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Natural Crisis in Post-modern Era: A Scientific Study of Select Novels of

Hilary Mantel

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Abstract

Dame Hilary Mantel is one of the pioneer British women writers. She has written her novels on various themes and some of her themes are related with the scientific trends, supernatural powers, scientific mysteries, metaphysical elements, and ghosts. Her novels deal with some sensitive and controversial issues on which scientists do not believe. Due to such themes, many critics have attacked on the use of such themes in her novels, but Hilary Mantel did not pay any attention to such critics and kept deploying the use of ghosts and conversations with the dead people in her novels. This is one of the remarkable qualities of her novels which challenge the scientific explorations on such themes. The present paper is an attempt to examine supernatural powers, scientific mysteries and ghosts. It has been seen that her novels offer a compelling exploration of the supernatural realm amidst the backdrop of natural crisis. Hilary Mantel evokes a sense of the uncanny. She blurs the boundaries between the alive human beings and the dead people, and between the natural and the supernatural powers. Mantel has explored the psychological implications of ghostly encounters that permeate her oeuvre. Through her masterful storytelling and evocative prose, Mantel deals with the real and fictional world. Hilary Mantel's select novels offer a captivating narration of such issues. The ghosts take place in her fictional world. Through a scientific lens, the present paper attempts to underscore the enigmatic manifestations of supernatural forces and their impact on the characters. The cryptic pasts, the labyrinth of secrets, series of enigma, the awkward habits of her female characters, eerie atmospheres, and scientific themes are the main objectives of this paper.

Keywords

Hilary Mantel, Supernatural Powers, Scientific Mysteries, Ghosts, Natural Crisis, Symbolism, Embittered Relationships, Alienation

Hilary Mary Mantel, a renowned British novelist, was born in 1952 in Glossop, Derbyshire in England. Her novels deal with the women characters grappling with their own struggle of life. *The Vacant Possession* (1986), *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* (1988), *Fludd* (1989), *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992), *A Change of Climate* (1994), *An Experiment in Love* (1995), *The Giant O'Brien* (1998), *Beyond Black* (2005), *Wolf Hall* (2009), *Bring Up the Bodies* (2009), and *The Mirror and the Light* (2020) are her renowned novels. She has written her works in different genres, such as fictions, autobiography, historical fiction and short stories. She was the first woman writer who bagged the Booker Prize twice. Her memoir *Giving up the Ghost* which was published in 2003 in which she has shed light on her personal life.

The fact cannot be denied that Hilary Mantel's novels have a range of diverse themes, symbols and recurring motifs. Among them, the portrayal of natural crisis, amidst the backdrop of societal upheaval and existential uncertainty, also emerges as a strong theme. Mantel very beautifully weaves the themes of natural crisis into the fabric of her fiction and presents a world where characters grapple with those forces which are beyond their controls. Natural crisis is one of the themes in some novels by Hilary Mantel. Her narration of natural crisis lies in the concept of power and its influence on her female characters.

In fact, Hilary Mantel's own life has been much affected by the ghosts and that's why she has narrated that aspect of her life in her novels. The novel is set at the Axon House where two enigmatic characters live who do not want to meet other people living in their vicinity. So far as the Axon House is concerned, it has been described as "a place which appears to contain ghostly presences" (9). Thus, the novel has supernatural undertones. The house has been described with "stained glass in the door of the porch, venous crimson and the storm-dull blue of August skies" (9) and it symbolises mystery and otherworldliness. When Florence goes there, her first impression about the Axon House further amplifies the eerie atmosphere. She finds "the quality of furniture, each heavy and unpolished piece pushed up against the next, jostling for space on a mud-coloured carpet" (111) which makes her disappointed and leaves her a bit terrified. This cluttered and awkward environment of the house leads to decay and haunting. Florence also has premonitions about this house, "I always knew something dreadful would happen in this house" (203).

It is also strange that Evelyn Axon has purported ability to communicate with her dead husband and it also adds the layer of supernatural elements. It is due to her unique ability that Mrs. Sydney also comes to her house so that she may also talk to her deceased husband which exemplifies the exploration of séance and supernatural powers in this novel. Evelyn declares that Mrs. Sydney's husband "has been roasting in some unspeakable hell" and it shows that Evelyn also works as a medium and it leaves impact on her séances on both her and her clients.

So far as Muriel is concerned, her life also remains a mystery to her mother. Her mother knows it well that she is a bit mentally-retarded girl. When she gets pregnant, her mother conceals her pregnancy from her neighbours, and that's why she orders Muriel not to attend her classes. During her pregnancy, she has ghostly appearance as is noted by her mother, "It was more than the house could contain. A ghost carrying a ghost" (79). It is also strange that there are some other things in Mantel's novels where characters also look a bit doubtful. When Muriel gives birth to her baby, it looks like a changeling. Evelyn also comments to see it, "You can't say it's human" (188). Evelyn advises her daughter to replace the child by exercising her powers. She says, "Find some water, a river or something. Float it

along" (189). Thus, the novel deals with such issues which are beyond the access of science. It generally happens in our life that some people hold the view that supernatural beings can replace human children. Thus, it can be stated that Evelyn's mental illness and her supernatural beliefs also form the core of the theme.

