

Nationality, History, and Mythology: A Thematic Study of Man Booker Prize-Winning Novel *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel

Dr Meenakshi Joshi

Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities

IPS Academy, IES, Indore

ms.meenakshijoshi@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Man Booker Prize is the most prominent award given away, every year, to the finest work of fiction. The award is an opportunity and a platform for sensible literature and novelists and their work. It helps them to make their approach to global readers. The research paper is the thematic study of *Wolf Hall*, one of the winning novels of the Booker Prize. Written by Novelist Hilary Mantel who won the award twice for her Tudor novels series, *Wolf Hall* won the award in 2010. The historical novel provides a window for the readers to revisit the history of the country (England). Mantel shows the England of the sixteenth century through the eyes of her protagonist Thomas Cromwell. She has woven the national myth with historical facts into the novel. She includes nation-defining events to explore the nation's identity. Mantel has taken the most influential and discussed period of history which plays an important role in the History of England as a nation.

KEYWORDS

Mythology; Prophecies; Witchcraft.

Wolf Hall of Hilary Mantel is the winning novel for the 2010 Booker Prize. The novel is a historical fiction based on the history of the Tudor era. Many writers have different opinions on accumulating historical facts in modern narratives. Walter Benjamin, the writer of *The Storyteller*, expresses grief over the covering of information in the modern world because it rejects miracles and because of its prompt verification. He privileges storytelling for keeping the story free from explanation. We live in an age in which the kind of information that Benjamin speaks is easily accessible and globally acceptable. This is specifically true of the availability of historical information. Mantel's novel is one of the best examples

where one can map the popular and public history of the early twentieth-first century. Her fiction is a good place to find "the most extraordinary things, marvelous things... relate with the greatest accuracy" (Benjamin) and a challenge to the prompt verification of a certain period of history.

Mantel started her career as a writer by exploring the French Revolution and gave the manuscript *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992). After the success of four other novels, she returned to historical fiction in *The Giant O' Brien* (1998). She had not tackled history as immense both in material and in legacy until *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies* came into shape. These novels rest "on the shoulders of historians" but they also rest on Mantel's unique

perception that comes from her being born and brought up in an Irish Catholic family. Her family background was different. Her family had been living in northern England in the years that followed World War II. She reflects on her approach toward miracles in an interview:

If you were brought up in a religious setting, like Catholicism...you believe in magic, but you were also told there was something more powerful than magic and that is the invisible world created by God. And the fact is that the visible world is only the tip. I still believe that. I have a very strong sense of the world of our sense being –how can I put it– not the whole story. (Mantel “Dead are Real”)

This is the spiritual belief that engages Mantel with the myths of England in her Tudor novels. The magical and supernatural stories are an unavoidable and inseparable part of the novel. Though Historical fiction has been seen as “a product of romantic nationalism” (Anderson) yet Mantel has admitted her engagement with the nation in her historical novels. She comments that she must explore the mythological stories “since Englishness contained equal parts of both” (“Dead are Real”). The theme of theology has been woven together with national myth, magic, history, national narrative, and fiction to reclaim lost histories and explore new national identities

Mantel writes history in *Wolf Hall* but she also assimilates national myth with the historical facts into the novel. As she shares in an interview “Dead are Reals” that *Wolf Hall* may be about politics, “but it is also a song of England”. In one of her essays (Mantel “No Passes”), she expressed how she felt excluded from English or British identity. She also admits about her identity that she felt a shift away from her Catholic, Northern England, and Irish ancestry:

[Mantel] planted her flag right in the center of Englishness–because nothing, she thought, could be more seminal to English identity than the reign of Henry VIII and the coming of the English Bible. Thomas Cromwell had shown the English how to know themselves: in 1538, he ordered parishes to keep records of baptisms, marriages, and burials. And now she, writing about Cromwell, would furnish another document of English self-knowledge. It would be political but also mythological since Englishness contained equal parts of both (Mantel “Dead are Real”)

Mantel was not experimenting with the mythological voice the first time. She already had done this work in *The Giant O'Brien's* “a song of Ireland”. She intertwines myth and history together in the eighteenth-century mystery. Mantel brings together mythological narratives and historical narratives because it has the possibility of huge archetypes. What she has written in *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up The Bodies* is found in mythology like the female Fatale, the discarded wife, and the ruler who must secure his kingdom for his descendants. Literature has already seen the treatment of the archetype of the wise man with Thomas More, Cromwell's opponent. Rober Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* and Hitchens' *The Man Who Made England* presented Thomas More as Hero and demonize Cromwell. Mantel reverses these historical models. She makes readers believe that Cromwell is a wise man while Thomas More is a self-declared saint and literary giant. There is a connection between More's evil acts and the myth. Tudor society believed that giants are evil because of their role in myth, fables, and the Bible. By the late eighteenth century, giants became popular to study. As Mantel explores in her eighth novel *The Giant O'Brien*, Hunter, a Scottish man of Science vanquishes O'Brien, an Irish storyteller.

