Tudor History, the City and the Marginalised in Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*

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Abstract: Following its Man Booker Prize in 2009, Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* has gained a cult status in literature and cemented her position as one of the leading contemporary novelists in Britain. The novel follows the story of Thomas Cromwell's rise to power from an underdog to becoming the architect of Tudor politics during the reign of Henry VIII. Narrated through the perspective of Cromwell himself, *Wolf Hall* chronicles Cromwell's journey from 1527 to 1535. In doing so, Mantel has speculated Tudor history and its representation in historical discourse. As the narrative travels with Cromwell, Mantel leaves her reader with multiple possibilities to question the historical image of Cromwell who has been archived as a villain for his political activities. By allowing Cromwell to take control of the narrative, Mantel shows the existing Tudor history from a marginalised point of view. Before he became a minister in the court of Henry VIII, he was a butcher's son for which he was the subject of mockery to his contemporaries. However, the narrative of *Wolf Hall* does not only stop at exploring Cromwell's personal life but also his public activities that are connected to Tudor politics and history. Following Cromwell's association with the common people of the society, this paper aims to analyse the representation of Tudor history in the novel. Moreover, it seeks to understand the city as a major site for historical and political exploration and the contribution of the lower-class characters in the rise of Cromwell to power.

Keywords: Tudor history, Cromwell, *Wolf Hall,* Tudor Politics, Marginalised

Introduction

Until the publication of *Wolf Hall* in 2009, Hilary Mantel was "a relatively unknown and under-researched author" (Pollard 1035). *Wolf Hall* along with its sequel *Bring up the Bodies* has garnered her wider critical appreciation as both novels have awarded her Man Booker Prize back-to-back and cemented her position as a mainstream contemporary novelist. Before these two historical fictions, Mantel had also written *A Place of Greater Safety* where she told the story of the French Revolution and its leaders Danton, Robespierre and Camile Desmoulins. On comparing these three novels, the reader finds that the protagonists are all real historical figures and Mantel has chosen their consciousness to move forward with the stories. *Wolf Hall* chronicles the story of Thomas Cromwell from 1527 to 1535 and by giving him a perspective of his own story, Mantel breaks the traditional depiction of Cromwell as a Machiavellian character. Historians like Geoffrey Elton and Robert Hutchinson, Shakespeare and Fletcher in *Henry VIII,* and Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* have had their representation of Cromwell with a negative point of view which has contributed to fixing his image as a villain. Unlike these previous works, *Wolf Hall* does not follow a cliched Cromwell. This success of *Wolf Hall* has been rightly observed by Merritt Moseley who commented that Mantel's "choice of a focal character - Thomas Cromwell" is her "secret to success" (435). She hails *Wolf Hall* as a great novel "because of the firm authority with which Mantel handles these complicated materials, because of the unforgettable presentation of Cromwell, and because of her style, vigorous and absolutely appropriate to the times and the people she depicts" (ibid). However, the aim of this paper is not to seek the character analysis of Cromwell as many previous researchers have already examined the same.

Looking at some of the previous analyses of this novel, we find that *Wolf Hall* has been examined as a historical metafiction which is a problematic statement to consider. Mantel's re-imagination of Cromwell has also been the subject of many critical works. The issue of women is another topic that has been found in research related to *Wolf Hall.* Maria Baranova's *Portrayal of Thomas Cromwell in Hilary Mantel's novels Wolf Hall and Bring up the Bodies*, Niki Liebregts' *Make or Mar: Hilary Mantel's Re-Imagining of Thomas Cromwell in Wolf Hall*, Iveta Runstukova's *The Aspects of Life of Women in Tudor England in Wolf Hall* etc. are some of the examples of researched works on *Wolf Hall.* Amidst these frequently examined areas, two articles that stand out are Alison L. LaCroix's "A Man for All Treasons:

Crimes by and against the Tudor State in the novels of Hilary Mantel" and Rosario Arias' "Exoticizing the Tudors: Hilary Mantel's Re-Appropriation of the Past in *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies*". In the first article, LaCroix has observed the character of Cromwell as a bureaucrat, a political operative and a prosecutor who has made effective the Treason Law in his execution of power. On the other hand, Arias has focused on the "strategies and techniques used by Mantel" (19) in representing the Tudor past. She has analysed Mantel as a "mediator between the Tudor past and the present while providing a close encounter with the exotic other" (ibid). However, examining Tudor's history from the marginalised point of view has been a gap in these articles. The present article aims to explore those gaps in the earlier research on the novel. It seeks to understand the city as a major site for historical exploration. It also tries to understand the contribution of the lower-class characters in the rise of Cromwell to power.

