

His-Stories: Uncovering the Stronghold of the Shadows in Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*

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Abstract

The Tudor Dynasty has been the locus of many critical and fictional narratives even in the present age. The need for looking deep into the past to uncover truths previously left within the shadows of the pages of history makes fiction one of the most sought after genres to recreate and renarrate from new vantage points, the stories in newer lights. Postmodern fiction is one such genre wherein authors like Hilary Mantel, Philippa Gregory, Alison Weir, Tracy Borman and others employ their figments of imagination to narrate the past and make it acceptable for the readers of the present. In case of Hilary Mantel, her Cromwell trilogy leans onto the genre of meta-fiction, wherein elements of both history and fiction are merged in order to challenge the traditional stronghold that history as a concept occupied. The first book from her trilogy, *Wolf Hall* (2009) is a narrative retelling of the start of the reformation from the point of view of Thomas Cromwell, a minister who has risen to power through his abilities and cunning. Thomas

Cromwell becomes the centre in the novel, with emphasis on his experiences within Henry VIII's court and giving away a side of the story which is not biased or rather royalist in its tendencies.

The aim of the paper is to discuss the ample possibilities that the merging of fiction and history hold in uncovering myriad points of view in understanding the developments of the past/history. The "little narratives" dismantling the established grand narratives recorded in history will be the primary line on which the paper will align. The notion of history being a genre that has elements of fiction within its many pages is again highlighted by how manipulation becomes a trope in many instances within historical records.

Keywords: history, fiction, tudors, shadows, narratives

His-Stories: Historicizing Fiction/ Fictionalizing History in Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*

Hilary Mantel whose full name is Dame Hilary Mary Mantel is an English writer well known for exploring innumerable themes in her writings. From writing austere comedies to socially probing novels which are set in a wide range of contemporary and historical locales, Mantel's works have a vast hold on the literary scenario of the present. However, it was with the publication of the Cromwell trilogy that Mantel's position as a prominent English writer became even more magnified. The first two books from the trilogy, *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bring up the Bodies* (2012) have won Mantel the Man Booker Prize Award for Fiction. The third book from the trilogy titled *The Mirror and the Light* (2020) continues with the story of Cromwell, who loses his grip on the political scenes of the Tudor Court, further losing his positions and getting sentenced to death. These historical fictions have completely refurbished the aura of the history during the days of the Tudor Dynasty. Mantel recreates the events of King Henry VIII's time and

her books testify the merging of both history and fiction. The first two novels from the trilogy were adapted as a pair of stage plays that debuted at the royal Shakespeare Company in 2013 and they were also developed as a 2015 television miniseries.

Mantel exemplifies the aura of an author who chose to be different from the rest. Hilary Mantel in an interview with the *Paris Review*, describes herself to have become a novelist only because she felt she had missed the opportunity of becoming a proper historian: “I only became a novelist because I thought I had missed a chance to become a historian. So it began as second best. I had to tell myself a story about the French revolution--- the story of the revolution by some of the people who made it, rather than by the revolution’s enemies¹.” This interview is related to her first published novel from the Cromwell trilogy, *Wolf Hall*. It was with her plan to create a trilogy based on this Tudor history that enabled her to make a name for herself in the ambit of a historian. She, however, does not fall into the category of the conventional historian because of the way in which she handled and questioned history through her books further enabling the readers to experience a new flavor in the realm of history. From Linda Hutcheon’s book *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, the definition of what a historical fiction or novel or a historiographic metafiction is found aptly expressed and the following lines from her book describe the Hungarian Marxist philosopher, George Lukacs’s idea about the type of characters that a historical novel should have:

George Lukacs felt that the historical novel could enact historical process by presenting a microcosm which generalizes and concentrates. The protagonist therefore, should be a type, a synthesis of the general and the particular, of “all the

humanly and socially essential determinants.” From this definition, it is clear that the protagonists of historiographic metafiction are anything but types: they are the ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history. (Hutcheon 114)