Mantel considered it her favourite work until *Wolf Hall*.

Mythology, witch, and prophet are things that we frequently find in her novel. In the novel, Queen Anne Boleyn is accused of having bewitched Henry the King, while biographies and fictional explorations of Anne never link her to witchcraft. Similarly, Elizabeth Barton who appears in *Wolf Hall* was a prophet whose opposition to Henry's marriage to Anne resulted in Barton's death. Mantel links these two women together in the novel to show the kind of women who think they can influence and manipulate the men around them only to discover their opportunities. While the decline in many superstitious beliefs occurred, there was a decline in the belief that "Women were generally believed to be sexually more voracious than men" (qt in Baker). Henry's court regarded any suggestion of witchcraft attached to Anne Boleyn as an implication that she was sexually more voracious than her husband. Cromwell used the reputation of Anne Boleyn to support the charges laid against her.

Some contemporaries discussed whether the prophets had gotten their foreknowledge from God, conjuration, or astrology. In the novel Eustache Chapuys, Charles's Ambassador to England and a regular visitor at Cromwell's house observes that the English are trusting and easily move by prophecies. Mantel's Cromwell dismisses prophecies. In *Wolf Hall*, Cromwell interrogates and convicts Elizabeth Barton for her prediction of Henry's death. English belief in magical myths like prophecies and witches has been used to motivate attacks on women who have achieved a position of power, especially through their intellectual abilities or their public voices. These prophecies are often used as a tool for handling political power. Acquiring power and its loss is a theme in all of Mantel's work. They can be seen in the postmodern context in which Mantel lives. The

characters within these myths seem to be non-aristocratic. It gives hints that only aristocrats can wield power. The women characters engaged in these myths suggest female suppression.

Though the West is far away from myths and prophecies and lives in a secular age, still it is possible to say that the demons and devils and witches and prophets have never been firmly expunged from the collective imagination, whether by Christianity or any other enlightening movement (Poole 29). Mantel has presented in her novel that contemporary British society fashions itself as secular.

Through the witches, prophets, magic, and religion, Mantel creates the intertextuality between her fictional novel, the myths of the creation of England, and the history of Henry VIII's break from Rome. Thomas Cromwell scoffs at the idea of using witchcraft as a basis for the charge against Anne. He was aware of the use of this treatise for persuading women. This means that Cromwell relied on the association of the devil and sexual promiscuity with witchcraft to influence the verdict of the assessors at Anne Boleyn's trial. The story of Albina and her sisters, the founder of Albion, also contains a female pact with the devil, paganism, and female misrule. Mantel believes that "The visible world is only the tip. I still believe that. I have a very strong sense of the world of our senses being...not the whole story" ("Accumulated Anger"). She is therefore in Tudor's novel intertwined religion with magic.

A nation's history acts as its foundation and influences its concept of national identity. It provides a collective memory to its citizens. These fables and myths travel first orally and then in print form. Mantel conveys the old myth through the character Wolsey who affirms to Cromwell makes him believe the old myths of Brutus and Edward IV's three sons.

These myths perform a major role in an early twenty-first-century novel about the early sixteenth century. How these myths have been passed, interpreted, and organized over the centuries can be better understood through Mantel's *Wolf Hall*. The combined narration of myths by Wolsey in *Wolf Hall* and other modernist writers like T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and D. H. Lawrence invoked the same myths which are used to serve a nation's political ambitions. It is well explained in one of his dissertations of Cohen. He argues that giants were just one example of a mythological trope that appears in history in medieval texts and was accepted in history likewise they appear in the Bible. Giants appear in literature and folklore until the fourteenth century and this tradition got the change in the earliest years of the Middle English period. It was the time when both secular and sacred myths were used as foundations for secular writing.

