



REVISITING BRITISH HISTORY : A STUDY OF HILLARY MANTEL'S

'WOLF HALL'



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ABSTRACT:

Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* published in 2009 is a remarkable Booker prize Winner novel that takes us back to the good old days of Oliver Cromwell and his times. Writing about a historical incident of the past involves a careful and honest representation of the incidents that are recorded in the history books. However, there are a lot of cultural and linguistic elements that are also

narrated from modern day viewpoint. This paper comments upon such cultural, linguistic and historical material and its honest description that succeeds in entertaining the readers and helping them in the creation of virtual historical reality.

KEYWORDS : Revisiting, culture, material, historical, linguistic

Research Paper :

Hilary Mantel's novel *Wolf Hall*, named after the Seymour family of Wolfhall in Wiltshire narrates the upward journey of Thomas Cromwell through historical events. It is an act of revisiting the British history and thereby giving an opportunity to meditate upon the unchangeable past. She has received great literary acclaim for her writing work. This is seen as a rare exploit for a novel belonging to the genre of historical fiction. She won the Man Booker Prize first in 2009 for the *Wolf Hall* and then in 2012 for *Bring up the Bodies*. While talking about the merits of historical writing, Merrit Moseley says in his review:

There is a small but insistent critical voice that historical fiction is escapist and demonstrates a refusal to confront and represent the world in which we are all now living. (2012, n. p.)

He even goes so far as to voice the general observation that 'historical events, no matter what they are, do not make a great novel' (2012) and asserts that *Wolf Hall* is in fact a great novel because of the firm authority with which Mantel handles her complicated material and because of her style, vigorous and absolutely appropriate to the times and people she depicts (2012). The novel *Wolf Hall* is, in this way, a device of storytelling and in many ways transcends the criticisms commonly levelled at the entire genre of historical fiction.

One of the key features of the novel is revisiting British history and past incidents. It uses cultural and historical revisits to come across as 'real', as depicting real events and the lives of real people, as providing a window into the past. However, a narrative filled to the brim with historical detail does not necessarily make for a pleasant read, nor a qualitatively good novel, let alone a 'great' one, and moreover, the primary purpose of this research paper is to study the writer's journey into the past and the fictional act of making it look contemporary. According to historian Herbert Butterfield, historiography attempts to "make a generalization, to find a

formula”, whereas in Mantel’s case, repetitions of British histories have a place in the narrative only in so far as they fulfil a narrative purpose. Mantel herself has admitted that she puts a lot of effort into making sure her historical novels have “a literary quality as well as, a historical quality”. The novel *Wolf Hall* makes ample use of British historical and cultural revisits to create a rich imaginary world for the reader to dwell in, as it should, but does not mix the narrative with unnecessary details for the purpose of full disclosure. Revisits are scattered in the tale with such repetition and such comfort that there is no sense of the tale being overloaded with British history details.

Cultural revisits are of critical importance in historical fiction because they link the fictional work to reality to a greater or lesser extent depending on the degree of invention involved in a particular work and the degree to which it claims to give a historically accurate depiction of events. Rushing back to British historical era through stories is a sort of studying the qualities of ‘an elusive child of mixed parentage, which claims the right of invention reserved for fiction, but claims, also, to be based on historical reality (Porter 315). This paper comments on Mantel’s opinions on historical fiction and the concerns of an author working with characters based on real people.

Historical fiction occupies a hard-to-define space in between fiction and non-fiction. Rachel Cohn claims that there is a “great divide” between fictions’ territory and history’s (162). This particular effect of British historical fiction is of interest in the study of *Wolf Hall*, as it is one on which Mantel herself has commented on many occasions. While she has taken a subject matter explored again and again by historians and fiction authors alike, she has attempted to reserve judgment on the actions of her characters, especially Thomas Cromwell:

“The essence of the thing is not to judge with hindsight, not to pass judgment from the lofty perch of the 21st century when we know what happened. It’s to be there with them in that hunting party at Wolf Hall...” (Higgins 2012)

This aspect of revisiting history in the novel is an attempt to portray in reality a main character that has often been painted with a two-dimensional brush of actions, is of critical importance. It has been recognized as one of the praise-worthy features of the book time and again. Atwood mentions that Mantel does not desist from exposing the dark sides of her protagonist’s personality, and his dark actions.

There is a vast variety of British cultural and historical revisits in the novel *Wolf Hall*, all of which add something important to the narrative and often to the characterization of certain characters. Many scholars have attempted to make categorization of the types of cultural revisits that exist. However, those attempts can be considered as the acts of revisiting British history. As per Newmark’s categorisation (1988: 95), the cultural revisits could be related with Ecology, Material culture (in which he distinguishes food, clothes, houses and towns, and transport) Social culture, Organisations, customs, activities, procedures and concepts.

Djachy & Paresishvili have written on the translation of British history revisits what they call ‘socio-political reality’, i.e. “concepts related to administrative-territorial arrangement of a country” (2014: 8). They assert that this kind of realities is translated by means of transcription/transliteration, as well as by means of descriptive translation (2014: 8). Many of the administrative bodies or offices mentioned in *Wolf Hall* do not have generally historical references.

