



# Memory, Trauma, and Historical Perspectives in the Novels of Hilary Mantel

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**Abstract-** Hilary Mantel is considered one of the most famous contemporary novelists. Winner of two consecutive Booker prizes, Mantel, in her novels, keeps on exploring such themes as Memory, trauma, loss, Identity Quest, and Historical Perspectives. She herself felt being a marginalized citizen of U.K., because she was born on Ireland. Her own life experiences match with her characters who always carry a past with them which keep on haunting them. Hilary Mantel tells Sally Vincent that most people refuse to remember their childhood. Though- her memoir 'Giving up the Ghost' does not flinch from terror, sickness, separation. But will committing her past to paper lay her ghost to rest? She herself replies. She tells Marianne Brace that she survived the devil of girlhood and had to wrestle with serious illness. She has written a memoir to banish the demons. In the present paper I have tried to connect all pervasive themes of Memory, Trauma and Historical Perspectives in the novels of Hilary Mantel with her own life.

**Keywords-** Memory, Trauma, Hilary Mantel, Historical Perspectives, Identity Quest.

## I. Introduction

Hilary Mantel is one of the most popular and greatest historical novelists of present age. She wrote novels on themes like memory, trauma, loss, identity quest, displacement, history and Nature. She has written twelve novels, including *Every Day is Mother's Day* (EDMD) (1985), and its sequel *Vacant Possession* (VP) (1986), *Wolf-Hall Trilogy*, *Eight Months on Ghazal Street* (EMGS) (1988). She wrote a memoir, 'Giving up the Ghost' (GG) (2003), and two collections of short-stories. She has also written a substantial number of Essays and articles published in various journals, columns and magazines. She was awarded Booker Prize twice for the first two novels (*Wolf-Hall* (2009) and *Bring up the Bodies* (2012)) of *Wolf-Hall Trilogy* in 2009 and 2012. Her third novel of this trilogy entitled- *The Mirror & the Light* (2020), was also in the Long

### List of the Booker Prize.

The Present Paper maintains that Displacement, memory, trauma, loss, historical perspectives and Identity Quest are inseparable themes in the novels of Hilary Mantel. These themes are all pervasive and pervading. We get the glimpse of these themes from her very first novel which she carries up to the last novel. These themes remain not only intact but are growing and developing with every next novel. Mantel who is known for her thematic varieties in her novels, has kept a pattern of themes. Thus, these themes are not only present but are playing major role in moving the narration forward.



Mantel is known for her mastery over development and accuracy which dealing with historical events. She fills the gaps between the given data, from her imagination, so dexterously and accurately that even historians too believe and agree with her art of detailing.

Her protagonists whether they are from domestic and social setting just like in *Every Day is Mother's Day*, *Vacant Possession*, and *Beyond Black*, or from historical and cultural setting like *A Place of Greater Safety*, and in 'Wolf-Hall Trilogy', or in religious setting like in 'Fludd' or in science and experimental setting like in 'The Giant O' Brien', and in 'An Experiment in Love', are always struggling from the trauma of their past which keep on haunting them throughout their lives.

Mantel's characters carry memory and trauma which become the pivotal point of their lives. They always feel themselves carried away by Memory and Trauma and there is always a quest for Identity among all the protagonists portrayed by Hilary Mantel in her novels.

Memory is a literary device used by the writers to give depth into their characters. It includes identity Quest, personal trauma, nostalgia, collective consciousness, loss, personal experiences. Etc. which shapes the present of the character. It is often subjective and personal. Stream of consciousness novels, memoirs, autobiographies, and personal essays are some of the genres where writers have employed this device consciously and intentionally. 'Giving up the Ghost' (2013), is a famous memoirs written by Mantel. In this book she has portrayed her own life based on her memory and recollections. In the very first chapter, "The Second Home" she writes-

You come to this place, mid-life. You don't know how you got here, but suddenly you're staring fifty in the face. When you turn and look back down the years, you glimpse the ghosts of other lives you might have led. All your houses are haunted by the person you might have been. The Wraiths and phantoms creep under your carpets and between the warp and weft of your curtains; they lurk in wardrobes and lie flat under drawer liners. You think of the children you might have had but didn't. When the midwife says 'It's a boy', where does the girl go? When you think you're pregnant, and you're not, what happens to the child that has already formed in your mind? You keep it filed in a drawer of your consciousness, like a short story that wouldn't work after the opening lines. (GG 20-21).

In her essay "The Day is for the Living" (2023) Mantel writes- "my concern as a writer is with memory, personal and collective: with the restless dead asserting their claims" (TDFL 244). She writes- "we don't reproduce the past, we create it" (244). Memory as a literary device in the works of Mantel is all pervading and pervasive. She believes that there is no facts only memory. She writes- "[e]vidence is always partial. Facts are not truth; though they are part of it- information is not knowledge." (244).