Hilary Mantel and Thomas Cromwell in *Wolf Hall*

After the monumental success of *Wolf Hall* and its sequel *Bring up the Bodies,* Mantel has reflected on her novelistic process in many lectures and interviews. In the first Reith Lecture, she reckons that reporting the "outer world faithfully" and getting into the "interior drama" of her characters motivates her to write historical fiction. (Mantel, "Why I became a historical novelist"). In dealing with history in fiction, she finds that history has been changing "behind us, and the past changes a little every time we retell it" (Mantel, "Booker winner Hilary Mantel on dealing with history in fiction"). The reason Mantel didn't depict the story like a historian and instead followed the psyche of Cromwell can be understood in her statement from the Second Reith Lectures. Commenting on the difference between a historian and a historical novelist, she opines: "The historian, ideally, struggles for neutrality. The novelist doesn't. She is allowed to be partisan. She must be. Her history comes from the point of view of her character. She is allowed to get behind him" (Mantel, The Iron Maiden). Further, she ponders that in re-imaging the past she has gone through the perspective of her characters: "From history, I know what they do, but I can't with any certainty know what they think or feel" (ibid).

In *Wolf Hall,* Cromwell gets to write both his personal history and the political history of the Tudor period. Although he has appeared in many fictional works set in that era, none of

them seems to break the archetypal image of him. In Philippa Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl*, he has been limited to "Secretary Cromwell" (328). C.J Sansom's *Dissolutions*, Cromwell's character is reduced to his actions of torture during the time of Dissolution of the Monasteries. In Alison Weir's *Innocent Traitor*, he appears as the right hand of Henry VIII who "did not like to trouble the king" (49). Mantel herself cites the examples of Hans Holbein's portrait which reflects him "a man of undistinguished ugliness, with a hard, flat, sceptical eye" and Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* where he is "the villain who casually holds another man's hand in a candle flame" (Mantel, How I came to write *Wolf Hall*). Here, it is pertinent to understand that these depictions of Cromwell have led to fixing his image as a villain and a political traitor. However, Mantel's Cromwell does not succumb to this formula and gets to "imagine his childhood, explore his early life and chronicle his rise to power" (Mantel, Thomas Cromwell, perhaps not such a villain?").

Tudor History: Cromwell, the city and the marginalised

The narrative of *Wolf Hall* travels with Cromwell. It unfolds the major events of his life that eventually led him as a powerful courtier in the court of Henry VIII. From a blacksmith's son to the Master Secretary of the Henrician government, the journey of Cromwell has also helped the reader to look at history and historical representation of the Tudor period. The fall of Cardinal Wolsey, the Reformation of England and the execution of Thomas More are seen through the point of view of Cromwell. These historical events get new interpretations due to Cromwell's association with them. Mantel's statement "Beneath every history, another history" in the chapter of *Wolf Hall* "An Occult History of Britain" can be seen as an apt remark to understand the representation of Tudor history in the novel.

In *The Renaissance Self-Fashioning,* Stephen Greenblatt states that "the family, state and religious institutions" (Greenblatt 01) dominate the power nexus in Tudor England. This is evident in *Wolf Hall* as the Boleyn and the Seymour families were at loggerheads in exploring power. However, Cromwell with his family at Austin Friars also sought power as he reflected: "It's not a dynasty, but it's a start" (Mantel 111). Working for the King, Mantel's Cromwell got to operate the state's laws. He did not only handle the affairs of the court but also the foreign diplomatic issues of the state. The episode with Spanish ambassador

Eustache Chapuys was a testament to Cromwell's power in functioning the politics and at the same time a mirror to interpret the history of the period.

In *Wolf Hall*, the reader witnesses the politics and history of the Tudor period when Cromwell enters the service of Cardinal Wolsey and begins to learn the life of a courtier under his tutelage. Cromwell's courtly activities give us a picture of the Tudor court and the way it functions. Alison Weir in *Henry VIII: King & Court* rightly observes that the rise and fall of the courtiers are determined in the court as the court has become "the political and cultural hub of the nation, a seat of government, a sophisticated arts centre and a meeting place of scholars" (Weir 25). Before Cromwell, the Tudor court and history excelled by the presence of Cardinal Wolsey and Thomas More. However, both these men's fall from power helped Cromwell to become the most trusted and powerful courtier for Henry VIII. It is important to understand that Cromwell's re-writing of Tudor history does not only have a courtier's perspective. The narrative offers the role of other spaces and characters to get a version of Tudor's history. Apart from the court, the characters find various locations to engage in their intriguing political activities. Mantel's introduction to the characters in her "Cast of Characters" (ix) along with the places they belonged displays a significant tactic as it indicates the role of the places in getting the history of the period. For instance, we find both Putney and Austin Friars belonged to Cromwell and he chooses the second location for his political activities after becoming a courtier. Similarly, Thomas More's home in Chelsea has become another space for many political debates and discussions of the period.

Along with these significant households, one space which has contributed to the story of history and politics of the Tudor period is the city. Cromwell's association with the city and the city people have displayed another side of Tudor history which is mostly ignored by other fictional works based on this period. Cromwell and other powerful courtiers' association with the city people allow the reader to re-visit the Tudor history and ambience of the Renaissance city culture. From the novel, it is seen that the political history of the Tudor period is influenced by cities like Venice, Florence and Antwerp. As a centre of urbanization and commerce, cities have access to many forms of knowledge which helped the courtiers to plan their strategies. We find Cromwell's awareness of Thomas More's people as "city people" (Mantel 189). In the very early phase of his career, Cromwell learned the importance

of having city people on his side. The increasing connections among the courtiers, merchants and traders turned the cities into a space of politics. A city stands as a place for both "information and misinformation" (Martin 11-12) and the diplomats of the Henrician court ally with the city people to get them for their political benefits.

