

Gabriel Garcia Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*: A Critical Reading According to Mikhail Bakhtin's Concept of "Polyphony"

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Abstract—This paper aims at reading Gabriel Garcia Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981) in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of voice, especially the concept of "Polyphony". The main argument is that polyphony is an important key concept to take into consideration to better comprehend the interrelationships of voices between the narrator and the other characters in this novel. In order to prove this argument, the researchers emphasize language and speech diversity in order to shed light on "Heteroglossia", which is another related concept coined by Bakhtin. The researchers will also examine the characteristics of the double-voicedness and the manifestations of polyphony in the novel. The results show that Gabriel Garcia Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* can be described as a polyphonic novel because of the variety of consciousnesses and independent voices of its various characters. Eventually, the paper shows how the novel demonstrates heteroglot features because of the different characters who are coming from different social groups, which will help the reader to better realize the different layers of social voices.

Index Terms—Mikhail Bakhtin, Gabriel Garcia Márquez, polyphony, heteroglossia, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*

I. INTRODUCTION

The main aim of this paper is to read Gabriel Garcia Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981) in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of voice, especially the concept of Polyphony, a term he introduced in 1963 in his book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Polyphony simply means 'many-voicedness', it refers to "the construction of the voices of characters and narrator in the novel" (Vice, 1997, p. 112). This paper attempts to apply this concept on Márquez's novel in order to examine the significance of the narrative voice and the voice of the other characters.

In his theory of voice, Bakhtin is very much influenced by Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels. He observes the distinctiveness of Dostoevsky's characters and their voice within the novel. According to Bakhtin, these characters are treated as ideologically authoritative and independent, they are not dominated by the author's ideology (1984). Simon Dentith argues that they are granted as much power as the narrator's voice, "which indeed engages in active dialogue with the characters' voices" (2005, p. 39). Thus, because of the diversity of voices in the novel, that of the narrator and of the characters, the novel can be considered to be polyphonic, that is; it has a plurality of unmerged voices and consciousnesses. One can argue that this feature is one of the most important features that distinguish the novel as a genre from all other fictional genres. It is a feature that can be seen in all novels, but it is more prominent in certain novels like Dostoevsky's novels and the novel addressed by this paper, Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death*.

Bakhtin (1984) emphasizes in particular the significance of language diversity and speech characterization in a polyphonic novel. However, it is not possible to consider every novel that has linguistic diversity to be a polyphonic novel, he argues that "what matters is the dialogic angle at which these styles and dialects are juxtaposed or counterposed in the work" (p. 182). Therefore, multiple voices as well as the various linguistic features that correlate with each other in a dialogue are "fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel; each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 263).

Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* has a remarkable narrative framework which outlines a description of the same incident from various views and makes it possible to observe the different perspectives, voices and the complicated interrelationships between the different characters. It manifests a diversity of social speech types and a multiplicity of voices. Simultaneously, it has characteristics of a heteroglot novel which encompasses a variety of social environments; languages of social groups, of professional groups, and so on. Therefore, both heteroglossia and polyphony can be clearly observed in this novel. Nevertheless, this paper focuses on the hidden and embedded features of polyphony only, leaving heteroglossia for another related paper.

It is possible to read Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* as a detective-fiction novel. It is mainly about the murder of Santiago Nasar who is thought to have taken the virginity of Angela Vicario. Moreover, the narrator "function(s) like a murder detective, reconstructs the crime bit by bit" in a way far from what the title indicates, with reference to the other characters' insights of the murder (Mambrol, 2020, para. 4).

According to Williams (1985), Márquez is "a writer vastly more experienced in journalistic and fictional writing" (p. 117). Almost all Márquez's works have a distinguished journalistic style of narration. Many of Márquez's narrative techniques, such as mentioning the exact time of the events, says Raymond Williams, derive from his experience in journalism (1985, 131). Such experience has also influenced the style of writing some of his novels like *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. Aghaei and Hayati (2014) argue that the origin of such novels "emphasizes on the dual forces of journalism and fiction" (p. 12). *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is a distinguished work by Márquez due to its narrative which is "based on both 'journalistic' and 'fictitious'" features (p. 12).

In addition, Márquez is fascinated by detective fiction from an early age of his life, which has been a major factor in his career as a journalist and a writer (Williams, 1985, p. 118). Williams (1985) adds that Márquez "has been constantly preoccupied with such themes as death, the rational and the non-rational, the effects of modern science and technology, the common man, and insanity" (p. 121). He is considered to be a humanist whose works are largely concerned with the cause of the common man, "an interest," states Williams (1985), "which this Colombian shares with many writers who have won the Nobel Prize" (p. 131).