The Victorians rejected myth as "incompatible with science" (Segal) and made it a sub-category of religion. Among the theorists who sought to find other meanings and significance for myth was Ernst Cassirer. According to his view, the myths in the early twentieth century resulted from mental reception and interpretation made by earlier cultures. By taking the modern approach to T. S. Eliot's modern poem *The Waste Land*, he found:

Myth as a psychological and social tool to cope with the guilt and anxiety that members of society feel towards their aggression and to unite society by turning that aggression onto outsiders (Segal)

Shortly after winning her first Man Booker Prize for *Wolf Hall*, Mantel wrote an editorial for *The Guardian* in which she talks about the value of historical fiction. Mantel argues:

To try to engage with the present without engaging with the past is to live like a dog or cat rather than a human being; it is to bob along on

the waters of egoism solipsism and ignorance ("History in Fiction").

Her editorial is a plea for better history, she said:

History offers us vicarious experiences. It allows the youngest student to possess the ground equally with his elders; without knowledge of history to give him a context for present events, he is at mercy of every social misdiagnosis handed to him. (Mantel "History in Fiction")

Myth, history, and literature remained interlinked till the early seventeenth century for example Shakespeare's history plays. Outside of universities and schools, the proliferation of historical pageants, the expansion of historical tourism, and the popularity of historical novels (Fielding) characterized post-Victorian society. For some early twentieth-century historians, this popular celebration of history was not rigorous enough; they perceived Britain to be mostly ignorant of its past. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the establishment of several societies for the preservation of historical buildings and sites. Despite the existence of these new societies, history is recognized as a professional area of study and practice. In 1980 White argued that historical data and events should be narrativized and presented in more easily form to understand. Therefore, it was clear that history and literature cannot be separated. White further identified that historical facts consist of four tropes: comic, romantic, tragic, and satiric. Mantel alludes to these tropes in the first epigraph of *Wolf Hall*: "There are three kinds of scenes, one called the tragic, second the comic, third the satiric" (Mantel)

Mantel weaves national myth with historical facts into the novel. She says that *Wolf Hall* may be about politics, but it is also a song about England. The primary concern is revisiting the history of Britain behind the curtain of mythology, political

upheavals, and church reformation in the Sixteenth Century. Mantel has chosen this huge archetype of historical-based fiction because no story can reflect England and its national identity better than the reign of Henry VIII and the coming of the English Bible. Thomas Cromwell showed the English how to know themselves. It is political but also mythological as

Englishness contained equal parts of both. Since these events are nation-defining, the author chooses to set her historical fiction to define the country's history and national identity. Mantel knows the value of historical fiction as she said without the past one cannot be engaged with the present.

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Perry. "From Progress to Catastrophe: Perry Anderson on Historical Novels." *London Review of Books* (2011). Web. Assessed on Jan 16...
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller". *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*. Baltimore London. John Hopkins UP, 2000, p. 77-97.
- Mantel, Hilary. *Bring up the Bodies*. Harper Collins Publisher, 2012.
- Mantel, Hilary. *Wolf Hall*. Fourth State, 2010.
- "The Dead are Real: Hilary Mantel's Imagination" Interview by Larissa Macfarquhar. *The New Yorker*. 15 Oct. 2012. Accessed on 18 Oct.2015
- "Booker Winner Hilary Mantel on Dealing with History in Fiction". *The Guardian*. The Guardian News and Media Limited, 17 Oct.2009.Web Assessed on 22 Dec 2015
- "I Accumulated an Anger that would Rip a Roof Off". Interview by Aida Eidmariam. *The Guardian*. The Guardian News and Media Limited. 12 Sept. 2009.
- "Anne Boleyn: Witch, Bitch, Temptress, Feminist." *The Guardian*. The Guardian News and Media Limited. 11 May 2012. Web.
- Segal, Robert A. "Myth: Theoretical Approaches." *Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. London: Routledge, 2010.

Dr Meenakshi Joshi is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Humanities of the Institute of Engineering and Sciences, IPS Academy Indore, MP. She has more than 13 years of experience in teaching and 7 years of experience in research. Her research areas are Fiction and creative literary techniques, new teaching techniques in English Language and Communication Skills. She has received the Award of Best Teacher by RGPV and also has received the honourable mention and winners of the Editor's pick on MUSE India Author's Space platform for her poetry.