Throughout the Medieval and Renaissance periods, History as a subject of knowledge was classified as the study of the past which invariably reported from facts. The historian had to collect data's or facts from the past and represent those in a chronological manner for future use and reference. It was a branch of knowledge, recording all the events which were held to be significant and that which gave a grandeur to a certain epoch. But, with the fleeting of time and especially with recent developments in the field of literary theory and criticism, the simple notion of History being a record of the past, came to be loosened. Terms like 'historicity' surfaced which meant a tactful questioning of the authenticity of the past as recorded in history. With the onrush of theories like structuralism and post-structuralism, questioning and finally, dismantling the existing stronghold of belief in a centre, gave way to the spread of new ways of understanding established ideas. Likewise, the distinction between History and Fiction, wherein the latter was a narrative genre, derived from the imagination and the former, as already stated, an outcome of facts, was supposed to be the only point of vital difference. It was imagination which was thought to be lacking in a narrative of history but, with the dawn of the nineteenth century, theorists began to focus more on collecting the similarities between the two rather than the differences. This led to a new kind of understanding whereby elements of fiction came to be incorporated in the narrative of history giving it the shape of historical fiction and also making one thing evident that whatever has been recorded in history is also not devoid of subtle instances of fictionality. Thus, emerged a new kind of genre that is, historical fiction. This genre

is seen to be explored by Hilary Mantel in her novel *Wolf Hall*, an influential narrative of the author's unconventional outlook on exploring the Age of Reformation in England by re-visioning the Tudor Dynasty politics during the rule of the King Henry VIII. *Wolf Hall* portrays Thomas Cromwell's growth from a young boy to his rise in being a powerful minister in the court of Henry VIII. With the wholesome knowledge of court dynamics under the aegis of his master and mentor Cardinal Wolsey, Cromwell aimed to make a place for himself in the Court of Henry VIII and when his master was wrongly accused of going against the King's interest, he was more than determined to do right by his master while competing for an important place in the Tudor Court. The question of a male heir succeeding the throne was of paramount importance and Queen Katherine couldn't provide the King with one, and so the rifts came to be witnessed in the King's household whereby the overtly ambitious Anne Boleyn tried to take over the Queen's position. It is here that the newly prominent Cromwell tries to help another ambitious persona in court to triumph over the hierarchical order of the Tudor Court. In helping Anne becoming the Queen by annulling the King's previous marriage with Queen Katherine of Aragon, Cromwell made his stronghold in the King's good books even more solid. Thus, became the story of the not-so-well-to-do boy from Putney, Cromwell cementing a rightful place in the King's court a reality. But, what is interesting to note is that Cromwell goes through a lot in the years following the new Queen Anne's reign as he tries to understand his own person while constantly prying into his own inner motives. The ending of *Wolf Hall* clearly decides the kind of position that Cromwell ended up being in as he worked on to repeat the history of annulling another marriage for the sake of fulfilling the King's wish of having a male heir as Anne couldn't provide him one either and Jane Seymour becomes the next prospective match for the King who seeks Cromwell's aid.

Thus, the power that Cromwell initiates as an outsider with no background of nobility to boast of is the centerpiece holding together the blocks of Mantel's Tudor Story. Cromwell, the son of a blacksmith and invariably a part of the Shadow is voiced with a dominant language in Mantel's *Wolf Hall*.

Henry VIII had a pompous court, with every person within it thriving to sustain and please the King. The Suppressed in the context of the Tudor period and particularly in the court of Henry VIII were the people who occupied their position in the lowest dregs of society. These people were the ones who did not have a noble status attached to their name since their birth; they were the hardworking community who worked for the benefits of the people who were above their station in life, the King and everyone else relating to the royalty, gentry and even merchants in many ways. The Suppressed were also the ones whose history were wilfully left out by the historian to contain only those histories which were about the people in positions of power, that is the nobility and the lives of Kings and Queens. A lot of changes were noticed in the society of England and one very striking change that Mantel tries to throw light upon is the gradual resurfacing of the voices of the people that belonged to non-royal households. With the Reformation taking the primary space in Tudor England, the English society saw its cultures moving towards a balance based on equality wherein abilities and talents are put on top of blood privileges. Thomas Cromwell's short but powerful presence in the Court of Henry VIII is aptly depicted by Mantel and it is through him that the plot in the novels revolves. In order to narrate her stance on the Tudor Dynasty, which was to understand and bring new perspective into the character of Thomas Cromwell and along with that recreate those 'little narratives' from the Tudor Age which were left under the shadows in the established historical records. She therefore,

