

Narrating the Unrecorded: Hidden Histories of Tudor England in Contemporary Historical Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Historical fiction is an alternative to the study of the past because it retrieves voices and experiences that are often missing from official history. This paper applies the theoretical framework of New Historicism to investigate the hidden histories of Tudor England in the works of Hilary Mantel and C. J. Sansom. Drawing on Mantel's Wolf Hall trilogy and Sansom's Shardlake series, the study examines how the authors reconstitute political, religious and social realities without changing historical facts. Their narratives shed light on disadvantaged views, uncover hidden power structures and reimagine archival silences through creative storytelling. The study contends that historical fiction, through the juxtaposition of literary works and historical discourse, provides a supplement to traditional history by uncovering obscured aspects of the Tudor period. The paper claims that the works of Mantel and Sansom represent the purpose of New Historicism to re-place the past and to expand the knowledge of Tudor England beyond the constrictions of traditional historiography.

Key words: New Historicism; Historical Fiction; Tudor England; Hidden Histories.

"Old stories can be rewritten... But in stories the odds are evened."

- Hilary Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light*

Histories can be rewritten, but they cannot be replaced; if they are, it becomes fabrication; this is what differentiates history books and historical fiction. Canonical history texts can never be wholly true, whereas historical fiction can never be wholly false. Historical fiction conveys the true history in a fictional representation. Historical fiction is a blend and a synchronisation of history (factual details) and fiction (recreation) of a major or particular event that is talked about in history. The historical fiction revolves around two things primarily: the setting and, secondarily, the characters. The setting of a work of historical fiction might be a real place, a created space, or a recreated space to fit the context of the historical event. The employment of events depends on the narrative ability of the writer. The narration aligns with the event that happened, which makes the fiction gripping for the readers. The second important notable function is characterisation.

The characters in historical fiction are sometimes recreations of real figures or original creations, which makes the fiction more gripping and presents history from a new perspective or even reveals what has been hidden for ages. History is considered to be a mutable one which alters in the hands of the person who narrates it; it's a familiar ideology that history is often told

from the perspective of the victors, whereas the voice of the defeated people is often muted or, rather, silenced or left undocumented. For instance, colonial history is told from the colonisers' point of view, who colonised the natives; hence, the authoritative voice of the colonisers is set aloud, and the suppressed voices are often faint or possibly muted. The question of where these suppressed voices are remains unanswered; an article in the *Journal of Global History* presents that the colonised community finds it extremely difficult to ground their history because their narratives are often cited by the colonisers themselves (Mishra).

History is approached from two different perspectives: one presents it as a series of events, glorifying individual successes and failures in terms of war; the other adopts a historicist perspective, focusing on research and documentation of what exactly happened, remaining neutral and unbiased, i.e., the narrative of historical fictions. It sees literature and history not as separate entities but as mutually co-existing entities. This gives way to the text, and while literature deals with the events of history, historical fiction becomes the text, and the historical background and socio-political milieu it surrounds itself with become the context. Historical fiction also presents the state of history being governed by the circulation of power that regulates and operates the society. Hence, a text is placed central to the socio-political milieu, and the text cannot be separated from the context. The text cannot be understood without the context because the history in making is not just the history, but it is the byproduct of the age to which it belongs, so "the text becomes the product and a producer of cultural energies and codes." (Lyu).

New Historicism analyses this cultural production and power circulation in history – how it made changes in the course of history. New Historicism focuses not only on history but also on how history is formed and on how historical fiction presents history. Does the blend of history with fiction alter the true course of history? The answer is that historical fiction never displaces, eliminates, or replaces any of this authentic information, but it presents history in a rather imaginative or recreative way, which is easily understood by the audience.

The present paper focuses on two historical fiction novelists and how they portrayed the Tudor Dynasty in a much more fascinating way. Their ways of presenting fiction are different from one another, without altering the true events of history. Hilary Mantel, a British novelist and a Booker Prize winner, presents the recreation of Tudor England in her voluminous *Wolf Hall* trilogy. In *The Wolf Hall* trilogy, Mantel presents the novel from the perspective of Thomas Cromwell. The novel follows the technique of bildungsroman, which follows the mental and physical growth of the character, showing how Cromwell progresses through the Tudor dynasty from being a shipboy doing errands to becoming the Lord Privy Seal of England.

The second writer, C.J. Sansom, presents history in historical detective fiction. Sansom uses an investigative narrative strategy where the plot functions as a means of uncovering the hidden power structure, marginalised voices and the social tension of England. Both novels follow events of the Tudor reign in England and also focus on the religious conflicts between the Protestants and Catholics, the dissolution of monasteries, political conspiracies and court intrigue, social inequality, and the outbreak of epidemics and poverty.