II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Several studies have discussed and analyzed Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* from different angles; however, no study has applied Bakhtin's concept of Polyphony to analyze the difference between the narrative voice and the voices of the other characters. So, this paper attempts to bridge the gap in the related literature by studying the diversified voices of the narrator of the events, and of the other characters whose testimonies are intertwined and layered within the narrative discourse. The paper will also refer to the related concept of 'Heteroglossia' and provide some examples on how it is used in the novel.

In his essay entitled "The Hidden Depths of García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*," Zaidi (2011) explores the symbolic imagery and the acts of concealment that characterize the narrative of Márquez's novel. He argues, "Ostensibly a quest for truth and an attempt to decipher a recurring and eternal present, the narrative conveys a terrible self-knowledge through a tragicomic language of dreams" (2011, p. 107). For Zaidi, the whole novel is built on a symbolic imagery that describes every event in details.

Popescu (2020), on the other hand, discusses Márquez's novel and emphasizes many aspects, especially the one related to the medieval form of the chronicle. She suggests that the Márquez's main intention is "to parody the imperatives of historiography" of the nineteenth and twentieth century (para. 9).

In a study of *Chronicle*, McGuirk (1987) depends on some of the speculations applied by Derrida on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in order to mark the intersections with the novel in a form of a series of overlapping speculations. He emphasizes the opening of the novel which begins "with an epigraph," believing that it "invites open reading rather than interpretative closure" (1987, p.169).

Kercher (1985) examines Márquez's novel and its illustrations that are made by Márquez's fellow Fernando Botero. Her study aims at constructing an analogous model by maintaining the details apart "to better judge the distance there is between the novel and the illustrations" (1985, p.90). She emphasizes the popular forms of the novel like the romance, epistle, memoir and so on. She concludes her study by emphasizing the vision of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, saying that it is "of the brilliant technician of postcapitalist society who tinkers with literature and art" (1985, p.100).

In another study, Alonso (1987) focuses on the ritual dimension in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, which is usually considered a sort of ritual repetition of the crime. He argues that it is "not a matter of understanding or accounting for the murder of Santiago Nasar, but of re-enacting it" (1987, p.156). This study helps in realizing the "performative intention" which rules the novel as well as the coherence in which there is no meaningless or wasted action.

III. METHODOLOGY

The present paper is a qualitative study that makes use of the argumentative and analytical approaches, in which the later requires a close analysis of the different social languages and voices that build up a special type of dialogue. The narrative discourse used in this novel is composed of various points of views and consciousnesses; 'double-voices discourse'. For that reason, this paper discusses Bakhtin's concept of polyphony and attempts to apply it on Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* to achieve a new perspective in understanding it. The main argument, thus, is that polyphony is an important key concept to take into account to better comprehend the interrelationships of voices between the narrator and the other characters in Márquez's novel. While the minor argument is that the reader can easily realize the differentiated layers of social voices.

IV. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Vice (1997) refers to Bakhtin who argues that the novel can achieve a “unity only if it is constructed out of heteroglot, multi-voiced, multi-styled, and multi-linguagedness features” (p. 11). Primarily, the diversity of social speech types and the multiplicity of characters play an essential role in understanding Bakhtin’s other concept, ‘Heteroglossia’, which means ‘multi-linguagedness’. Moreover, Márquez’s journalistic style of narration in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* proves the importance of polyphony in achieving a better understanding of the novel.

Furthermore, Vice (1997) points out that Bakhtin views the novel as polyphonic when “the character reveals his or her own inner conflict, rather than being narrated from the outside,” he assures that “what looks like a unitary voice turns out to be multiple and interactive” (p. 57). In *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, Márquez uses a first-person narrator who recalls the events of the murder that took place more than twenty years ago, by going back to the other characters’ testimonies which he finds written in the remains of an investigation report. In doing so, the narrator outlines the events of Santiago Nasar’s murder from various points of view; those who really witness the crime, those who hear and spread the rumors, and those who contradict what seems to be the truth. Although the narrator appears to be speaking on behalf of the characters, their unmerged voices are still present within the complex narrative of the narrator’s voice.

