Edward Auttonberry

Hatley

102-060

August 8, 2019

The Implementation of Santiago Nasar’s Arab Background

The novella *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* focuses on deciphering the mystery of the murder of Santiago Nasar. This mystery is not one about the perpetrator of the crime is, but rather one about uncovering the circumstances that led to the story’s fatal actions being carried out. The content of the story itself provides sufficient detail surrounding the events of the murder both before and during its enactment. Thus, the reader is thoroughly convinced of the convictions of the Vicario brothers and understands their need to fulfill a family duty, regardless of whether the reader agrees with that need. However, there are many cultural and character details provided that, together, serve to fully explain the reasons for Santiago’s death aside from the will of the Vicario twins. Some such details are buried in the ethnic origins of Santiago and his father, Ibrahim Nasar. In the story, the personae of Santiago Nasar and his father are characterized by the severely misunderstood and highly discriminated identity of the various Arab peoples that emigrated to Latin America, which has great effects on how they interact with the people around them, and ultimately contributes to provoking Santiago’s murder by the Vicario brothers as a result of prejudices that were established long before the events of the story and were strengthened by the tides of immigration from the Middle East, the actions of Ibrahim Nasar, finally being validated by the unfortunate scandal concerning Angela Vicario and Santiago’s dishonest implication therein.

To best understand the eastern aspect of Santiago’s culture, it is important to establish the specific background of his father Ibrahim. At first glance, the dialogue in the narrative seems to imply that Santiago, and thus his father, are of Turkish descent, due to the exclamative declaration by an anonymous onlooker before the chase scene, stating: “Not that way, Turk; by the old dock” (Marquez 115). This notion, however, is contradictory to other details about their heritage. Turkey, as it understood today, is a small country. Even during the height of the Ottoman Empire, everyday use of the Turkish language was restricted to the region of Asia Minor. In fact, due to the much more prominent use of Arabic and Persian languages in the region of the Ottoman Empire, the use of Turkish in any literary capacity was met with complaints of discrimination by authors of the time (Mengüç 72).

The Ottoman Empire dissolved in the year 1922. In the story, Santiago Nasar is 21 years old at the time of the crime. The original crime, which Marquez’s fictional crime is based on, “occurred on Monday, 22 January 1951” (Bell-Villada 206). If the timespan of the novel is consistent with the actual event, that would make Santiago Nasar’s birth year 1930 or 1929. The actions of emigrating to Columbia, establishing a business, amassing a fortune, getting married, and final conceiving a child would undoubtedly require of Ibrahim Nasar several years of effort. Additionally, it is stated that Ibrahim “built two large bedrooms and five cubbyholes for the many children he intended having” (Marquez 11). This would have also taken a considerable amount of time, and the tense implies that this was constructed before Santiago was conceived. Considering the time required to accomplish all these feats, it can be inferred that Ibrahim arrived in Columbia either during or very soon after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. The contradiction between this chronological observation and the Nasars being labeled as Turkish lies in the fact that Ibrahim and Nasar speak Arabic between each-other. The Arabic language is not the common spoken language in the area of contemporary Turkey, and it hardly used outside of religious ceremony. Considering that the whole of the Ottoman Empire was referred to by many simply as “Turkey,” it is likely that they are only labeled as Turks due to the rule of the Ottoman state over the location from which Ibrahim originates geographically. Another contradiction is that the spelling of “Ibrahim” does not match the common Turkish version of that name, [İbrahim](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C4%B0brahim_%C3%9Cz%C3%BClmez). The non-Turkish spelling of Ibrahim, the language spoken between father and son, and the common mistake of referring to the whole of the Ottoman Empire as Turkey, are all subtle details that allow the reader to infer that Ibrahim and his son are in fact not Turks, but rather Levant or Bedouin Arabs. Based on the geography of the extent of Ottoman influence in the final years of their reign, it is unlikely that Ibrahim identifies as a Maghrebi Arab because the empire had long lost its influence in North Africa by that time. This distinction is important because it provides the reader with a more accurate image of the ethnic background of the Nasar family by eliminating cultures with different principles and histories, which enables the reader to make connections between that culture and the prejudices experienced by him and his immigrant peers.