The term 'Trauma' can be defined as the psychological and physical response to the most painful and distressing event occurred into one's life. It completely destroys the peace and psyche of a person. It may be in the form of personal trauma, as in 'Atonement' by Ian McEwan, and 'The Kite Runner' by Khaled Hosseini, which depict



how a person's whole personality is shaped and constructed through the traumatic experiences of childhood. In 'The Handmaid's Tale' by Margaret Atwood and 'The Bell Jar' by Sylvia Plath, we find exposure of systematic gender oppression as trauma. Victorian character Heathcliff in 'Wuthering Heights' by Emily Bronte too has undergone personal trauma which came out as hysteria or madness.

Historical Trauma and collective trauma are result of a great historical catastrophe like mass exodus of Jews and Kashmiri Pandits, Death of a great leader, World War, partition, slavery, colonialism etc. This can be traced from such novels as 'Exodus' (1958) by Leon Uris, about exodus of Jews, 'The Garden of Solitude' (2011) by Siddhartha Gigoo, about the exodus of Kashmiri Pandit, 'Massacre at the Palace: The Doomed Royal Dynasty of Nepal' (2002) by Jonathan Gregson, about the assassination of the king of Nepal, 'A Farewell to Arms' (1929), by Ernest Hemingway, about World War I, 'Train to Pakistan'(1956) by Khushwant Singh, about India and Pakistan Partition, 'Beloved'(1987) by Tony Morrison, about slavery, 'Things Fall Apart'(1958) by Chinua Achebe about colonialism, etc.

In literature the theme of trauma is being represented through, alienation, displacement, identity quest, nostalgia, missing the loved one, regret, grief, etc. It is depicted like a bad experience occurred into the life of the protagonists, which keep on haunting them throughout the novel. Hilary Mantel has imbued the theme of trauma in almost every novel by her. She herself has suffered this trauma of loss. She lost her father because a new father entered into her life who replaced her previous father. She lost her beloved home because their parents left that place to avoid gossip. She married her boyfriend Gerald McEwen, a geologist. She suffered the trauma of losing her baby. She was diagnosed endometriosis and at the age of 27 after the surgery she was told that she could not become mother again. She divorced her husband due to this trauma. She travelled far and wide around the world and this trauma keeps on haunting her.

Mantel writes-"The book of me was indeed being written by other people: by my parents, by the child I once was, and by my own unborn children, stretching out their ghost fingers to grab the pen" (GUG 70). At another place she writes- "Sometimes I feel that each morning it is necessary to write myself into being- even if the writing is aimless doodling that no one will ever read, or the diary that no one can see till I'm dead. When you stop writing you find that's all you are, a spine, a row of rattling vertebrae, dried out like an old quill pen" (GUG 222).

She says, "I am not writing to solicit any special sympathy" (GUG 222), but because she had to. After this trauma of loss or personal trauma, she had undergone, nothing was meaningful in her life. She tells about herself that, "I am writing in order to take charge of my childhood and my childlessness; and in order to locate myself, not within a body, then in the narrow space between one letter and the next, between the lines where the ghosts of meaning are" (222)

In EDMD Muriel Axon undergoes the personal trauma which stems from the continuous ill treatment by her own mother. In VP she carries the trauma of losing her baby and decides to avenge the injustices meted out on her. Although ten years have passed, yet she plans everything flawlessly to succeed in this quest. In EMGS, Frances



Shore feels continuous trauma when everyone in Saudi Arabia, considers her an alien, for being a western woman. She not only faces cultural alienation but also for her being a female who always remain under surveillance. She feds up with the cynicism and hypocrisy there and always feels to exert her identity but every time her husband Andrew forbids her. In *AEIL*, Carmel McBain undergoes the trauma of societal pressure, and her relationship with Karina torments her without any escape. In 'Wolf-Hall Trilogy' the protagonist Thomas Cromwell carries the trauma of his humble origin throughout his life. He left his home as the son of a blacksmith and later rose up to the level of chief minister of England, advisor of the king, and the most powerful man of England after the king Henry VIII, but could not escape this personal trauma.

Historical Perspectives plays the most pivotal role in understanding the memory and trauma present into the novels of Hilary Mantel. Novels like *AEIL* provides the glimpse of Mantel's own life and a pattern in England where the girls of working class parents, are trying to break the barrier of their class and become the first generation educated girls, who will not return to work there in mines. Characters like Carmel and Karina represent these historical perspectives.

To quote Dr Kumud Characters in her novels grapple with the gaps and contradictions in historical records, raising questions about the nature of memory, the fallibility of eyewitness testimony, and the selective nature of historical representation. By foregrounding these issues Mantel encourages readers to interrogate their own assumptions about the past and to recognize the provisional nature of historical knowledge. (Dr Kumud P. 5)

Hilary Mantel is known for thematic varieties. Memory, trauma, and historical perspectives, are the major themes in her works. She herself has undergone and experienced these emotions. Belonging from Ireland she herself has felt an alien in Britain. Sara L. Knox writes, "Her novels described, with unromantic realism, a non-Britain. She portrays Britain and Britons abroad without mythologising or nostalgia, writing fiction in which the problem of belonging is most starkly drawn in those spheres that define it: home, neighbourhood, region, nation" (Knox 323).

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