

HILARY MANTEL EXAMINED: A PSYCHO-BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY OF OBSESSIVE COMPULSIONS IN A WRITER'S LIFE

D. Wilfin John

Research Scholar, St. John's College, Palayamkottai, Manonmaniam Sundarnar University

Abstract

Biographical approach is an early critical approach to literary works. Today, the field has evolved by merging itself with emerging theories like New-historicism and Personality-psychology. Psycho-biographical research is one such growing field that helps in analyzing historically significant individuals such as artists, political leaders and celebrities in the form of therapeutic case studies. In depth, the topic expands to explore, uncover, and reconstruct the life of the historical subject psychologically with regard to the observation of abnormalities in them. The subject for this case study is the Booker Prize winner Hilary Mantel. With the help of her memoirs, interviews, and reports, Mantel's obsessive compulsion can be identified, which is also reflected in the women characters of her historical fiction. Hence, this article entitled "Hilary Mantel Examined: A Psycho-biographical Study of Obsessive Compulsions in a Writer's Life" aims to trace a parallel between the author and her characters as well as understanding the historicity of a past personality through a present personality.

Keywords: Abnormalities, New-Historicism, Personality-psychology, Resemblance.

Stress, anxiety, obsession, etc. had recently become one of the global psychological problems experienced by all age groups. Though it had become a habitual dis-ease, these prolonged untreated illness leads to all kinds of somatic pain and everlasting impending doom in lives. Chronic stress is one such form of intense depression caused by miserable living conditions which makes individual lead an abnormal life. Similarly individual inflicted with long-term stress are obsessed with their own repetitive mental images which causes anxiety disorders. Obsessions are reoccurring or repeated thoughts, urges, impulse, images while compulsions are repetitive behavioral patterns, the former cause distressing emotions or disgust while the later drives a person to respond to the obsessions.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder is one of the psychological conditions which are typically caused by the past traumatic events in childhood, forbidden sexual thoughts, religious thoughts, or through exclusive negative thought over a particular thing over a period of time. The seriousness arises in person when the normal routine gets disturbed and the repetitive thoughts trap them into an endless cycle. The infected people perform their obsessed thoughts again and again without being conscious of their action. The poor insight in them do not allow them to think of their obsessions and even create a seemingly comfortable pattern of everyday life with easier tasks and added structures. A study shows that in general women are much affected by OCD than men in their early adulthood. Some of the various other causes for OCD include abuse or trauma in childhood.

'To doubt' or 'to question' lies as the primary construct in the circular process of OCD. Many psychologists accept that it is because of uncertainty and doubt in individual the birth of obsessive thoughts is marked. In this paper, the well known writer Hilary Mantel's religious obsessions, the physiological obsessions, the literary obsessions are to be focused.

When Mantel's works especially her memoir *Giving up the Ghost* is psychologically examined, the obsessions or doubts that every writer encounter while writing can be clearly noticed. As she herself mentions: "...I come to write a memoir I argue with myself over every word." (5). She further tells about her pathological obsessions, which had suffocated her in her early childhood "... I am haunted by the ghosts of my own sense impressions, which re-emerge when I try to write, and shiver between the lines." (23)

Mantel being brought up as an orthodox catholic always had the discriminative sense of addressing everyone as catholic and protestant. Her childhood loveless condition, her separation from her father Henry, the entry of her 'non-catholic' step father Jack all had much impact in leaving a permanent mark on her psyche. The pre-conceived religious obsessions in her made her believe that her sins went beyond confessions. She writes as: "From about the age of four I had began to believe I had done something wrong. Confessions didn't touch some essential sin." (22)

In a recent interview, Mantel answers about her religious alienation in spite of being raised as a catholic eventually in a convent school.

Two things happened together, when I was about twelve. First I started to cast a critical eye on the

Catholic Church as an institution. Then I asked myself if I believed its teaching, and the answer was no. My disbelief had been growing in the dark, unknown to me. (The Creative Process)

The major cause which turned Mantel's life into a Godless is the unanswered prayer in the death of her Aunt Annie. The repressed feelings in Mantel's life unveiling the causes for her father's separation, Jack's intrigue, friendless alienation, and incurable somatic pain, added to it the death of her close relatives all made her alienate from the religious activities. In her memoir she writes about the dilemma in believing the existence of supernatural.