Many strictly stereotypical attributes of twentieth-century Mediterranean-Arab culture are implemented into the illustration of the life of Santiago, as well as the lives of the rest of the Arab community present in the story. Just as the Columbian value of family honor is portrayed as a strong influence through the actions of the Vicario family, parallel values are attributed to the Arab community of the chronicle. In fact, the expectation that this value be held in high regard seems to be more equally enforced upon both sexes.

When Santiago was fifteen, he fell completely in love with María Alejandrina Cervantes, a local prostitute. The love affair lasted fourteen months. It was so strong that his own father stepped in to end it, entering the brothel and dragging Santiago out after delivering a beating with his belt. To complete the punishment, the father isolated his son at the ranch. At the time of Santiago’s death, he was formally engaged to Flora Miguel, a loveless arragement favored by both families. The marriage was to be held within the year. (Pelayo 118)

This event exhibits that expectation – Santiago, a male, is levied a hefty punishment for ifringing on his family’s honor via engaging sexually and romantically, short of his father’s blessing, with a prostitute. This idea of expecting virtuous actions from both sexes is more ascribable to Arab principles than it is to Latin ones. Ibrahim himself was only able to display such a disregard for these principles via through his affair with Victoria Guzman, wherein “She'd made love to him in secret for several years in the stables of the ranch” (Marquez 9), due to the fact that his family was not with him in Columbia, allowing him to misbehave without consequence. The quote also mentions another radical ideal of Arabian culture, which is arranged marraiges. This practice is even still very commonplace in the modern Middle East region, and this is reflected in the story, as “Santiago Nasar accepted the engagement in the bloom of his adolescence, and he was determined to fulfill it, perhaps because he had the same utilitarian concept of matrimony as his father” (Marquez 111). The “utilitarian concept” mentioned is an artifact of the outlook of the Arab community in the story. For some Arab cultures, it is seen as a duty to accomplish rather than a desire to fulfill. These attributes of the lifestyles of the Nasar characters are evidence of their actual origins in the Middle East, which brings into consideration new reasons that some of the characters in the story have for wishing Santiago’s death even before his scandal.

There are many reasons for any of the townspeople to express prejudice against Arab immigrants. One strong reason that is as contentious today as it was in this story’s timeframe is the conquest of Muslim conquest of Iberia by the Umayyad Caliphate, and the establishment of Al-Andalus as an Islamic state in place of the primarily Arian Christian Visigoth Kingdom. At the greatest reach of their invasion, the Umayyad’s had conquered most of the Iberian Peninsula and captured Narbonne and Toulouse in Southern France (Burton 59). The rule of the Umayyad’s and their successors saw forceful conversion of the locals to Islam, violence not seen since the emergence of the Visigoths five-hundred years before, and the exportation of Iberian slaves to other parts of North Africa and the Middle East.

Though the final remnants of the Muslim Conquests in the Nasrid kingdom had long succumbed to the forces of Catholic Spain and Portugal, Latin communities continued to harbor a strong distrust for Arab influence during the colonization of the New World. This prejudice remained with the Columbian population as immigrants began to arrive in post-colonial Latin America in search of new opportunity. The sudden influx of a Middle Eastern presence in South America was not received well by the native population of many of the receiving countries, including Columbia, and this attitude toward those settlers maintained its effect during the time of Santiago’s death, as indicated by Fausta Lopez and Angela Vicario’s shared notion that “all Turks are alike” (Christie 27). Though this remark is unrelated to the history of Arab influence in Spanish history, it clearly shows that a distaste felt for Santiago because of his background is not applied to him exclusively, but to all the Arab newcomers. This is evidence of a popular distrust of the Nasar family well before the news of Angela’s impurity was brought to light.

To make the matter of this distrust worse, Ibrahim Nasar happed to gain substantial influence within the community in a relatively short period of time. In the same manner of time that was previously defined between Ibrahim’s arrival and the birth of Santiago, he was able to acquire enough property to construct a farm and repurpose a warehouse close to the river as a living space. Not only that, but he was able to supply enough livestock to justify the farmland. He also married a local woman in order to better integrate himself into the locale. It is likely that some certain individuals of the community took notice of Ibrahim’s sudden success and resented him for it. This effected Santiago Nasar as well, as a few members of the community held a grudge against him and his status as the fortunate child in a wealthy family (Pope 183). This resentment likely has some origin in jealously, but it is also at least partially due to a hurtful similarity that this sudden acquisition of wealth by an Arab stranger has to the Muslim Conquests so unfortunately ingrained into the collective outlook of any state that inherits its culture from Spain.

