

Fantasy and Historiography: Dymystifying Cromwell

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Thomas Cromwell, ancestor of Oliver Cromwell, has received scant attention from the readers and researchers alike. Son of an abusive blacksmith, he rose to power under the rule of King Henry VIII, by dint of sheer hard work, intelligence and cunning. Hilary Mantel in her Booker Prize winning books *Bring Up the Bodies* (BUTB) and *Wolf Hall*, reimagines a historiobiographical portrait of this brilliant, persuasive path breaker who achieved feats that sowed the seeds of the modern world and changed the history of England forever.

“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle” writes Karl Marx (*The Communist Manifesto*, 79). The literary artist dealing with history treats the subject as one of power struggle that leaves its imprint on all artistic productions of that time. He creatively presents a time and a state under transformation. The Marxist critic George Lukács also argues that a literary work, especially writing of a novel, necessitates holistic representation of a time with all its “inherent contradictions, tensions and conflicts” (*Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 493). And history bears proof of the machination of time. The dominant power, as scholars like George Lukács & Antonio Gramsci suggest, seeks to homogenize the diverse and discrete voices of resistance. Power attempts to unify the polyphonic voices of dissent to serve its own goal.

Histories are concerned with rebellion, conspiracy and war. The idea of fate is, of course, present, with historic expiation and retribution. The turbulence of spirit makes a character dangerous and they leave the imprint of their mind on political order. Therefore, the studies in loyalty and treachery are not the outcome of psychological makeup of a character but rather of historical imprint. History is more than chronicled events, or an offshoot of economic and political causes. It is interesting to study how the “pattern” is sustained in the action of characters. The primary activity of a character is apprehended as shaping or mis-shaping a political order. He cannot be projected as possessing any private emotion. These emotions are translated through imagery which plays an important part in determining in what world, and in what manner, those emotions are felt. It is imagery which finds the equivalents for emotions in the world of public and political behavior, and so this emotion takes a relevant part in our imaginative apprehension of the political order.

History and Literature differ in their empirical and imaginative uses of language. History is primarily a discourse of the given and the known. Whereas literature combines this knowledge into frescoes of an ideational contention the basis of structured flights of imagination. (Charu Sheel Singh, 39)

Literature seeks to plumb the depth of history to record the trajectory of a man's fortune/ evolving identity. People constantly try to delimit themselves to construct an identity. Novels hold mirror to the violent political upheaval and man's role in it. The novels of Hilary Mantel encapsulate Cromwell's personal agenda. Mantel uses the novel form to imaginatively reconstruct the past. Her novels can be read as an attempt to read the Gramscian notion of organic intellectual. For Gramsci, social change could not be brought by an elite group but by intellectuals that emerge organically from the working class, who articulate the feelings and experience of the masses.

The present paper deals with the actions and emotions of Thomas Cromwell. It is a gripping tale of Tudor England where the king Henry VIII and his courtiers come alive through the creative imagination of the writer, Hilary Mantel. *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*, these two Man Booker Prize winning historical novels present a "speaking picture, an audacious vision of Tudor England..." (BUTB, Blurb). By an artistic amalgamation of history, biography and politics Mantel brings out the class-struggle of that era and also shows how Cromwell, the kingpin, rose from a mere blacksmith's boy to becoming the most powerful man of England. In presenting the story of Thomas Cromwell, Mantel creates a complex and intertextual connection between history, historiography and a bloody struggle for power. It reflects the disillusionment of the populace vis-a-vis the political ambition of the protagonist; while unknown to all, King Henry VIII had his own vicious, greedy personal and political agenda.

The purpose of the paper is to examine how history has been appropriated and utilised in the production of these literary works and "attempt a serious study of the relationship between personal fortunes and social conflicts..." (*Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 155). So I shall view the socio-political contexts in which the novels are implicated- the multifaceted Cromwell- and the imaginative recreation of historiography.