It is also noticed that both Evelyn and Muriel are perceived as mad by their neighbours and community workers. It is explicit from Evelyn's strange behaviour when she locks Isabel Field in the house. Both the mother and daughter epitomise the complexity in this novel. There are psychological horrors coupled with ghost stories. When Isabel Field was locked in the Axon House and she was crying for help, she comes to know that this house had sinister and haunted nature. The novel depicts how supernatural beliefs take shape in human being's minds and reshape their perceptions. It is also strange in the novel that even the concept of love in a family is reshaped and entwined with mystery by the characters' own experiences and the views they hold.

It is also to be noticed that Muriel's pregnancy is shrouded in secrecy and shame. Eleanor Byrne writes about Muriel, "To this end, she finds and murders the man who assaulted her sexually and is father of her child. In a convoluted plot twist, it transpires he is Isabel's disgraced father" (15). Muriel's this act breaks the heart of her mother, Evelyn. Muriel's pregnancy, shrouded in secrecy, silence and shame, disrupts the fragile semblance of normalcy in their household. Evelyn tries her best not to send Muriel to attitude cases and her studies also get affected a lot. Evelyn tries to shield Muriel from public criticism and scrutiny and for that purpose she does not allow her to go outside.

It is also interesting that the setting of the novel congruities specifically to the supernatural environment of the novel. Even the Axon House serves as a metaphor in the enigmatic nature of family. Harriet Waugh's writes that the house as a place where "things gibber in the wainscoting" encapsulates its eerie ambiance (32). Evelyn's penchant for secrecy, symbolised by her use of a cardigan to conceal her pregnancy, adds to the sense of mystery pervading the narrative. Evelyn's practice of séances adds another layer of intrigue to the story. Her ability to communicate with the dead, while mysterious and unsettling to those around her, reflects her desperate attempt to control her circumstances.

Hilary Mantel has narrated the story of Colin and Sylvia, husband and wife. Colin is in love with Isabel Field and is in intimate relationship with her. When he comes to know that his wife is pregnant, he refuses to marry Isabel just because he cannot leave his wife in that condition. This novel deals with futility of human life. Colin and Isabel do not have any mutual understanding and no love exists between them. Colin's frustration is explicit from these words, "Colin is also not contented with his life and he thinks of committing suicide also. He says, "Do you know, sometimes I feel very much like suicide...and if I felt really tempted to suicide, I would play it" (41-42). They are united only for their physical desires. There is no fraternity between the Axons and Sydney families which show the devastating impact of the modern age where even neighbours remain like strangers. Muriel gets pregnancy without marriage. It shows the degradation of moral values and ethics. That's why Evelyn hides Muriel from her neighbours and the social workers of the Day Care Centre.

Evelyn's habit of concealment, mystery and Muriel's revenge has been projected in its sequel *Vacant Possession* in an enigmatic haze. Even the title of the novel has paradox and intrigue implications as the passion without occupancy does not have any significant value. This concept is further embodied by the vacant the Axon House after Evelyn's death and it coveted by Muriel who comes to take the revenge of her mother's death. The mystery deepens

with Mrs. Wilmot and Lizzie Blank, as Muriel infiltrates Colin's household under false pretenses. Colin's baffling discovery of teeth in his front garden adds to the sense of unease, hinting at sinister forces at play. Kowalski's unwitting involvement in Muriel's schemes, culminating in tragedy, underscores the novel's web of deception and manipulation.

Scientific mystery can be seen Mantel's *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* because in this novel, she crafts a suspenseful tale set against the stringent oppressive regime of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Mystery pervades in the novel because the main female protagonist, Frances, senses paranoia, dilemma, identity crisis and danger in this country. A woman's oppressed and marginalised status has been depicted by mantel in this novel. The novel is set at Dunromain apartment and it becomes a locus of mystery with the presence of an empty flat and rumours of clandestine affairs. Frances's curiosity about the empty flat, fueled by the sound of sobbing and mysterious occurrences, leads her down a perilous path. The enigmatic behaviour of Raji, Abdul Nasr, and the maids adds multiple layers of dilemma, indecisiveness and intrigue, as Frances unravels some hidden truths. Yasmin's disappearance also adds a new mystery in the novel. Fairfax's cryptic messages and untimely demise leave Frances and Andrew grappling with some unanswered questions and lingering suspicions. The climax of the novel reaches with Fairfax's mysterious injuries followed by subsequent death. It underscores the insidious sense of vagueness and menace lurking in the shadows.