I want my Aunt Annie and I pray that she may come back. I know God won't deliver. He won't deliver on that sort of prayer and what I'm doing by praying it is blaspheming... He didn't help me in the secret garden, and I think he couldn't anyway... Why didn't he try, though? He could have done something. He could have showed willing. I wanted him to manifest, and own me, take charge. But he never got out of bed. (GUG 109)

Thus the religious obsession psychologically plays a main role in shaping her career especially getting it repeated as a compulsion in her works of art. In the recent same interview, the interviewer questions about religion becoming the source of conflict and fascinating theme in her works in spite of her lack of religious faith. For which Mantel answers: "I can easily grasp this because religion was so central to my childhood. I took everything in, I was asked to believe, and I agreed." (The Creative Process) This shows how the obsessions on religion had turned her over years shaping her mind to look over everything in perspective of religious confrontations.

Similarly physiological obsessions or her thoughts about her physical illness are also seen repeated in her works. The somatic pain increased in her as a result of her alienated thinking about her father's separation and her family's disintegration. The missed diagnosis and the treatment of ignorant doctors troubled further and ended in her removal of uterus. At the very age of twenty seven she lost the hope of bearing a child. Thus the thought about her lost child continued leading to desperate situations, which she balanced through her writing. In most of Mantel's expressions either in form of writing or interviews the compulsion to share about her physical appearance and about her illness never faded. In a recent interview, Mantel shares about her health issues which affected her writings.

The spell in hospital occurred between the writing of the two books. I have had a lifetime of illness, but I

wouldn't like to say how that feeds into what I have written. It was certainly a very strange time in 2010 though. I had won the Booker with *Wolf Hall*, and then there was a year in which I had two bouts of major surgery and it was sort of a hole bitten out of time. When I came to write *Bring up the Bodies* I did so in a storm: really, very, very fast. I suppose I had been mentally preparing all that year. (The Guardian)

Similarly literary obsession or the compulsion to talk about literary characters and associating it with her real life is also present in Mantel's memoir. Her criticism on several books reveals her inner pathological state and further brings her hidden obsessions. "I remember the first time I read *Jane Eyre*: probably every woman writer does, because you recognize, when you hardly begun it, that you are reading a story about yourself." (GUG 246)

The well-known psychological theory "Mad Artists" who isolates themselves from the social groups and insists on 'private room' behavior can be identified with the behavioral characteristics of Mantel. In one of the interview, she answers about the importance she gives for the literary works which shows both her craze and her obsession over literature.

Restriction, yes. I think it's good for me as a writer. I don't think it's very good for me as a human being. A sort of grimness entered into me, I think, which is still there. I suppose that book always was more important to me than anything else. (The Paris Review)

Thus her obsessive thoughts on literature had played an enormous role in changing Mantel's life especially in bringing her under depression towards her lost child. The aborted child named Catriona further prove to be the replica of the literary character in R.L. Stevenson's *Kidnapped* which she herself mentions in her memoir. When she writes about her lost child, she uses the expression "mental picture" (GUG 227) which is nothing but her own obsessive thoughts. Thus Mantel's memoir is full of her own obsessions, she mentions as: "...they were my inspiration, that I'd be only half a woman without them... They won't, without a struggle, be kicked out of your psyche" (GUG 240)

Mantel's most of works till date seems to be a representation of all her psychological obsessions on religion, physiology, literature and hence the title *Giving up the Ghost* express a fallacy. There is no adequate proof on Mantel giving up all her obsessions and hence her autobiography falls under the category of fallacy literature.

Works Cited

1. Mantel, Hilary. *Giving Up the Ghost*. London: Harper Collins. 2013. Print.
2. Adams, Tim. "Hilary Mantel Interview: 'My Problem Is Never Ideas. My Problem Is Time'." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 26 Apr. 2014, www.theguardian.com/books/2014/apr/27/hilary-mantel-interview-wolf-hall-novelist-margaret-thatcher-assassin.
3. Funk, Mia. "The Creative Process Interview with Hilary Mantel." *The Iowa Review*, 14 June 2017, iowareview.org/blog/creative-process-interview-hilary-mantel.
4. Simpson, Mona. "Hilary Mantel, Art of Fiction No. 226." *The Paris Review*, 25 Sept. 2017, www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6360/hilary-mantel-art-of-fiction-no-226-hilary-mantel.