

Research Article

Digital Affect and Narrative Form in Saharu Kannanari's *Chronicle of an Hour and a Half*

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Abstract: Saharu Nusaiba Kannanari's *Chronicle of an Hour and a Half* revolves around a rumour that achieves gargantuan dimensions through its circulation on WhatsApp. The debut novel is a clever critique of WhatsApp culture, where distorted information is disseminated at a breathless pace, confounding and provoking people to lose their humanity. It is also a comment on how social media becomes a tool for vigilante justice and moral policing, veiled under personal insecurities. The paper will try to analyse the role of social media in amplifying misinformation, shaping public perception, and inciting real-world consequences. The paper will try to locate the dichotomous position of WhatsApp, often perceived as a tool for convenience and connection, which is here portrayed as a vehicle for destabilizing communities, eroding social cohesion, and perpetuating a cycle of violence. On the other hand, it is only through WhatsApp and the ensuing brutality that the social propriety and the so-called peaceful community are exposed as terribly hypocritical and essentially fake. The analysis will delve into the consequences of the unchecked circulation of unverified information, examining how the digital age has blurred the lines between fact and fiction and the profound impact this has on individual lives and societal harmony. The insertion of social media also offers a powerful critique of vicious machismo and dubious sense of honour (always localised on the woman's body), in Kannanari's provincial town of terrible orthodoxies, where female desire is punished and where everyone is complicit in mass murder. Finally, the paper will also discuss the anonymity offered by social media, in this case, to the raging homogenous blob of faceless, self-righteous, violent men.

Keywords: social media culture; rumours; mob lynching; gender

Saharu Nusaiba Kannanari's debut novel *Chronicle of an Hour and a Half* is set in a small village called Vaiga in the foothills of the Western Ghats. Critics and interviewers have commented on the similarities between the Vaiga and Kannanari's own hometown, Areekode near Calicut, Kerala, and his deliberate choice to situate his story within familiar environs. The inexplicable lushness and incessant rain transcend the realms of mere regional setting, achieving metaphorical dimensions; the green and wetness accentuate the passion of youth on one hand and the gloom that anticipates sordid violence on the other. Ceaseless rains, gloomy dark skies, and flooded lanes serve as the backdrop to this chaotic drama of brutality and toxic masculinity. Kannanari makes one of the characters declare, "This is the darkest monsoon...since 1991" (Kannanari, 2024, 8). Almost prophetically, he observes, "Lightning blazed across the sky in a great bluish fury and thunder crashed with Quranic wrath, and then it was all dark again ((Kannanari, 2024, 10); the descending darkness portentous to the impending moral apathy and communal doom.

The novel features a multiplicity of voices – first-person narrators jostling with each other and vying for prominence within the narrative framework. The sections or chapter headings are named after the narrators; however, their sheer number without any discernible characteristics makes them appear as one gigantic, terrifying, and devouring mouth. The author deliberately doesn't devote much time and space to fleshing out individual characteristics because a particular novelistic distance needs to be maintained to highlight the brutal homogeneity of mob frenzy and the repercussions, if any, of collective violence in a small town. *Chronicle of an Hour and a Half* revolves around a rumour that achieves gargantuan dimensions through its circulation on WhatsApp. For an author who has been vehemently vocal about not being on WhatsApp, the discourse surrounding social media – its unprecedented rise and pitfalls – becomes especially relevant in order to gauge human conditions and behavior. Ironically, the very first mention of 'phone' and associated social media is by Imam Shahnavaaz, lamenting, "Nothing agitates me as an Imam more than a congregant busy on his phone during the Friday sermon. Nothing violates the sanctity of the mosque more than a congregant busy on his phone during the Friday sermon" (Kannanari, 2024, 7). Interestingly (rather cheekily), Kannannari situates his novel during the span of one and a half hours of a holy Friday. He depicts characters engaged in anything and everything except spirituality: so consumed in their worldly lives - carnality, greed, jealousy, hatred, misogyny, hypocrisy, gluttony, and the innate and unforgettable tendency for unimaginable violence.

