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Foucauldian Power and Resistance in Hilary Mantel's "The Assassination of "Margaret Thatcher

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Abstract

Hilary Mantel is an outstanding figure in English literature whose works get positive reviews from critics all over the world. Although many of Mantel's works have been investigated from various perspectives, it has not been studied from a Foucauldian point of view. This article intends to present a Foucauldian reading of Mantel's short story "The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher". This investigation reveals the power relation between characters and exposes Mantel's depiction of resistance to power in Foucauldian manner. The findings further suggest that the assassin in the short story is a sample of a great resistance in Ireland to the power of Margaret Thatcher.

Keywords: "Hilary Mantel", "The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher", "Michel Foucault", "Power", "Resistance".

Introduction:

Hilary Mantel is an English writer widely recognized all over the world. She was born on July 6, 1952, in Derbyshire. Mantel is an important writer in English Literature, who has written several novels, two short story collections, and several articles. She is known for black comedy and historical fiction. The publication of her novel, *Wolf Hall* (2009), about the rise and fall of Thomas Cromwell from power, had a significant role in enhancing her reputation. The *Assassination of Margaret Thatcher* is a short story collection by Mantel, which is published in 2014. From this book, *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher* is the short story I select to investigate in this study.

Briefly, "The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher" is about an aged woman, who is the narrator of the story, living in an apartment near a hospital in 1983. The hospital is host to Margaret Thatcher, the prime minister of Britain, for eye surgery. Nurses and reporters gather to visit Thatcher after surgery. An assassin for the Irish Republican Army comes to the woman's apartment and enters her house as a plumber. The assassin makes the woman his prisoner. He wants to use the woman's window to shot to Thatcher, when she comes out from the hospital. The assassin and the aged woman engage in a conversation about political commitment, Ireland, Thatcher, and the assassination

that the assassin aims to accomplish. Finally, the assassin decides not to kill Thatcher.

The works of Hilary Mantel have been under investigation by scholars and readers after their publication. "Hilary Mantel: Embodying Thomas Cromwell and Redefining Historical Fiction through 'Women's Writing'" is a study by Alaa Alghamdi which is published in 2018. The author attempts to locate Mantel's writings in the category of women's writings in spite of their masculine perspective, using Julia Kristeva's viewpoints. "Wolf Hall and moral personhood" by Nora Hämäläinen is another research about Mantel's writings, which is published in 2019. In this investigation, Hämäläinen attempts to present an ethical reading of Mantel's *Wolf Hall*. Although, most of Mantel's works have been studied from different perspective, yet nobody has studied "The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher" through a Foucauldian lens. The purpose is to uncover power relations between characters and reveal resistance against power in the story.

In order to meet the objectives of this investigation, this paper deploys Michel Foucault's conception about 'power' and 'resistance' on Mantel's short story; because of "The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher's" obvious presence of power and resistance in the world of the story. I draw on Foucault's book *History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (1978) and Dianna Taylor's book about Foucault, Michel Foucault: *Key Concepts* (2014) in studying the story. According to Taylor, Foucault asserts that power is omnipresent and co-exists with social relations (15). Power comes from all levels and layers of society and it develops in specific, local, individual choices, behaviors and interactions. Foucault describes three types of power in his works: sovereign power, disciplinary power and bio power. (Taylor 41) In this article, we deal with sovereign power. In Michel Foucault: *Key Concepts*, Chloe Taylor, a contributor, elucidated Foucault's conception of Sovereign power:

Sovereign power is a power which deduces. It is the right to take away not only life but wealth, services, labor and products. Its only power over life is to seize that life, to end, impoverish or enslave it; what it does not seize it leaves alone. Sovereign power's right over life is merely the right of subtraction, not of regulation or control. (41- 42)

Sovereign power was present all over the history of civilization. It is a standard view of power. On the other hand, Foucault talks about a concept, which is called resistance. He in his *History of Sexuality, Volume 1* asserts that "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power (95). Foucault continues in *History of Sexuality*:

There is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the

revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. (96) Also Lawrence Hamilton in his "Resistance and radical democracy: freedom, power and institutions" asserts that power is everywhere and is closely tied up with existing forms of domination, repression and constraint (482).

The Analytical Body:

In Mantel's story, "The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher", Thatcher whose character is in accordance with real Thatcher, is the representative of sovereign power. When the narrator who is the aged woman depicts the character of Thatcher, she emphasizes the cruelty of her by expressing "She lives on the fumes of whiskey and the iron in the blood of her prey" (143). Similarly, the assassin explains the character of Thatcher as "cruel, wicked but not ridiculous" (140). Thatcher's government interferes in the internal affairs of north Ireland where the assassin comes from, collaborates with the political structure of Ireland to kill protesters, tries to suppress Ireland's republicans specially Ireland Republican Army (IRA) and it has great role in the hunger strike of 1980 and 1981 by the criminalization of republican prisoners. (Gerry Adams- theguardian.com) Although, these facts are not mentioned in the story directly, they are clandestinely present in the background of the story. Thatcher is a politician whose policy has not a solution for unemployment even worsens it (Tejvan Pettinger-economicshelp.org). The narrator asserts that Thatcher "be born to rich people" (135). The assassin points to the problem by expressing "Three million unemployed" (135), and he asserts that most of these unemployed people live round our way. He asks the old woman that "It wouldn't be a problem here, would it?" (135).

On the other hand, we deal with resistance. The assassin intends to kill Thatcher. This is a kind of violent resistance to the policies of Margaret Thatcher. The resistance is not all about the assassination of Thatcher. The assassin refers to the resistance in Ireland. He asserts, "I think of those boys on hunger strike" (141). Then, he continues:

The first of them dead almost two years to the day that she was first elected: did you know that? It took sixty-six days for Bobby to die. And nine other boys not far behind him. After you've starved yourself for about forty-five days they say it gets better. You stop dry-heaving and you can take water again. But that's your last chance, because after fifty days you can hardly see or hear. Your body digests itself. It eats itself in despair (141).

This depiction of hunger strike demonstrates the deepness of resistance in Ireland. The narrator agrees with the assassin and adds:

You can't force pity from a government like hers. Why would she negotiate? Why would you expect it? What's a dozen Irishmen to them? What's a hundred? All those people, they're capital punishers. They pretend to be modern, but leave them to themselves and they'd gouge eyes out in the public squares (141-142).

The narrator's agreement with the assassin uncovers resistances against Thatcher and her policies in England. However, these resistances are in different forms, and somewhat, they are easy to adjust.

Moreover, according to Mona Lilja et al, "Neatly put: (organized) resistance encourages (everyday) resistance" (41). In this story, organised resistance in Ireland and England to the power of Margaret Thatcher and her government encourages everyday resistance. This everyday resistance reveals itself in the actions of the assassin.

Conclusion:

Mantel's works have been studied from different points of view and in this investigation; this paper scrutinized "The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher" from a Foucauldian conception of power and resistance. The study reveals that the story depicts a power structure in Britain and Ireland and resistances against it in a Foucauldian manner. A further study might utilize theories of post colonialism to study this story from a different perspective.

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