made an attempt to bring out the periphery or the ‘little narratives’ of the minor figures into the forefront by taking recourse to the elements of metafiction. These peripheral voices were those of the Suppressed as mentioned in the beginning. The people in the periphery did not belong to any noble families and were the ones who worked manually hard to thrive for a doable living for themselves and at the same time serve the basic needs of the nobility above them. Thomas Cromwell himself was a part of this periphery before his climb to a glamorous fortune and Hilary Mantel tries to bring out the predicament of the periphery by enumerating how they, too were an important part of the past in order to understand the history more thoroughly through her novel.

Metafiction emerged out of the need to understand how human beings reflect, construct and mediate their experiences. It works on the principle of viewing or taking up the metaphor of the world as a book. Conversely, metafiction seemed to modify this metaphor in lieu of contemporary philosophical, linguistic or literary theory. It is because of the increased consciousness of the ‘meta’ levels of discourse and experience that it goes beyond by reflecting upon the greater awareness within contemporary cultures of the function of language in constructing and maintaining our sense of everyday ‘reality’. The term metafiction when broken down is a blend of the two words, ‘meta’ and ‘fiction’, where ‘meta’ stands for beyond and ‘fiction’ is a type of literature which uses imagination to depict people or events. The metafictional novel has to employ metalanguage in order to accomplish metafictional levels of rendition in the recounting of history. The word ‘metalanguage’ was first developed by the linguist L. Hjelmslev wherein he defined metalanguage as that which, instead of referring to non-linguistic events, situations or objects in the world rather goes on to refer to another language altogether: it is a language which takes another language as its object. For this idea to be implicit

Saussure's distinctions of the terms signifier and signified become relevant here, wherein the signifier denotes the sound-image of the word or its shape on the page; the signified is the concept evoked by the word. Thus, metalanguage is a language that functions as a signifier to another language, and this other language thus becomes its signified. The following lines from Patricia Waugh's *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self Conscious Fiction*, defines metafiction in the words of how Hjelmslev perceived it to be:

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attentions to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality... Over the last twenty years, novelists have tended to become much more aware of the theoretical issues involved in constructing fictions. In consequence, their novels have tended to embody dimensions of self-reflexivity and formal uncertainty. (Waugh 2)

That language passively reflects a coherent, meaningful and 'objective' world is no longer tenable. Rather, language is an independent, self-contained system which generates its own 'meanings'. The relationship of language to the world is highly complex, problematic and is triggered by convention. Therefore, the necessity of 'meta terms' is evident in order to explore the relationship between this arbitrary linguistic system and the world to which it apparently refers. In fiction they are required in order to explore the relationship between the world of the fiction and the world outside the fiction. Patricia Waugh in her *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self Conscious Fiction*, addresses how metafiction fits into the tradition of novels, the relationship of fiction, reality and truth along with analysing contemporary authors. Metafiction

deals with the question of the uncertainty of describing anything. The metafictional writer faces a basic dilemma, which has to do with the ideas of representation: that no matter how hard one tries to ‘represent’ the world, it, in fact cannot be ‘represented’:

In literary fiction it is, in fact, possible only to ‘represent’ the discourses of that world. Yet, if one attempts to analyse a set of linguistic relationships using those same relationships as the instruments of analysis, language soon becomes a ‘prisonhouse’ from which the possibility of escape is remote. Metafiction sets out to explore this dilemma. (Waugh 4)

