



OFFSPRING OF ENDOMETRIOSIS: HILARY MANTEL'S FEMALE CHARACTERS AND THE THEMES OF STILLBIRTH, PREGNANCY, MISCARRIAGE AND CHILDLESSNESS IN HER NOVELS

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Abstract

Hilary Mantel no longer remains unnoticed since the publication of her two universally acclaimed novels *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies* bring her amongst the most prominent British writers. The present article is an attempt to show the effect of her severe illness ('endometriosis' which was not diagnosed timely in Hilary Mantel and due to misdiagnosis she was given anti-psychotic drugs which gradually enhanced the severity of her illness and left her fat, weak and infertile) on her characters. An everlasting shooting pain and misdiagnosis of her disease left her unable to conceive. This article tries to dig out the hidden reasons behind the recurrent themes like stillbirth, pregnancy, miscarriage and childlessness in Hilary Mantel's novels.

Keywords: Endometriosis, autobiographical novels, psychological novels.

Hilary Mantel is one of those unfortunate people whose illness was not timely diagnosed and who were led to suffer the ailment to the verge of its devastated condition due to the lack of medical proficiency. She writes about her shooting pains, ailment and its misdiagnosis in her memoir *Giving Up the Ghost*. She tells how her disease was not diagnosed for a very long period and she was given anti-psychotic drugs which resulted in her infertility. She talks about the result of her late diagnosis of Endometriosis in an article published in *The Guardian* in the following words:

At 19, I began actively seeking a diagnosis. I was 27 when I received it, and by that stage, major surgery was the only answer. Abruptly I lost my fertility and, in some ways, lost myself. Though I was told I was cured, the condition recurred, and drug treatment led to huge weight gain. Thyroid failure followed

and the devastating chain of consequences pursues me to this day. Anything I have achieved has been in the teeth of the disease. (Mantel "Endometriosis")

In her memoir *Giving Up the Ghost* she deplores her inability to give birth to her once imagined daughter Catriona. She writes, "There would be no daughter, no Catriona..." (GUG 208). Though at various places Hilary Mantel mentions that she does not get affected by her infertility but the recurrent themes of pregnancy, stillbirth, miscarriage and childlessness in her novels clearly show how deep her medical condition affects her writings.

Hilary Mantel's first novel *Every Day is Mother's Day* (1985) registers a mother-daughter relationship. Muriel, a mentally challenged daughter gets pregnant from a stranger, "In the circumstances, Muriel's pregnancy could only be felt

as a lesser shock" (EDMD 33). Her mother Evelyn, an old age woman does every possible thing to let her daughter deliver her child comfortably at home. But we soon find that she tries to get rid of the new born and takes Muriel to a nearby canal and drowns the baby by calling it a "changeling", thus leaving Muriel devoid of her kid. The novel captures one more pregnancy of Sylvia who is Muriel's neighbour Florence Sydney's brother Colin's wife. In the sequel of this novel *Vacant Possession (1986)* Colin and Sylvia's daughter Suzanne gets pregnant in an illicit affair and she leaves home just to give birth to her child.

Hilary Mantel's Black Comedy *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street (1988)* is a fabulous work and the protagonist is a British immigrant, Frances Shore in Saudi Arabia with her engineer husband who faces cultural shocks at this new country which is completely different from her home country. But in this wonderful tale full of suspense with gothic environment Hilary manages to include such questions as why Frances and Andrew have not planned for a kid yet etc. at several places. Her next novel based on a religious couple who go to South Africa to render their services as missionaries is *Change of Climate (1994)*. Anna and Ralph Eldred go to Elim, South Africa to do their dream job just after their marriage. In South Africa Anna gets pregnant and gives birth to twins but later the couple has to face an incident which will leave a lifetime mark on their hearts. Their twins get abducted and when found they only find their daughter. They never see their son again.

Beyond Black (2005) is a story of Alison Hart, who is a 'medium' by profession. Alison had a very bad and neglected childhood. She was very young when she realized she could see the dead. In many of her sessions with her clients Alison mentions deceased children. In one such sessions she says to the client, "...but I'm talking about the little boy you lost. Well, I say little boy. Of course, he's a man now. He's telling me we have to go back to ... back a good few years, we're talking here thirty years and more" (BB 38).

Her campus novel *An Experiment in Love (1995)* records an incident of pregnancy and

termination. The protagonist Carmel MacBain's friend Sue gets pregnant but when her boyfriend denies marrying her she has no other choice except aborting her child. The incident of a teenage university student going through an emotional upsurge on her own without her parents assistance is written with so much pathos that it melts the hearts of the reader. When she returns from nursing home she is a pale and the unspoken pain of a mother who could not bring her first issue in the world due to social restrictions is clearly seen in the following excerpt from the novel:

The following day, Sue was up and about: uncertain, looking drained and ill, but no worse than people do look in the course of a London winter. There was an unspoken agreement that we would never again refer to what had taken place. Her child must vanish into the blank badlands of never-was: very different, of course, from the glittering realm of might-have-been. (EIL 227)

Hilary Mantel's historical novel based on a true historical incident *The Giant, O' Brien (1998)* is a story of an Irish giant sized man and an anatomist John Hunter but in the middle of the story Hilary introduces a female character, Bitch Mary who selects prostitution for earning due to poverty and gets pregnant. The narrator says about Bitch Mary, "He had seen her last in Ireland, stepping between the puddles, her child riding high in her belly" (GOB 120). She was brutally killed later in the story.

Wolf Hall (2009) and *Bring Up the Bodies (2012)* have multiple incidents of pregnancy, miscarriages, stillbirths and infertility. The plot of both the novels revolves around the desire of a male heir for the British Empire. Katherine of Aragon gets pregnant multiple times so does Anne Boleyn but only few babies survive. Wolsey tells Thomas Cromwell that the King Henry VIII and Katherine of Aragon hoped of having a male heir six times but none of them survived.

Six times (to the world's knowledge) Katherine and the king have lived in hope of an heir. 'I remember the winter child,' Wolsey says. 'I suppose, Thomas, you would not be back in England then. The queen was taken

unexpectedly with pains and the prince was born early... He breathed fifty-two days, and I counted every one of them. I think that if he had lived, our king might have been – I do not say a better king, for that could hardly be – but a more contented Christian. (WH 80-81)

Anne Boleyn's sister in law, Lady Rockford tells Thomas Cromwell that she was unable to conceive. Her husband is rude to her due to her infertility. While talking to Cromwell she mentions her disappointment for being unable to produce an offspring. She says, "I believe my husband wishes I would die.' She says it lightly" (WH 504).

Thus, all the above mentioned characters and incidents from Hilary Mantel's novels point that her personal experience of endometriosis left an impact on her writings. Hilary Mantel's novels are full of such incidents which have childbirth or infertility as one of the major themes of her novels. It seems Hilary Mantel's personal anguish for not being able to conceive is one of the reasons for using such themes in her novels whether knowingly or unknowingly. Her novels are psychological reflection of the trauma she has gone through at an early age.

Work Cited

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Note on Abbreviations used:

EIL: *An Experiment in Love*.

BB: *Beyond Black*.

EDMD: *Every Day is Mother's Day*.

GUG: *Giving Up the Ghost*.

GOB: *The Giant, O' Brien*.

WH: *Wolf Hall*.