Márquez’s *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* parallels an actual murder that occurred in 1951 in Colombia, where the author used to live. However, Márquez’s novel has distinct features which distinguish it from being only about a real event. Mambrol (2020) states that “The murder is being pieced together by the nameless narrator, a friend of the victim, in the same manner that a detective might approach the case” (para. 11). Accordingly, the journalistic style merges with the fictitious narrative and constructs a unique structure for the whole novel. Moreover, Williams convincingly argues that the detailed narrative of the story is what gives the novel the sense of fiction (1985). The narrator, being one of the minor characters, is the first voice presented in the novel. Through his voice, the reader knows about all the incidents. Based on direct observation and interviews with the other characters, the narrator acts like a reporter retracing the events in details and mentioning the exact time for each. However, the frame of the events in the novel does not follow a chronological order (Aghaei & Hayati, 2014). One possible reason for this frame is the multiplicity of voices and events.

The novel begins with a sentence informing the reader that the protagonist- Santiago Nasar- is going to be killed; he is accused of taking the virginity of Angela Vicario (as the narrator explains a few pages later). After finding out that she is not a virgin, Angela’s husband, Bayardo San Roman, brings her back to her parents’ home. Her twin brothers, Pedro Vicario and Pablo Vicario, force her to tell them who did this, only then and without any effort, the name of Santiago comes out of her mouth. The brothers decide to take revenge and to kill him. While they are waiting for him in front of his house, almost every person in the town becomes aware of the rumor which the brothers themselves have spread; hoping that someone will prevent them from committing the crime, but alas. Although the unnamed first-person narrator exposes in advance the information about what is going to happen, where and to whom, the reader is still interested to know the rest of the story.

The dialogic nature of *Chronicle* contains two levels of voices. Both levels constitute the novel’s internal discourse. The first one refers to the stratification of the narrator’s voice, and the other refers to the voices of the characters. The large number of characters in *Chronicle* - those who are involved in the plot of the murder and those who are not- makes it a relevant framework to apply the concept of polyphony on the novel. According to Bakhtin (1984), the most important thing to consider in a polyphonic novel is the interaction and interdependence between the various characters’ consciousness. In this novel, this interaction can be found in the unique relationship between the narrator and all other characters.

V. THE DOUBLE-VOICED NARRATOR

Throughout the novel, the reader can notice two voices for the narrator: the first one is his first person view as a teller of the whole story, acting like an investigator asking around about the missing pieces of the crime that took place twenty- seven years ago. The second one is his voice as a character who has been through many unpleasant experiences and events. So, he plays two important integrated roles. In addition, through the first voice, the narrator introduces particular details about Santiago’s mother, stating that she never forgives herself after all these years for misinterpreting the dreams which her son had the night before his murder. By doing so, the narrator tries to figure out exactly what has happened in that day by making a conversation with Santiago’s mother.

In almost the entire novel, the reader is able to recognize the narrator’s unique style of dialogue. He is addressing, anticipating and reacting to the other characters’ discourses without having them present in the dialogue, as if he is directly addressing the reader. This type of narrative is called literary discourse, through which the narrator “tends toward an objective style of speech—relating the action as something happening to someone else, to the characters” (Park-Fuller, 2009, p. 3). The narrator uses direct speech in order to permit the reader to hear each voice of the characters without taking the final word for himself as in the example above. Another example occurs when he refers to Victoria Guzman, the cook, talking about Santiago: ““He always got up with the face of a bad night,” Victoria Guzman recalled without affection” (Márquez, 2003, p. 7). Sometimes, the narrator uses both direct and indirect speech. This way of narration can be seen in many occasions, as when he says:

On the day they were going to kill him, his mother thought he’d got his days mixed up when she saw him dressed in white. “I reminded him that it was Monday,” she told me. However, he explained to her that he’d got

dressed up pontifical style in case he had a chance to kiss the bishop's ring. She showed no sign of interest. "He won't even get off the boat," she told him. (Márquez, 2003, p. 6)

At some points, the narrator moves from the literary discourse to the oral discourse, he "becomes not only the telling voice but also a voice coming from within the tale, a voice that exists on a level between the literary voice and character voices" (Park-Fuller, 2009, p. 3). For example, the narrator says: "They were twins: Pedro and Pablo Vicario. They were twenty-four years old, and they looked so much alike that it was difficult to tell them apart. 'They were hard-looking, but of a good sort,' the report said. I, who had known them since grammar school, would have written the same thing" (Márquez, 2003, p. 14). By using the first person pronoun 'I', the narrator asserts his voice as an active character. He also asserts that his role is not only to narrate the events.