These two novels of Hilary Mantel are the story of love for power and power struggle set against a very turbulent time of British history. Set in the Tudor England, it covers a time-span of about three years (1533 to 1536), from

Henry VIII's marriage to Anne Boleyn to her execution and then the king's third of the six marriages. Presented as biography of Thomas Cromwell, it bears testimony to Henry VIII's (mis)rule, his selfishness and cruelty, and Cromwell's aspiration for power and pelf. The famous Sir Thomas More succinctly summarises Cromwell's character, "... lock Cromwell in a deep dungeon in the morning, and when you come back that night he'll be sitting in a plush cushion eating lark's tongues, and all the gaolers will owe him money" (*Wolf Hall*, 605).

The early stage of Henry's reign was dominated by Cardinal Wolsey, the Lord Chancellor, and his endeavor to raise England's position in European politics. But when he opposed the idea of the king's divorce to Katherine, as it was against Catholic religious belief, and also because the Emperor of Spain, Charles V was her nephew, he was sentenced for imprisonment and later execution, though he died before that. Cromwell, Wolsey's protégé, accepted his advice and blindly supported the king in his entire mission, though he nursed a grudge against Wolsey's enemies. These novels deal with the power struggle of the time; and also with the rise and fall of Anne Boleyn. The reading is engaging as "the circumstances surrounding the fall of Anne Boleyn have been controversial for centuries. The evidence is complex and sometimes contradictory..." (Author's Note, BUTB, 409). The king went to great length to marry Anne. He deserted his wife, broke up with Roman Church and incurred the wrath of the emperor of Spain. But he soon fell out of love with her.

It is said that the cruelest of rulers give us the most dynamic and fruitful development, and it is proved by the many far-reaching changes in the religious and political domain brought on by the king, stemming of course, from his greed and selfish interest. The first book, *Wolf Hall*, which won the 2009 Man Booker Prize covers the period of the King's wooing to execution of Anne Boleyn. It bears testimony to Cromwell's growing power and riches. The king's interest in Jane Seymore and ultimately making her his third wife, immediately after Anne's beheading, sums up the story of the second book – *Bring Up the Bodies*. In between the novels there were other events like the setting up of the Church of England, translation and introduction of the English Bible in these Churches, the plunder of monasteries, and cessation of England from the Papacy, overall the emergence of England from the barbarism of the Middle Ages to a modern world. The novels seek to examine some of the vital issues of the day, along with the inner workings of the protagonist. The political issues surround Henry VIII's many marriages, his need for money and absolute power over the

parliament. The personal issues are Cromwell's desire for accumulation of power and wealth. But his inner world cried out for revenge on all those who were responsible for the fall of Wolsey- the person Cromwell loved and adored. And the writer tries to reconstruct the past from Cromwell's stand point.

The ideological point can be reconstituted from Marxist philosophy. The Marxist critics define class struggle as the fulcrum of history and its social factors. Marxist criticism has been devoted to the reconstruction of the past on the basis of historical evidence to underscore the similitude of representation of any given time. The "reflection" theory of the Hungarian Marxist philosopher George Lukács, problematises literary works to unravel the social system of a given time. In his view, "the novel ... revealed or ought to reveal underlying patterns of the social order and provide a sense of the wholeness of existence with all its inherent contradictions, tensions and conflicts" (*Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 493). And the well read, brilliant Thomas Cromwell, one who was instrumental in bringing sweeping changes in Henry VIII's England, would have argued, had it existed then, that he was only dealing with the "reflection" theory. Hilary Mantel's novels endeavour to sketch the biography of this charismatic, least researched persona.

The origin of biography can be traced to the Old Testament, in the accounts of monarchs or heroes. However, the Roman historians Plutarch, Tacitus and Suetonius were pioneers of the form. Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* (1st cent. AD) proved an important source of plots for many plays of Shakespeare. It was in the 18th century that Johnson's *Lives of Poets* and Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791) decided the course of biography. In the mid-Victorian age prudery enforced restriction on writing, so the writings were glozed to lend respectability to the work. Biography takes on mythic proportion that impacts the community's shared story. The biography manifests into the story of community, as well as the individual. It relies on a balance of presenting facts and interpreting the meaning of events. These two novels of Mantel exemplify biography of a person and a movement. These novels vividly portray a socio-political upheaval through the life story of Thomas Cromwell. The novelist reimagines and reinvents a Cromwell that unfolds hitherto untraded vista of history.

