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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 of who 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. This is done such that the reader is thoroughly convinced of the convictions of the Vicario brothers and understanding of their need to fulfill a family duty, regardless of whether the reader agrees with that need. However, there are many details provided in-between the lines that, together, serve to fully explain the reasons for Santiago’s death aside from the will of the Vicario twins. Many of these details are hidden in the ethnic origins of Santiago and his father, Ibrahim Nasar. In the story, Santiago Nasar's persona is characterized by the, at the time very underrepresented, identity of the various Arab peoples, which has great effect on how he and his father interact with the people around him, and ultimately contributes to provoking his murder.

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, as well as those other characters that seem to share in their culture.

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. 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.

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