In Hilary Mantel's *Fludd*, the character of Fludd also has mysterious characteristics. His cryptic declaration, "I have come to transform you, transformation is my business" (55), leaves the residents of Fetherhoughton quite puzzled about his true intentions. His identity is veiled in secrecy because he does not want to discuss about his past. When he discusses with other about the past, he just comments to "murder the past" (106). His ambiguous responses, such as his explanation of his failed aspirations to become a surgeon and his references to alchemical processes of "nigredo" and "albedo," only deepen the mystery surrounding him. Father Angwin also observes that Fludd is a mysterious personality. Fludd's room is filled with incense and it has an old-fashioned nightshirt, which further makes him a dubious personality. His way of interaction with other characters of the novel is quite enigmatic. His act of seduction of Sister Philomena, his ambiguous relationship with Father Angwin and the nuns puts the readers into confusion as it adds mystical aura in this novel. Thus, he can be called a catalyst for supernatural and mystical themes in the novel.

In the novel, *An Experiment in Love* (1995), the depiction of sex pervasiveness of young girls has been depicted very mysteriously. Carmel, Karina, Julianne, etc. many poor girls' lives have been depicted by Mantel. Camel is the narrator of all the experiences of her life. Mantel speaks of three complex things at Tonbridge Hall: first, miniskirts fell out of favour; the second thing open the fire door so to avoid any calamity, but these doors are closed away to keep away the boyfriends yet the boys used to spend the nights and are hidden inside the wardrobes; and the third thing, Carmel informs her parents that she will spend Christmas at Niall's house. The novel narrates how poor people send their daughters to study in colleges and university and allow them to live in hostels, but many girls, instead of studying, get involved in other activities because their bodies demand sex. Mantel describes how these teenager girls have to take contraceptive pills but unfortunately, if girls gets pregnant, their boyfriends sometime do not help them and they have to suffer the aftermaths. Carmel thinks that sex before marriage a test drive. She enjoys sex with Niall and admits that she lost her virginity at the age of thirteen or fourteen. Carmel narrates:

May be the act of love came too late. As a career move, I should have lost my

burdensome virginity at thirteen or fourteen, when there would have been no question of a lasting attachment and no desire for one. I shook when I removed my clothes and I cried after it was done, not out of pain or disappointment but out of an up-rush of muddling emotion which twenty-four hours later I was ready to call love. (145)

Carmel calls herself an expert just because she enjoys sex every Friday and Saturday like the husband and wife do. She says, “We walked about before each other naked, as if we were the fount and origin of the world” (157). Niall asks her to stay in their house at Christmas and she spends night at Niall’s house. Mantel has depicted sex very mysteriously. Apart from it, the fire incident in the novel in which a girl dies also emerges as a natural calamity in the novel.

We can see in her novel *Wolf Hall* where the rise of Thomas Cromwell to prominence amidst the chaos of Henry VIII's court serves as a potent example of the destabilising effects of unchecked ambition. As Cromwell maneuvers through the treacherous corridors of power, the natural balance gets disturbed and it leads to the political unrest and conspiracy in the kingdom. Mantel sheds light on the psychological dimensions of natural crisis because it is usually seen that her female characters seem to be grappling with their own problems of life and their existential dilemma in the face of tumultuousness and uncertainty.

In the final installment of her Cromwell trilogy, *The Mirror and the Light*, the protagonist, Cromwell, confronts his own mortality and the legacy he leaves behind. When he looks back at his past life and the fleeting nature of the worldly powers, Mantel illustrates the transitory nature of human life in the midst of natural crisis or disaster. In the novel, Fludd, also, the alchemists comes in the town of Fetherhoughton and he has the enigmatic forces which also break the natural harmony, bringing disruption in natural environment. In this way, through cryptic reverberations and supernatural abilities, Fludd also challenges the perception of his reality, and in this way, he blurs the line between natural and supernatural. The novel deals with the supernatural powers and the existence of the ghosts.

In conclusive remarks, it can be stated Hilary Mantel's novels present a profound exploration of natural crises in the post-modern world. Her works deal with such issues on which some people do not agree. Eileen Pollard writes, “*Beyond Black* (2005) is a very different and complex novel by Hilary Mantel. It is about spirits and a medium” (12). Mantel writes about the pervasive impact of natural crises on people’s lives in the post-modern world. Thus, it can be stated that Mantel’s novels are not only significant literary works but also vital commentaries on the scientific and supernatural material. S. D. Sindhkjhedkar et al. also write that Hilary Mantel has mastery over different themes in her novels, “It is her innovative attitude which leads her to write novels with diversified themes. This very attitude makes her distinct and unique from other novelists” (18).

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