These Middle Eastern immigrants also bring with them fears about the religion that dominates the area they come from. Latin America continues to be a steady stronghold of Catholic faith, and this ideal was pressed even more strongly in the temporal span of this chronical. It is made clear that Santiago and his far are practicing Catholics. However, it is not possible to say the same with any certainty about their fellow Arabs. This is a likely point of view for the natives of the town and many other towns in Latin America. Even for those immigrants that express Catholic faith, it is reasonable not to trust their full commitment, especially if they only converted to integrate into society. The native citizens of Sucre’s fictional counterpart were undoubtedly worried about the religious influence that the large number of incoming settlers would bring with them as well as whether they were truly committed to Catholic faith. This fear was held against the Arabs in Santiago’s time, adding to the distrust of the power and influence that his family’s wealth carried.

During a time of great civil unrest and confusion, a strange man from a far away land characterized by a vastly different and antagonistically infamous culture than that of rural Latin America appeared and established his inexorable future in Columbia. This man is Ibrahim Nasar, who does this much to the dismay of some of the local inhabitants. They carry on with their lives as the new businessman firmly plants his roots in the community by way of fraternity, marriage, property, and significant wealth. As this goes on, these few resentful townspeople cannot help but liken this to the Umayyad invasion of the Spanish motherland about which they had heard many dreadful testimonies passed through the generations.

Ibrahim Nasar had the first child of what he hoped to be many. This child, Santiago Nasar, was raised in fortune and opportunity. Santiago grew, and he inherited the mannerisms of his father. Due to this and the same unavoidable prejudices that his father and the rest of the Arabs faced, the focus of discontentment shifted to Santiago after his father’s passing. Yet, Santiago continued to live life as normal without any major interference from the troubled few troubled natives. Had his life continued to progress uneventfully, he probably would have lived a full life wherein he marries his betrothed while continuing to pursue Divina Flor. However, this is not the case, and his life is interrupted by the unfortunate events and convenient mistruths that surround Angela Vicario’s stolen honor. The people that hated Santiago and his father always wanted them gone, though it was unthinkable that they would act on that desire, and even he did not see it:

Nor did Santiago Nasar recognize the omen. He had slept little and poorly, without getting undressed, and he woke up with a headache and a sediment of copper stirrup on his palate, and he interpreted them as the natural havoc of the wedding revels that had gone on until after midnight. Furthermore: all the many people he ran into after leaving his house at five minutes past six and until he was carved up like a pig an hour later remembered him as being a little sleepy but in a good mood, and he remarked to all of them in a casual way that it was a very beautiful day. (Marquez 4)

It is not until Santiago’s alleged affair with Angela surfaces that a tipping point is reached that reaffirms their prejudices against Santiago and his people and convinces those characters that the Nasar family needs to be removed.

# **Works Cited**

Bell-Villada, Gene H. “The Novelist of Love.” *Garcia Marquez: The Man and His Work*.

Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2010. *JSTOR*. 07 Aug 2019. Boydell Press, 2009. JSTOR. 12 Aug 2019.

Burton, Peter. "The Arab conquests." *A History of the Early Medieval Siege*.

Christie, John S. "Fathers and Virgins: Garcia Marquez's Faulknerian *Chronicle of a Death*

*Foretold*." Latin American Literary Review, Jan - Jun 1993. JSTOR. 13 Aug 2019.

Márquez, Gabriel García. *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. New York: Vintage, 2003

Mengüç, Murat Cem. “Interpreting Ottoman Identity with the Historian Neşri.” *Living in the*

*Ottoman Realm: Empire and Identity, 13th to 20th Centuries*, Eds. Christine Isom-

Verhaaren and Kent F. Schull. Bloomington: IU Press, 2016. *JSTOR*. 07 Aug 2019.

Pelayo, Rubén. "Chronicle of a Death Foretold." *Gabriel García Márquez, A Critical Companion*. Westport: Greenwood, 2001. print.

Pope, Randolph D. “Transparency and Illusion in Garcia Marquez’ *Chronicle of a Death*

*Foretold*.” Latin American Literary Review, Jan – Jun 1987. JSTOR. 13 Aug 2019.