Alexander Cowans cites sixteenth-century Italian diplomat Giovanni Botero in "Cities, Towns, and New Forms of Culture" who opines that the greatness of a city lies in the "multitude and number of the inhabitants and their power" (101) and this is evident in *Wolf Hall* as several courtiers find their accomplishes among merchants, traders and artisans. Antwerp, Florence and Venice have provided the much-needed information to the courtiers as the courtiers have employed their people in the cities. The rumours and gossip of the city people find its link to Cromwell's life and it gives evidence of their association with the politics of the period. The households have also served as a space for political discussion. In *Wolf Hall,* we see in 1530 Thomas More is asking Cromwell about a merchant friend from Antwerp named Stephen Vaughan which indicates the benefit of having the merchant class on one's side to climb in the politics of power. This is later confirmed in one of Cromwell's remarks on the importance of the city and its people: "The world is not run from where he thinks. Not from his border fortresses, not even from Whitehall. The world is run from Antwerp, from Florence, from places he has never imagined; from Lisbon, from where the ships with sails of silk drift west and burned up in the sun" (Mantel 378).

However, the city that captures most of Cromwell's political activities is London. During the sixteenth century London showed its growth "not only in population, but in economic power, political influence, and cultural sophistication" (Wagner and Susan, eds. 710). In *Wolf Hall*, Mantel depicts the way Cromwell's household in Austin Friars in London has become the epicentre of his political life as it "fills up with city merchants, monks and priests of various sorts" (Mantel 320). London offers Cromwell the space to operate his laws. He has hardly gone to any places outside London. His biographer Tracy Borman remarks: "With the notable exception of his youth and brief sojourn in Calais in late 1532, Cromwell had never strayed from the capital for more than a few days" (Borman n.pag). As the cities are connected to the politics of the state, Mantel's Cromwell embraces London and other European cities to get his politics right.

Apart from the contribution of a city, *Wolf Hall* shows the way marginalised people helped Cromwell in his rise to power. Although the narrative always magnifies Cromwell, it is important to seek how they have created an identity of their own without being recognised and worked mostly under the shadow of their master. During Henry VIII's reign, the Tudor period witnessed a transition as England "abandoned the disaster-oriented framework of the Middle Ages" and moved towards a "pre-industrial political economy" (Guy 09). Along with the rise of nobility and mercantile classes, the period saw "multiple occupations, domestic self-employment" (10). This led the marginalised to find their way to court politics both directly and indirectly. In *Wolf Hall,* Mantel introduces the marginalised characters in the "cast of characters". The cook Thurston, Dick Purser, the keeper of the guard dogs, and Henry Pattinson, the servant of Thomas More are a few significant characters whose works provide a scope to look at their importance in the larger context of history. Cromwell's servants at Austin Friars controlled the atmosphere more than their master (Mantel 315). Despite their marginalised background, the servants became part of the politics in an intriguing court culture. The story of Dick Purser, once tortured by More and later shifted to the household of Cromwell, displays the circulation of power and information from one household to another.

In addition to these servants, we also find the story of Elizabeth Barton attached to the life of Cromwell. Her origin is also that of a marginalised background as she once worked for the archbishop of Canterbury (Ackroyd 67). In 1531, her prophecies against the king's new marriage shook the Tudor world. Although she was beheaded at the Tower, courtiers like More and Fisher had tried to rescue her from the situation. Tracing the rise of Barton, Robinson Murphy in "Elizabeth Barton's Claim: Feminist Defiance in *Wolf Hall*" discusses the outspoken nature of Barton and the way she disapproved "Henry's proposed divorce of Catherine" (154). By 1532, Cromwell gets to handle the matter of Barton personally and her subsequent death reflects the subjugation of the marginalised voice in the Tudor world. However, these subaltern voices have emerged in multiple occasions to reclaim their identities. In every courtier's household, a servant used to know about the political secrets of his master and worked as a spy for another. Despite their identity as marginalised, they proved instrumental and relevant for their masters.

Conclusion

In *Wolf Hall*, Mantel's aim is not to alter the existing image of Tudor history but to experience it through the eyes of Cromwell. Mantel allows Cromwell to picture his version of Tudor's history. Chronicling the various phases of Cromwell's life from 1527 to 1535, *Wolf Hall* retells some of the significant historical events of Tudor history, such as the divorce of Henry VIII, the execution of Thomas More and Cromwell's rise to power from his perspective. The narrative is designed in a way that the reader can only see a particular story of Tudor history the way Cromwell approaches it. The city and its people have allowed Cromwell to advance his political move. As a location of news and information, a city functions as a space where the courtiers can accomplish their activities. The marginalised also contributed significantly to the larger context of the Tudor politics. The rumours and gossip of these characters are another integral part of the novel's narrative that helps its protagonist exercise political power over his enemy. Although their voices deprived acknowledgement, it is seen that they have never disappeared from the narrative of the powerful as they became instrumental to their rise.

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