Marxist theorist Louis Althusser analyses this concept of text. i.e., the historical fiction enables the symptomatic reading, which states that a text can have multiple undefined

discourses. Symptomatic reading shows that a text has multiple meanings beyond what it contains. So historical fiction as such can convey something beyond all those non-fictional canonical texts contain: "nothing is ever clear, and no truth is a single truth" (Mantel 452). The symptomatic reading is projected in the contemporary novels of C.J. Sansom and Hilary Mantel in their Shardlake series and Wolf Hall trilogy. Mantel fictionalises certain elements in her novel, leaving it to the readers to understand between the pages. She creates a character named Jenneke in *The Mirror and the Light*; this characterisation is not to divert the main course of history but to open up to a possibility about the existence of a private life of Cromwell that might have remained undocumented by historians.

In the novel, Jenneke comes face to face with Cromwell; she introduces herself, "I am Anselma's child. I do not know how she is in this tapestry, but we can ask ourselves that some other day ... It was my mother's wish that after you left Antwerp, you should not be troubled. When I was a little child, I thought you were one of those men who sail to the new-found lands and bring back treasure (Mantel 400). Only for a few instances in the novel does the character Jenneke appear, yet she doesn't confront Cromwell, but she gently does say that she wanted to meet her father at least once; hence, she came all the way long to meet her long-forgotten father. Mantel's characterisation of Jenneke is very elegant and subtle because she knows the danger of introducing herself to London's public, as she is Cromwell's daughter. This news would stir his position, as he was already set for a trial by Stephen Gardiner. She gently meets her father for one last time, and then she leaves. Through her fiction, Mantel presents that literature can illuminate emotional and personal truths that official records often omit.

Similarly, in C.J. Sansom's *Dissolution* (2003), he is not fictionalising that actual murder that took place in the Tudor court but transforms the systematic violence of the Tudor reformation; thereby, his novel becomes a microcosm of what the actual big picture of England was during the 16th-century dissolution foreground: the dissolution of all the monasteries under the Act of Supremacy of 1564. In the first novel, *Shardlake*'s anger is directed against the king as a reformer, but he supports the dissolution of monasteries, as they have become the hub of corruption and the accumulation of corrupted treasures by the monks.

Sansom, through the character of *Shardlake*, shows that the medieval church was a place which was loaded with extreme wealth, and the priests, in the name of God, were making money. Monks were known to live a very simple life at the monastery, devoid of all earthly pleasures, and they needed to do their own work, but the monks of St. Donatus lived with servants who were asked to do even the simplest work that needed to be done by oneself: "...mostly these monks live in great buildings attended by servants living off fat revenues from their lands, scabbed with every sort of vice" (Sansom 29). Cromwell states to *Shardlake* that the monasteries had now become the breeding ground for all ill deeds: "It's all in there: sodomy, fornication, and treasonable preaching. Assets secretly sold away" (Sansom 14).

The mediaeval people also had a strong notion that the babies born with deformed bodies were no longer the creations of God but the creations of the devil; "creatures can be made by witches, although they necessarily must be very imperfect creatures and probably in some way deformed" (M. Miles). Sansom represents this superstitious belief through his character Matthew *Shardlake*. He is a solicitor by profession with extensive knowledge in

advocacy. He wanted to become a clergyman when he was young at Lichfield, but he was crooked-backed, and he was rejected by a priest for his deformity: "Anyone with a visible affliction, even with a withered limb, let alone a great crooked humpback like yours, can never be a priest. How could you show yourself an intercessor between ordinary and sinful humanity and the majesty of God when your form is so much less than theirs?" (Sansom 39).

Mantel and C.J. Sansom record and reiterate history through their fiction, which becomes the principal purpose of New Historicism. As New Historicism places historical and non-historical texts side by side and formulates a parallel reading. This "word of the past" (Barry 178) influences the concept of deconstruction by Derrida: "Everything about the past is now available to us in textualised form" (Barry 178). Mantel and Sansom, through their fiction, deconstruct the fact that the dissolution of monasteries was done at the personal interest of the king; hence, the hidden political agenda of endorsing the wealth from the monasteries will fuel the king's treasury. The other side of the dissolution of monasteries is not stated in the non-literary texts, but these historical fictions are trying to present the hidden agenda for the cause of dissolution through New Historicism. The aim of this historical fiction "is not to represent the past as it really was, but to present a new reality by re-situating it" (178, Barry).

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