

## **BEYOND CENTRE: A PSYCHO-FEMINISTIC READING OF HILARY MANTEL'S GIVING UP THE GHOST**

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### **Abstract:**

The literary genre 'Autobiography' emerged as a result of the writers considering their psychological 'self' expression as authoritative and having much influence on the world or being influenced by it. Men writers, for centuries, through associating themselves with the government or political groups and in turn bought a 'self' centered writing based on their experience and observations. But, on the other hand women writers who tried their hand in expressing their 'selves' remained passive or invisible for centuries. However in recent times many of the women writers revise the established trends, standards and definitions and explore new boundaries in this genre. Hilary Mantel's is one such writer who in her memoir *Giving up the Ghost* questions the established binaries of the 'Self' and the 'other'. This paper attempts to psychologically study Mantel's memoir and trace the cultural complexities which draws firm distinctions between 'margin' and 'centre', conscious and unconscious.

**Key Words:** Unconscious, Margin, Revise, Self, Trends, Centre.

"If you do not tell the truth about yourself, you cannot tell it about other people."

— Virginia Woolf

The word 'autobiography' has its root combination from three of the Greek words: 'auto' signifying 'self', 'bios' signifying 'life' and 'graphe' signifying 'writing'. Even from the classical times, men writers write memoirs, spiritual autobiographies, fictional autobiographies, etc. which

the feminist critics claim as a work purporting self-justification rather than self-documentation. These women-centered theorists accuse the patriarchy of propagating the ideology of ‘self’ as expressed in the autobiographies as a record of the male experience. Further they believe this ‘self’ constructive male experiences marginalizes women on various levels.

Helene Cixous, one of the important feminist critics call the invisible domain of women’s writing as ‘elsewhere’. She argues that the male construction of history is nothing but ‘his-story’ and insists on the need to invent ‘the other’ history i.e., the Herstory version of history. In her essay, “Stories: Out and Out” (1986), she claims the possibilities of striking back or splitting the classical structure. She writes as: “...it is time to change. To invent the ‘other’ history...We are presently living in a transitional period one in which it seems possible that the classic structure might be split. (83)

Cixous’ “elsewhere” does not only stress on the subjugation of women in history but also in literature. Observing these obscurities in the historical records, the feminist started ‘herstory’ movement to retell history from a woman’s point of view. Elaine Showalter also insists on such woman-centered canon and regulates it “...not [just as] a competing canon but [rather] an alternate canon” (128). In her essay, “Towards a Feminist Poetics”, she coined a term “gynocritics” which intends to construct a “...female framework for the analysis of women’s literature” (131)

Chodorow suspects that women’s identity is under patriarchal suppressions as their ‘collective identity’ is defined by the dominant group. In her essay, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, she argues: “The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate...feminine personality comes to conclude a fundamental definition of self in relationship” (169). Women writers especially in autobiographies, keep

themselves detached from the public events like men. They focus more on their private life which is a strike against the male standard of keeping themselves in the centre of their writings. Observing this, Dr. Ranjana Harish differentiates women's autobiographies from the established male standards:

Locally woman's autobiography which projects an image of private strength and public passivity doesn't mirror the establishment history of the autobiographer's times and thus the belief that a good autobiography is always representative of its time and mirror to the era also doesn't hold true in relation to women's life narratives. (30)

In women's autobiography a consciousness of self in which "the individual does not oppose herself to all others" nor "feel herself to exist outside of others... [but much] with others in an interdependent existence" (170) can be analyzed. Patricia Meyer Spacks seconding Chodorow also argues that women's autobiographies hardly mirror the establishment of history of their own time as they tend to concentrate more on their personal rather than that of exorcism and glorification. Spacks, in her essay "Selves in Hiding", argues that the autobiographies written by women suggest some female problems of self-presentation which reflects both a female dilemma and female solution.