Hilary Mantel’s novel, *Wolf Hall* is an attempt by the author to look back into a period which was known for its revolutionary ruptures, the Tudor Dynasty. Mantel’s texts try to subvert the then popular tide of hailing and naming the deeds of the prominent Royalty by uncovering the voices of the common people. For this she takes up the historical figure, Thomas Cromwell, who was able to earn a place of distinction in the court of Henry VIII even though only for a short interval. It is through this fictional narrativisation of Cromwell that the other peripheral figures from the period, attain a voice of their own and Cromwell’s own origins in the so-called lower dregs of society, make him seem like the leader of the peripheral club. The peripheral figures or the people left to rot in the Shadows in the novel were, Cromwell, his father, his sisters and their families, his wife and children, and the entire lot of Austin Friars, the ones who were not related to the King and his household directly, namely the ones working on the kitchens, the ladies –in-waiting of the Queens and to some extent even the Queens. Thomas Cromwell’s persona is quite intriguing as in the previous works of history, the recounting of his

life and times pertain only to those few years of success he achieved in the Tudor Court. Nothing is clearly known for sure about the times before his rise in Henry VIII's favour. Michael Everett, in the introduction of his book, *The Rise of Thomas Cromwell: Power and Politics in the Reign of Henry VIII*, paints a clear picture of how Cromwell's life was dealt with in the earlier works of history:

The fact that there has been little serious investigation into his background, activities and experiences for what was the vast majority of Cromwell's life remains surprising. Existing books on Cromwell treat the years before 1534, and certainly before 1530, as little more than a prelude to his ministry and years of ascendancy.

(Everett 6-7)

These peripheral figures and their position in the historical records became a topic for thought for postmodern theorists and philosophers. The concept of "little narratives" or giving voice to the deliberately left out parts of history was inaugurated by Jean Francois Lyotard in his book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. He focuses on the broader term 'legitimation' and how it has been responsible in determining the weight of different statements on the basis of truth and falsity. Lyotard is seen to problematise the importance that language holds in the basics of representation. He regards legitimation to be an imperial concept which is governed by the demand or need for legitimation itself. A game of language has always been the criteria for established history and the authoritative language always legitimated the knowledge that it wished to preserve and undermining all else that did not fall within its purview of acceptance. These were the grand narratives and postmodern scholarship sought to unsettle the

existing authority of the grand narratives (history, politics, culture) by positing the significance of “little narratives” or micro narratives. These little narratives are localised narratives or stories that represent small practices and local events without any claim towards universality or finality.

While Historians focus on the years of Cromwell’s prominence in Henry VIII’s Court, Hilary Mantel goes on to employ her imagination to come up with an assumed portrayal of Cromwell’s early life. Therefore, in the first book of the trilogy, *Wolf Hall*, she portrays the difficult early life of Cromwell in the house of Walter, his drunken blacksmith father:

Born at Putney in 1485, Thomas Cromwell’s father Walter Cromwell was a blacksmith and a brewer, known more for his drinking brawls and poor quality beer.

“‘So now get up’

Felled, dazed, silent, he has fallen; knocked full length on the cobbles of the yard... one blow, properly placed, could kill him now.” (3)

A common man’s rise from such deteriorating conditions has always caught the jealous eyes of the other well-to-do folks in King Henry VIII’s court. By trying to fill in the gaps with regards to Cromwell’s early phase and the phase after his rise to power, Mantel tries to make sense of how a common man, with no proper education succeeded in winning a place for himself in the English Court. The very fact that Mantel places Thomas Cromwell in the centre to take forward her history, making the King and his other prominent man’s lives revolve around Cromwell, acts as a pointer towards the subversive stance which she takes up. In the second chapter of *Wolf Hall*, titled ‘Paternity’, Thomas Cromwell is shown to be under the aegis of

Cardinal Wolsey, his mentor and inspiration. The discussions going about are that of the annulment of the King's marriage to Queen Katherine of Aragon. As is known, the most important thing for a King to have within his marriage is an heir, a male heir, who would be able to take along the family legacy, but, Katherine was unable to provide Henry with a male heir. Also, as the course of the times suggest, the King was all powerful and hence, his flirtatious regards towards Anne Boleyn also triggered his haste in ending the previous marriage. It must be noted that Anne Boleyn too was a peripheral figure up to the point when she finally convinces the King to annul his marriage with Katherine. Anne Boleyn's person compliments the parallel triumph in Thomas Cromwell's case.