It is the embittered Shahid, whose wife had abandoned him and eloped with a lover, who spreads the news of Reyhana (the forty-year-old married, mother of two grown daughters) engaged in an illicit relationship with the twenty-five-year-old Burhan. At the same time, her husband works in the Gulf. As if vehemently claiming vengeance for his own social emasculation, Shahid orders his friend Chinnan in self-righteous anger "to keep circulating the news, whether via WhatsApp or through calls or in person...[he] turned on the internet and typed up the story quickly and sent it on three or four WhatsApp groups popular among boys in the village. And then [he] called some of them" (Kannanari, 2024, 52-53). In *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New*

Technologies of Power, Byung-Chul Han discusses how social media is intimately and efficiently associated with the reinforcement of neoliberal ideologies and psychological mechanisms of control, and is hardly ever a naive or neutral mode of communication. Han delves into how the dynamics of social media and the digital landscape shape not just personal behaviour but also how information, truth, and falsehood are disseminated and consumed in contemporary society. In an interview with Nathan Gardels for *Noema*, he states, "Truth, the provider of meaning and orientation, is also a narrative. We are very well informed, yet somehow we cannot orient ourselves. The informatization of reality leads to its atomization – separated spheres of what is thought to be true" (Gardels, personal communication, April 21, 2022). Social media has initiated a significant subversion of verifiable data, leading to the erosion of authoritative sources of information. In traditional media systems, newspapers, radio, and even television were compelled to provide credible and accurate reports. However, with the advent of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp, and the unprecedented powers of individuation, the ethical compulsion for verifiable news is supplanted by the momentary thrill of circulation.

Han explains, "But truth, unlike information, has a centripetal force that holds society together. Information, on the other hand, is centrifugal, with very destructive effects on social cohesion" (Gardels, personal communication, April 21, 2022). Thus, the already fragile boundary between fact and fiction is increasingly blurred, leading to the transmission of unconfirmed information and social manipulation. "Bits of information provide neither meaning nor orientation. They do not congeal into a narrative. They are purely additive. From a certain point onward, they no longer inform – they deform. They can even darken the world. This puts them at odds with the truth. Truth illuminates the world, while information lives off the attraction of surprise, pulling us into a permanent frenzy of fleeting moments" (Gardels, personal communication, April 21, 2022). Shahid's message on Whatsapp goes 'viral' (a ubiquitous term in contemporary usage and reminiscent of Han's "fleeting moments") highlighting the inexplicable pace of transmission while disregarding the accuracy or quality of the news being shared. The muezzin informs the Imam, "But the unbelievable will get even more unbelievable if you hear what's circulating on WhatsApp... That Burhan's screwing Reyhana right at this moment, and both of their phones are switched off" (Kannanari, 2024, 97). Han discusses how the efficacy of shared news depends on obtaining a cathartic response from users. Kannanari's novel is an expert example of this – Shahid's messages on media provoke an emotional reaction among the raging, homogeneous blob of faceless, self-righteous, violent men. The novel becomes a critique of WhatsApp culture where distorted information is disseminated at a breathless pace, confounding and provoking people to lose their humanity.

As Shahid rants in sanctimonious rage and persists in engaging in vicious WhatsApp messages about the lovers, the aged Imam makes an observation, "It would have been useless spending my time arguing with Shahid. He was one impossible fellow. Truculent and full of certainties and cocksure. Wounded by his own wife two years ago. Righteous beyond religion. Muslim beyond Islam" (Kannanari, 2024, 96). The novel, thus, is also a comment on how social media becomes a tool for vigilante justice

and moral policing, veiled under personal insecurities. Apart from the sensational love affair, there is also another rumour of Reyhana's husband's elder brother, Saud, and his sons slapping Burhan's weak, old mother twice. As the Imam rushes towards the Bazaar, he witnesses Burhan's brothers avenging their mother by being engaged in a Sisyphean fight with Saud and his sons. The crowd "seemed to be cheering, wildly ecstatic, their hands thrown up in the air, recording videos and uploading them on WhatsApp" (Kannanari, 2024, 99). In an interview with Sergio C. Fanjul for *El País US*, Byung Chul-Han had commented how in the contemporary world, every individual has transformed into "infomaniacs" or rather, "datasexuals, people who obsessively collect and share information about their own and others' personal lives". He adds, "The smartphone is not a thing. It produces and processes information, and information gives us the opposite of peace of mind. It lives off the stimulus of surprise, and of immersing us in a whirlwind of news" (Fanjul, personal communication, October 15, 2021). In the same vein, the Imam in Kannanari's novel observes, "They all had their phones in their hands. Talking, recording the fight, typing. A pandemonium of around five hundred men...afire with hot rumours, vitriolic with violent opinions, and all the outrageous stories of Burhan and Reyhana that seemed to lend their anger a kind of raw legitimacy" (Kannanari, 2024, 99-100). Han describes the smartphone as a "cult object of digital domination." Unlike the undeniable authoritative power of religion, for Han, smartphones are associated with Foucauldian power – invisible, all pervading and insidious, and thus, instead of "rosary and its beads" people clutch their smartphones incessantly and uncontrollably linking a 'like' to a digital 'amen'. He comments, "A repressive regime provokes resistance. On the contrary, the neoliberal regime, which does not oppress freedom but exploits it, does not face any resistance. It is not repressive, but seductive. Domination becomes complete the moment it presents itself as freedom" (Fanjul, personal communication, October 15, 2021). The Imam in Kannanari's intelligent novel, a symbol of traditional authority, is thus rendered powerless over the apparently 'free' mob seduced and dominated by their smartphones to indulge in righteous lynching. The Imam narrates:

The anger was general. Sadique's wife was somehow everyone's wife, mother, or sister, or whatever, even for people who had never known Burhan or heard Reyhana's name at all, and in that silent consensus, the crowd was becoming a mob. Soon enough, the crowd began to disintegrate on its own, like angered bees, plagued by the incitements of the rumours. A clamour for Burhan's life took life in them, a hushed chant to kill. In loose groups, people began jogging down, each unsure as the other, each jostling round and past the other, pushing and pulling and falling and rising, and in no time, the entire Bazaar erupted in absolute chaos. The mob sped towards Reyhana's house, a good half mile away, and that was that. That was when all the rumour and anger and calls for the lynching of Burhan acquired a crucial sense of direction, and what was simmering came to a full boil, and the crowd turned into a mob. (Kannanari, 2024, 100)

In "On WhatsApp, Rumours, Lynchings, and the Indian Government", Chinmayi Arun notes, "There are two kinds of problems with rumour over WhatsApp: one is disinformation and the other is incitement to violence" (Arun, 2019, p.1). In the

same article, she shares multiple instances of mob-related violence, lynchings, and riots in contemporary India – exacerbated by the insidious involvement of social media. The relevant question is not whether WhatsApp causes violence, but rather the extent to which it may have contributed to the escalation of lynchings in India. She complains about how much news about lynchings in India has been dismissed as ‘fake news’. She feels it is essential to proceed from investigating the veracity of the rumours to a consideration of why rumours lead to lynchings and mob-related violence. Arun utilizes Veena Das’s concept of the connection between mob violence and rumor. She has remarked that the anonymity of the rumour, and its ‘lack of signature’, leads to a sense of ‘an endangered collectivity’ which eventually leads to death. Das also discusses the “social production of hate,” suggesting that rumour plays a role in manufacturing hatred (Arun, 2019, p. 3). It is not the falsehood we should focus on, but the creation of a sense of vulnerability, a collapsing social order, and a narrative within which murder is not just justified but even necessary (Das 2008).

Kannanari makes use of this disproportionate and palpable anger, “You wanted to become part of it because others were becoming part of it because that’s how a mob is made possible... Our phones were twittering with WhatsApp alerts... Like the body was no longer within the mind’s control... and I was the mob” (114-115), and precisely describes the formation of a mob that believes they have an unofficial mandate to exact justice for a perceived transgression. Through this frenzied narration of ‘Funny’, a teenage boy disparaged and misunderstood by his parents, Kannanari shows how personal vendettas, individual slights, and insecurities merge into one common cause, in this case, the lynching of Burhan – as if that indulging in that brutal action will once and for all avenge all the wrongs ever committed to each one of them. Burhan is transformed into the reason for the insult, pain, and humiliation suffered by every individual, the sole focus of their unquenchable rage.

Men prefer to conceive of violence as something exterior to them. In “Myth, Tragedy and the Scapegoat Ritual,” Gustavo Pellon discusses the ritualistic idea of scapegoating as “the principal process whereby men expel the truth of their violence and attribute it to an individual designated as guilty” (Pellon, 1988, 400). In times of crisis, the primary concern is that violence may become widespread. Scapegoating serves to unify a community by directing collective animosity toward an individual and accentuates the terrifying logic of collective violence toward an often unsuspecting victim. The scapegoating of Burhan, leading to his brutal lynching, is thus a diabolical visual of the town’s collective will. Upon switching on the internet, a character finds more than six hundred unread messages in the popular WhatsApp group of the village, from locals as well as those working in Dubai, Riyadh, and other locations. Kannanari writes:

It was an infectious violent experience to scroll through those WhatsApp groups, all so amuck with feverish opinions and equally feverish counter-opinions. There were moderates and extremists, bullies and thinkers, casteist grandfathers and conservative communists, those who typed in Malayalam and those who typed Malayalam in Roman letters and those who were emoji experts, toddy tappers and

doctors, drumbeaters and silent folks who only forwarded whatever came their way with indifference, there were Muslims and Christians and Hindus, all variety of men were actively present there in that silent but deafening cacophony of the virtual world, like a stadium full of quarrelling judges who seemed to agree on the wrongness of the wrong but not necessarily on the nature of punishment. (Kannanari, 2024, 121)

Such heated debates on social media are an everyday reality, often fueled by the platforms' rapid dissemination of information and the digital anonymity they provide. As described in the above quote, these numerous and furious WhatsApp opinions create a conflicted, explosive, and unstable space, amplifying emotional reactions and suppressing constructive dialogue, meaningful conversation, or reaching consensus. Additionally, the algorithms driving these social media platforms tend to promote content that generates strong reactions, further intensifying conflicts and division. The polarized debate in the novel veers from Biblical punishments of stoning in the marketplace to physical assault to denigrating the dignity of the adulteress, and finally reaches a consensus: Kill.

From the title "Chronicle" to the numerous characters and their overlapping testimonies, to an illicit affair culminating in a savage mob lynching—all point towards the unparalleled genius of Gabriel García Márquez and his remarkable novella *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. Similar to the tiny Latin American town ingrained with vicious machismo and dubious sense of honour (always localised on the woman's body), is Kannanari's provincial town of terrible orthodoxies, where female desire is punished and where everyone is complicit in mass murder.

Early on in the narrative, a character exclaims, "Because a family's honour rests with its women and they know it only too well to be forgiven" (Kannanari, 2024, 67). Vehemently critiquing gender discrimination, while crudely discussing the so called erring Reyhana, Kannanari makes his characters comment "Think of that forty-seven-year-old bitch" (122) and "That's for her husband to do. A Man doesn't beat up women unless he is the father or the brother or the husband" (124) and "as though by fucking that man she wasn't cheating only on her husband but on all the men in the village" (124). Alexandra Fitts writes how honour is "multifaceted and circumscribed by rules, both written and unwritten. It is a complicated weaving of social control and a construction of masculinity that is grounded on the physical restriction of women's sexuality" (2006, p.133). Kannanari, similar to Márquez, seeks to both reveal and critique the system of honour and its focalization on the female body, highlighting its potentially tragic repercussions. Through the use of social media, specifically WhatsApp, Kannanari presents the concept of honour as an outdated construct—one rooted in a medieval code of conduct that holds no relevance in the twenty-first century. Reyhana is stuck in a loveless marriage, yet owes her life to her husband, who has donated one of his kidneys to her. This further complicates her narration of guilt, repentance, frustration, and ennui. A married woman, engaging in an affair, is looked down upon by society; a married woman engaging in sexual relations with a man almost twenty years her junior can be the lewd and lascivious content for numerous WhatsApp forwards and memes.

Unlike the bishop who doesn't even step into Marquez's town, the Imam runs down to witness the absurd spectacle of grown men wrestling each other in limitless rage. Even the police arrive but cannot pass through the enraged mob. Neither religion nor law can stall the unsettling climax, described in graphic detail. Similar to Santiago Nasar, Burhan is brutalised and lies disemboweled - the terribly familiar aftermath of lovers' rebellions. The whole town is complicit. It is noteworthy that the most beautiful narrations are those of the mother and the beloved - two women whose lives are forever traumatized by the raging homogenous blob of faceless, self-righteous, violent men.

The debut novel is a clever critique of WhatsApp culture, where distorted information is disseminated at a breathless pace, confounding and provoking people to lose their humanity. It is also a comment on how social media becomes a tool for vigilante justice and moral policing, veiled under personal insecurities. The paper has tried to analyse the role of social media in amplifying misinformation, shaping public perception, and inciting real-world consequences. Through an interpretive and close reading of the novel, this paper attempts to locate the dichotomous position of WhatsApp - often perceived as a tool for convenience and connection, yet here portrayed as a vehicle for destabilizing communities and perpetuating a cycle of violence.

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