Susan Stanford Friedman, in her essay "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice" discusses women's psychological experience when writing autobiographies. She coins a word "relationality" to mean expression out of the "fluid boundaries" women experience psychologically. Hilary Mantel, on whom this research paper is focused, twice uses the phrase "I am used to 'seeing' things that aren't there" (1) in the very opening in order to emphasize her critical perception of looking into things and bringing out new meanings. As a woman writer her

awareness on her ‘relationality’ ie: the extension and limitations offered to woman with regard to the art of self-documentation is found mentioned in her memoir. Her concentration more of her selection and expression of words and her psychic distraction resulting in other words show the true state of every woman autobiographer in general. As she herself puts it: “The words I try to write end up as other words” (2)

Joan W. Scott’s also defines that to have a better understanding on the autobiographical subjects especially a “woman” or ‘a girl child”, it is important to have the base of “relational” theory. In relational theory, the mother-daughter relationship is a conspicuously considered area for analysis and most of the autobiographies written by women writers show it as a recurrent theme. Mantel’s life is also not an exception, her true ‘self’ cannot be revealed completely without having a better understanding of her relationship with her mother. The mother daughter relationship can be noticed as one of the key factor in psycho-reading her memoir. Her mother leaving her father Henry and remarrying Jack, whom Mantel calls her ‘step-father’ becomes the source for early trauma in Mantel’s childhood. Thus the remodeled ‘Self’ of Mantel through her mother’s behavioral impact can be traced in her later years too.

Chodorow, too, believes that “girls in relation to their mothers experience themselves as overly attached, unindividuated and without boundaries” (137). Another major concept in relationality theory is the fear of ‘becoming one’s mother’ which Rich calls it as ‘Matrophobia’. Steph Lawler, another feminist critic, in her *Mothering the Self: Mothers, daughters, subjects* (2000), supports this argument by adding that this fear springs primarily from the daughter’s identification either subconsciously or consciously comparing the pieces of her mother in her own self. In Mantel’s memoir similar fear can be witnessed, when she tells about her lost child Catriona. At first she hesitated to become a bare as she didn’t “...want to carry someone else’s

thwarted expectations.” (224) but when she was operated on endometriosis and had no hope of bearing children anymore, she expresses her hidden agony as:

I was no good for breeding, so what was I good for? Who was I at all? My hormonal circuits were busted, my endocrinology was shot to pieces. I was old while, I was young, I was an ape, I was a blot on the page, I was a nothing, Zilch. (212)

Memoir writing usually involves recollection process, usually of hidden memories, and of past interpretation. Daniel L. Schacter, “Memories are records of how we have experienced events, not replicas of the events themselves” (9). James Olney also distinguishes two models of memory ‘the archaeological’ and the processual. The archaeological model of memory is spatial while the processual model for memory is temporal. Suzzett A. Henke calls the Greek word ‘trauma’ to mean self-altering, self-shattering events with experience of violence, injury and harm. In Mantel’s case, the separation from her husband and her physical illness, her separation from her father Henry all led to trauma in her. This tormented her for a long time and through passing times she made her mind to concentrate on her personal work rather to think about her lost male companion. She writes as: “We had been separated for no more than two years... I believe people do change; there’s no mileage, really, in believing the opposite. I also had changed. I was living alone...Of Freud’s two constants, love and work, I now embraced just one...” (11)

Her expressions like “I had no voice”, “I had got my voice back”, “I only count the happy hours” (13) not only shows her trauma but also tells us about her rebirth as a writer. Mantel’s childhood seems to be filled with innocence and ignorance. Before knowing about her own biology, she always wanted to become a boy, ie: the ‘other’. Her biological limitations and the

truth about her ‘self’ become known to her only after her adulthood. On seeing and reading about the privileges enjoyed by the other gender, she mentions about her will to become a boy. “I make a fuss! It is related to my role in life. When exactly do I become a boy? (55)

Mantel’s memoir also brings to light the confrontations one experience with oneself and with the world. When she mentions about her surgery on endometriosis she also tells about the behavior of the doctors towards her. She expresses as: “How can I write this, I wonder? I am a woman with a delicate mouth; I say nothing gross.” (189). She finally comes to a conclusion that:

I feel that each morning it is necessary to write myself into being – even if the writing is aimless doodling that no one will ever read, or the diary that no one can see till I’m dead. When you have committed enough words to paper you feel you have a spine stiff enough to stand up in the wind. But when you stop writing you find that’s all you are, a spine, a row of rattling vertebrae, dried out like an old quill pen. (223)

Mantel’s writing can be seen as a perfect harmony of feminist ideology as expressed by Cixous and Showalter. She calls the history and great literature written by men as utter nonsense. “Shakespeare is bunk. History is bunk. Why are women always smiling? Smile, smile, smile.” (244). Thus, Mantel questions the established standards of patriarchal norms which placed men’s writing in center. She draws firm distinctions between the margin and the center and affirms that the center is no more the center but a mere constructed illusion.

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