The Oxford History of Britain edited by Kenneth O. Morgan is a modern form of narrative history, dealing with the general condition of Britain that is it covers the history of Britain and its people during the past two thousand plus years starting with the Roman Conquest up to the present. Kenneth O. Morgan, the editor is a celebrated Welsh historian who is known for his writings on modern British history and the writers who have contributed in this collection are all notable historians. This book contains a part named "The Tudor Age" which was written by John Guy, who was a student of G R. Elton at Cambridge. Guy, the serious historian that he wished to be, insisted on constructing an impartial documentation of Cromwell's undertaking's and therefore, while reading his analysis of Cromwell's character, one does not find any exposure with regards to Cromwell's individuality. His focus is more on Henry VIII rather than on Cromwell and hence, one finds only occasional mention of Cromwell's character in his argument with regards to the descriptions on the ideas of the dissolution of monasteries, administrative reforms, religious reformation and foreign policies during Henry VIII's reign.

Cromwell's religious inclination was the only exposure of Cromwell's individual view in Guy's contribution in the book: "Cromwell did not deny the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist nor teach Luther's doctrine of 'justification by faith alone' in so many words" (276). But his "injunctions to the clergy" results in his doom. "Denounced to Henry for secretly protecting a group of radical Protestants at Calais, the king withdrew his support and allowed Cromwell to be attainted on charges of heresy as well as treason"(276). From Guy's interpretation of Tudor court dynamics it is clear that he focused on the Kings' history more thereby making Thomas Cromwell more of a minor character who was essential just for realizing the King's pursuits and demands. Hilary Mantel gives Cromwell's character a new spin as she brings him out of his nonentity as a character by inserting him in a major role while making him the protagonist of her novel and for that she makes him go parallel with the common man who look up to him to augment their station in life.

The gap between fact and fiction came to merge with the emergence of historiographic novels or metafiction. In Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, historiographic metafiction is defined as that which embodies real, ideological, moral and political relevance through its ability to be intensely self reflexive and also at the same time paradoxically hold on to historical events and personages. Since, Mantel's novels are a rereading of the Tudor times, and going by Hutcheon's definition of how a historiographic metafiction works, her first novel from the trilogy has been spun across keeping intact both the elements of history and fiction. Consequently, historiographic metafiction, by situating itself in its discursive context, forces the acknowledgement of social practices, the historical conditions of meaning and the positions from which novels are both produced and received. In Mantel's view,

the past is not something one passively consume, but it is that which one actively creates in each act of remembrance. Bearing witness to this statement, in her rereading of Henry VIII's court, she has taken up the a accessible history and chosen her own specific characters to further create a space for fitting in her own narrative stories to fill in the blanks that were left behind by history about the course of the actions that took place in Cromwell's life and times as to how he became a powerful minister in such a short period. The gaps with regard to what took place in his life when he left his home to join the French army only to come back a more learned man in the ways of the world, fit to be a part of Wolsey's train. As *Wolf Hall* is a novel belonging to the postmodern era, the dig into the past therefore, invariably necessitates the use of a different kind of narrative fiction. The following line from Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, describes that different kind of narrative fiction that Mantel uses, which is historiographic metafiction:

Historiographic Metafiction is one kind of postmodern novel which rejects projecting present beliefs and standards onto the past and asserts the specificity and particularity of the individual past event. (Hutcheon 122-123)

The metafictional revisiting undertaken by Mantel in the novel, *Wolf Hall* is one where she is sticking to the established history and also at the same time adding her interpretations by taking recourse to a number of ideas from different historical texts in filling the gaps that were left behind by history. It is true that her focus on the character of Cromwell is the base but she is also equally conscious of keeping the villainy in Cromwell intact. She has however, quite aptly altered the position of Cromwell, giving him a new dimension by making him the founder of the

Reformation movement in a way. Through Cromwell, she has also helped the peripheral voices come to the forefront of the Tudor period and thereby justifying the postmodern discourse of emphasising the importance of “little narratives” over the overtly dominant grand narratives of the past. In conclusion, the above discussion ends on the note of how the past or history is made to strongly resonate through the character of Cromwell as it is through him that the history of the Tudor Court is fictionalised as well as dissected to open new vantage points of thought for readers.

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