Set in the pre-modern era of Henry VIII, the story moves around the shrewd, manipulative, vengeful Thomas Cromwell and his rapid ascendance to power mainly due to the teachings of his harrowing childhood and the last words of his mentor Wolsey. Presented as biography, the story plunges one into

the whirlpool of romance, crime and punishment. The narration eschews panegyric and euphemism and by using interior monologue, psycho narration and dialogue presents the life and time of Cromwell since his childhood to his role in the third marriage of the king. "Son of a brutal blacksmith, a political genius, a briber, a bully and charmer...Cromwell has broken all rules of a rigid society in his rise to power,..." (Blurb). During his childhood he had run away from home to get rid of his abusive father. Later he visited many countries in his struggle for survival. On the way he picks up many trades and learns many customs to ultimately land up with Cardinal Woolsey where he learns polish, politicking and the art of panegyrics. Though Woolsey himself was rigid in his views in aiding the king in his desire to divorce his first wife Katherine, as per Christian rule, his last words taught Cromwell that pleasing the king should be his motto.

British history, during this time was ridden with multitudinous problems. The king, Henry VIII, a self-seeking, cruel and a philanderer initially was disillusioned by his first wife Katherine because she failed to provide a male heir and had made many rules to marry Anne Boleyn. Anne Boleyn's beauty, brain and above all her sexual acrobatics, kept him enthralled. But like Katherine she also failed to provide him a male heir. Also her sexual prowess made him feel emasculated and he asks Cromwell seemingly innocently, "Cromwell, what does it mean, when a woman turns herself about and about in the bed? Offering herself this way and that? What would put it into her head to do such a thing?" (BUTB, 290). Two things are to be noted here, the cool tone of the king revealing his most secret activities with the queen to Cromwell; and Cromwell taking the side of the king for his trust in him, and turning the situation to his advantage.

Moreover the king was already captivated by Jane's docility and plainness and starts imagining a more dominant role as a lover. Cromwell shrewdly watches, observes and deduces the situation and helps the king marry Jane by eliminating Anne Boleyn. Behind this was the vested personal agenda of taking revenge on Anne for being instrumental in the death of Woolsey and also fear of her wit and power. The brain and brawn he had are utilized for the growth of his and the king's coffer. In return he climbs the social ladder and becomes the closest confidante of the king and at the same time distancing him from the others. He confesses his trouble to his nephew, Richard Cromwell: "... How many men can say, as I must, I am a man whose only friend is the king of England? I have everything you would think. And yet take Henry away and I have nothing" (BUTB, 176). Such was the sad situation of the most diplomatic

man of that age. But not for a moment Cromwell forgets the Damocles' sword hanging over his head, as "he is not one to boast of a coolness no reasonable man would possess. Henry could, at any moment, gesture to the guards; he could find himself with cold metal at his ribs, and his day done" (BUTB, 232). As history stands testimony this premonition of Cromwell would come true. Only three years after the death of Anne Boleyn, Cromwell would face the axe. But as things stand now he is enjoying the power and pelf of the King's proximity and is instrumental in the epoch making changes that sweeps through England.

A lot of research has gone into the writing of these books. And through the imaginative and artistic pen of Hilary Mantel, Cromwell's time comes alive for us. But one cannot claim it to be a factual representation of history, though it provides us a gripping tale of political saga. As Pasupati Jha writes:

...when history itself is a record of half-truths cherished through centuries, it is fully justified then if a historical novel applies historical facts in modified, artistically transformed way.... truth in this case is confined to creating the verisimilitude of history; a history novel is not history but literature, and creative art has its own needs and compulsions. (Das, B. K.,ed, 58)

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