At other times, the oral discourse emerges from within a literary sequence. For example, the narrator says: "'One night he asked me what house I liked best,' Angela Vicario told me. 'And I answered, without knowing why, that the prettiest house in town was the farmhouse belonging to the widower Xius.' I would have said the same" (Márquez, 2003, p. 34). So, one can notice that the narrator is using a double-voiced narrative. According to Bakhtin, this kind of narrative has developed "in forms of literary discourse," and "in forms of oral speech— *skaz* in the strict sense of the word" (1984, p. 190). One can argue, then, that the narrator's double-voiced narrative is part of the polyphonic whole of the novel, as it allows the characters to freely present their views and inner feelings, though sometimes the narrator's comments are provided as well.

The narrator's two voices interact with each other. Through his detective voice, he helps the reader to understand the by providing detailed information about some important events (Aghaei & Hayati, 2014). For instance, such details can be seen, for example, in referring to the exact time when Santiago gets up at "five-thirty in the morning" (Márquez, 2003, p. 1) and when Santiago leaves his house "at five minutes past six until he was carved up like a pig an hour later" (p. 2). In addition, the narrator presents in details the origin of some characters as well; like when he introduces Angela's husband- Bayardo San Roman- where he is from and his appearance, he says:

BAYARDO SAN ROMAN, the man who had given back his bride, had turned up for the first time in August of the year before: six months before the wedding. He arrived on the weekly boat with some saddlebags decorated with silver that matched the buckle of his belt and the rings on his boots. He was around thirty years old, but they were well concealed, because he had the waist of a novice bullfighter, golden eyes, and a skin slowly roasted by salt-peter" (Márquez, 2003, p. 24).

From this description, the reader can get a very good idea about Bayardo San Roman.

In addition, the narrator's personal voice gives him the chance to participate in presenting his opinions and to interact with the characters' simultaneously. For example, he says:

The most current version, perhaps because it was the most perverse, was that Angela Vicario was protecting someone who really loved her and she had chosen Santiago Nasar's name because she thought her brothers would never dare go up against him. I tried to get that truth out of her myself when I visited her the second time, with all my arguments in order, but she barely lifted her eyes from the embroidery to knock them down. 'Don't beat it to death, cousin,' she told me. 'He was the one.' (Márquez, 2003, p. 91)

In this example, using the first person pronoun 'I' demonstrates the role of the narrator in figuring out the missing pieces of Santiago's murder and his attempts to investigate the characters' actions to find the truth.

VI. MANIFESTATIONS OF POLYPHONY

Similarly, the voice of the narrator interacts with the other characters' voices, in the broad sense, which establishes a special type of polyphonic framework. The independence of the characters' voices, which distinguishes the polyphonic novel, is implicitly illustrated in the novel; the reader might refer these voices to the same layer of the narrator's voice.

Talking about the voices of the characters, it is important to mention some points that illustrate how they have independent voices, coming up, as a result, with a polyphonic novel. The first point is the layering of their voices when they speak out their views about the murder. Such layering enriches the novel with a multiplicity of perspectives. For instance, the narrator refers to the announcement that the Vicario brothers have spread in the meat market when they go to trim their knives and kill Santiago, he says:

Twenty-two people declared they had heard everything said, and they all coincided in the impression that the only reason the brothers had said it was so that someone would come over to hear them. (Márquez, 2003, p. 51)

The butcher's friend, Faustino Santos, surprisingly observes the scene because he usually meets them on Fridays. He adds his own view:

I thought they were so drunk," Faustino Santos told me, "that not only had they forgotten what time it was, but what day it was too." He reminded them that it was Monday. 'Everybody knows that, you dope," Pablo Vicario answered him good-naturedly. "We just came to sharpen our knives.' (Márquez, 2003, p. 51)

Another example shows that the upcoming event sounds unlikely to happen in townspeople's views. It took place when the mayor Colonel Lázaro Aponte finds the twins in Clotilde Armenta's store: "'When I saw them I thought they were nothing but a pair of big bluffers,' he told me with his personal logic, 'because they weren't as drunk as I thought'" (Márquez, 2003, p. 56). Like the other examples, the reader can observe the layering of the characters' and the narrator's voices.

The second point about the characters' voices is about their interaction with the voice of the narrator, answering his questions or sometimes simply correcting his information regarding some of the rumors, an interaction which is dialogic in nature. In spite of the narrator's insistence on controlling and taking the lead of the dialogue, the reader can still notice the characters' independent and significant voices.