There are not quite as many material culture revisits in *Wolf Hall* as one might expect of a British historical fiction novel. There are several reasons for this. First of all, Mantel tries to focus less on the details of food, clothing, housing etc., and instead uses broader terms to describe the characters’ surroundings, before dedicating most of her time to character interactions rather than material descriptions. Second, the novel is written from the perspective of Thomas Cromwell, who is not often preoccupied by material matters such as displays of wealth through clothing, unless observations thereof contribute somehow to his estimation of another character. Instead, Cromwell tends to be occupied with his work and the people he works with. However, there is still little material, culture revisits throughout the novel, and they can be generally seen as translation of British history.

Adrian Pablé writes on the loss of local colour in British historical fiction and observes that “worlds within fiction are four-dimensional, i.e. they can be described on a historical, a linguistic, a geographical and a cultural level” (2003: 99). The historical dimension, however, tends to be forgotten in most scholarly work, or at least historical references are not seen as distinct from cultural ones. They are of course similar, and Pablé adds that “historical distance generally entails cultural distance” (2003: 99), saying that the two can have the same alienating effect on the target audience; a story set in one’s own country but five centuries before one’s own lifetime can be experienced as just as foreign as a story set on an entirely different continent in the present-day.

While the effects of British historical and cultural revisits on a target audience are similar, their implications for the translator of British historical fiction often are not. British Historical fiction relies on historical revisits to communicate its setting just as much as it relies on cultural ones, but they are often tricky to translate because most British historical events are not entirely unknown to a target culture; often, the target culture has its own terminology for the events of a foreign country’s history, whether it be the name of a war or that of a historical period or development. The Narrator must then decide whether to domesticate the historical revisits, and in the study of *Wolf Hall*, doing so is not necessarily the best approach.

Religion plays a very different part in the life of a person living in the 16th century in England than it does for most people alive today; a great portion of the readers of this novel will be entirely unfamiliar with the extent to which religion governs their life. The passage of time is marked by religious events; often, characters in the novel will use the feast days of saints, instead of dates, to set a meeting or a goal or refer to the passage of time. For example, Cromwell remarks in consternation, upon visiting a house in the country and observing the state of the household affairs that “it is nearly Martinmas, and they have not even thought of salting their beef” (Mantel 2009: 61).

The passage of time in people’s personal lives is punctuated by events that are religious in nature: going to church on Sundays, getting married, baptising a child, saying a last confession before death, and so on. Religion is a cultural category in its own right, especially in the time of Cromwell, because it plays a major role in every part of people’s lives, from the day to day prayers and Sunday church services to major life events such as births, marriages or deaths. There are three types of revisits to British religious culture in *Wolf Hall*: the holy days and feast days of the Christian year, as well as saints’ feast days; the names of saints themselves and the names of characters from the Bible; elements of prayer or church services, including Latin quotations; ranks within the Church’s hierarchy; and religious oaths.

One crucial feature of *Wolf Hall* that does not seem to fit into any category in any of the models I have researched is the use of foreign language elements. Of course if the phrases in foreign tongues include cultural revisits themselves, those could be grouped into any of the traditional categories of cultural revisits. In *Wolf Hall*, the use of foreign language elements is in itself a type of cultural reference. The world that Mantel describes in her novel is a diverse world with characters of many different nationalities with many different mother tongues, so the fact that more than one language is used even in regular, everyday conversation is a feature of that cultural environment. The Tudor court is filled with ambassadors from all major European powerhouses and the queen herself, Katherine of Aragon, is Spanish. Spanish in particular is often used as a characterisation effect, to contrast Katherine and her servants from the English and paint them as foreign and other.

Moreover, regardless of whether foreign characters are involved, several languages are often used within a single conversation because many conversations are held by scholars, who rely on Latin amongst one another to communicate their ideas, and many Englishmen mix together their speech with French expressions, to hopefully be seen as fashionable and unusual, as worldly and well-travelled. Perhaps the most multilingual of all the characters in the novel is Thomas Cromwell himself. He speaks French, Spanish, Italian, Dutch and Flemish fluently, has a good grasp of Greek as well, and a gift for languages in general. Rosario Arias (2014: 27) observes that Cromwell is very well aware of his inclination for languages and the frequency with which he ends up acting as a mediator between different language speakers, and even sees himself as a translator both in *Wolf Hall* and its sequel *Bring Up The Bodies*: “I am always translating, he thinks: if not language to language, then person to person.”(Mantel 2009: 421)

Obviously, removal of any of the foreign language elements in British history revisit would be highly problematic, because it would undoubtedly have a damaging effect on the target audience’s perception of this cosmopolitan civil background and the characters there, perhaps Cromwell most of all. However, some restructuring of the surrounding material might be necessary in order to communicate the meaning of the foreign language elements to the target audience.

In this research paper, I set out to discover to what extent British history revisits in *Wolf Hall* and uses cultural, religious, material-cultural, and political and Administrative background. In order to prove that the genre of historical fiction requires a different approach pertaining to these types of references from regular literary translation, it attempts to portray a realistic image of the past, which is by definition foreign to the modern-day audience, and that foreignness is part of historical fiction’s particular fascination.

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