The third point, which is related to the concept heteroglossia, is the 'differentiated speech' of the characters' voices. In this kind of speech, the heteroglot nature of the characters' language builds a relevant structure for the course of the events. Vice (1997) argues that "Bakhtin uses the term 'heteroglossia' to mean not simply the variety of different languages which occur in everyday life, but also their entry into literary texts" (p. 18). Hence, the characters' languages, adds Vice, "bring with them their everyday associations" (ibid). Furthermore, the forms of heteroglossia are quite significant so that the "characters' dialogue and inner speech", "the various kinds of 'speech genre'", and "texts which reproduce a culture's various dialects and languages" (p. 19) all of them, as Vice (1997) explains, illustrate how heteroglossia functions within the novel. From the examples mentioned earlier from Márquez's novel, the reader can clearly notice such 'languages' made by the characters.

As for the characters' dialogue, the novel is full of examples of dialogue between the characters and the narrator and between the characters themselves. One of these examples is a dialogue between the Vicario brothers and Clotilde Armenta, the owner of the milk shop where the two men have been waiting for Santiago to kill him, they ask her "if she had seen any light in that window," (p. 55) pointing at Santiago's house, then she replies negatively and asks back:

"Did something happen to him?" she asked.

"No," Pedro Vicario replied. "Just that we're looking for him to kill him." (Márquez, 2003, p. 54).

She carries on: "And might a person know why you want to kill him so early in the morning? she asked.

"He knows why," Pedro Vicario answered (Márquez, 2003, p. 55).

The other form of heteroglossia in the novel is the variety of speech genres, "languages of a profession, class, literary school, newspaper" (Vice, 1997, p. 19). The reader can easily realize the different layers of social voices in the novel. Some of these voices include: the voice of Don Lázaro Aponte - the colonel and town mayor, the voice of Father Carmen Amador, Maria Alejandrina Cervantes's voice who owns a house of mercies, Bayardo San Roman's father's voice, General Petronio San Roman- the hero of the civil wars of the past century, and the voice of Doctor Dionisio Guarán- a physician and a man of letters.

In addition to the third form of heteroglossia referring to the various dialects and languages in the same culture, these voices have built and shaped the society described in Márquez's novel. In this novel, the national language is the Spanish, with some use of its Papiamento dialect which the narrator refers to as Bayardo San Roman's mother's language. According to Vice (1997), heteroglossia has two forms that have "different national languages within the same culture" (p. 19). These two forms are the most obvious in the novel, in the sense that the Spanish is the first national language and the Arabic being the second one in the same Caribbean culture. The Arabic language has its presence, though in a limited way, it is spoken by Santiago and his father Ibrahim Nasar for that their origin go back to the 'Turks' as the townspeople call them, "They spoke Arabic between themselves, but not in front of Plácida Linero (Santiago's mother), so that she wouldn't feel excluded (Márquez, 2003, p. 6). Also, it is clearly mentioned as a spoken language between Santiago and Yamil Shaium, "one of the last Arabs who had come with Ibrahim Nasar" (p. 104):

Santiago Nasar didn't reply, but said something in Arabic to Yamil Shaium, and the latter answered him, also in Arabic, twisting with laughter. "It was a play on words we always had fun with," Yamil Shaium told me.

Without stopping, Santiago Nasar waved good-bye to both of them and turned the corner of the square. It was the last time they saw him (Márquez, 2003, p. 105).

So, Márquez's novel is enriched by the multiplicity of characters and voices. With the journalistic style of narration, this multiplicity gives the novel a unique structure that would catch the readers' attention from the very first word. *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* has some features of a polyphonic novel because these characters and voices are placed differently, and in some cases they are opposing each other. As a result, the reader feels the existence of different characters with different perceptions on the murder.

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, one can argue that it is highly illuminating to read Gabriel Garcia Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* according to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony. Such reading reveals that it is a polyphonic novel with a special kind of independent voices. With its peculiar style of narration, its double-voiced narrator, its various speech genres, and its multiplicity of characters belonging to different social groups, the novel reveals heteroglot features besides the polyphonic ones, which make it a polyphonic and heteroglot novel at the same time. Further research can be done to thoroughly study and analyze Márquez's novel depending on more specific concepts by Bakhtin like "dialogism," "polyphony," and "carnival."

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