

## Displacement, Memory, Loss, and Identity Quest in the Novels of Hilary Mantel (Under Sub-Theme- Land, Memory, and Displacement)

Mukesh Kumar

Research Scholar, Sahu Ram Swaroop Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Bareilly  
(Affiliated to M.J.P. Roholkhand, University, Bareilly, U.P.)

[Mukeshkumarmjprubly@gmail.com](mailto:Mukeshkumarmjprubly@gmail.com)

ORCID: 0009-0006-3548-5388

---

Article: Received: 22/03/2026, Accepted: 29/03/2026, Published:31/03/2026.

D.O.I. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19329305>



© 2026 The Author(s). This is an Open Access article/ Journal distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are properly credited. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

---

**Abstract:** Hilary Mantel is considered one of the most famous contemporary novelists. Winner of two consecutive Booker prizes, Mantel, in her novels keeps on exploring such themes as Identity Quest, Displacement, Memory and Loss. She herself felt being a marginalized citizen of U.K., because she was born on Ireland. Her own life experiences matches with her characters who always remain on a quest for Identity and who always carry a past with them which keep on haunting them. Hilary Mantel tells Sally Vincent that most people refuse to remember their childhood. Though- her memoir does not flinch from terror, sickness, separation. But will committing her past to paper lay her ghost to rest? She herself replies. She tells Marianne Brace that she survived the devil of girlhood and had to wrestle with serious illness. She has written a memoir to banish the demons. In the present paper I have tried to connect all pervasive themes of Displacement, Memory, Loss, and Identity Quest in the novels of Hilary Mantel with her own life.

**Keywords:** Displacement, Memory, Hilary Mantel, History, Identity Quest.

**Introduction:** Hilary Mantel is one of the most popular and greatest historical novelists of present age. She wrote novels on themes like memory, trauma, loss, identity quest, displacement, history, and Nature. She has written twelve novels, including *Every Day is Mother's Day* (EDMD) (1985), and its sequel *Vacant Possession* (VP) (1986), *Wolf-Hall Trilogy*, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* (EMGS) (1988). She wrote a memoir, '*Giving up the Ghost*' (GG) (2003), and two collections of short-stories. She has also written a substantial number of Essays and articles published in various journals, columns, and magazines. She was awarded Booker Prize twice for the first two novels [*Wolf-Hall* (WH) (2009), and *Bring up the Bodies* (BUTB) (2012)] of *Wolf-Hall Trilogy* in 2009 and 2012. Her third novel of this trilogy entitled- *The Mirror & the Light* (ML) (2020), was also in the Long List of the Booker Prize.

The Present Paper maintains that Displacement, memory, loss, and Identity Quest are inseparable themes in the novels of Hilary Mantel. These themes are all pervasive and pervading. We get the glimpse of these themes from her very first novel which she carries up to the last novel. These themes remain not only intact but are growing and developing with every next novel. Mantel who is known for her thematic varieties in her novels, has kept a pattern of themes. Thus, these themes are not only present but are playing major role in moving the narration forward.

**Main Text:** Mantel is known for her mastery over development and accuracy which dealing with historical events. She fills the gaps between the given data, from her imagination, so dexterously and accurately that even historians too believe and agree with her detailing.

Her protagonists whether they are from domestic and social setting just like in *Every Day is Mother's Day*, *Vacant Possession*, and *Beyond Black* (BB), or from historical and cultural setting like *A Place of Greater Safety* (APGS), and in 'Wolf-Hall Trilogy', or in religious setting like in '*Fludd*' (FD) or in science and experimental setting like in '*The Giant O'Brien*' (GOB), and in '*An Experiment in Love*' (AEIL), are always struggling from the trauma of their past which keep on haunting them throughout their lives.

Mantel's characters suffer loss and displacement which becomes the pivotal point of their lives. They always feel themselves displaced as they keep on searching their belongings and there is always a quest for Identity among all the protagonists portrayed by Hilary Mantel in her novels.

Displacement is a term which has been defined by various streams of knowledge in various ways. In physics, displacement is defined as the change in an object's position. While social sciences define it as the forced movement of people from their homes or habitual place of residence due to various external pressures. There may be various reasons for displacement like climate change, disaster, any armed conflict or clash, threat of life, development, economic and political pressures, livelihood, natural calamity, or epidemic are some key and major factors responsible for the displacement.

In literature the same displacement is being applied to the characters created by the writer, who uses it as key device to move the narration of the story. In literature we see displacement in the form of social, psychological, political, cultural, mental etc. characters are forced to leave their homes like in refugee stories. Characters do not directly react on any emotional trauma but displace it psychologically redirecting the same emotion somewhere else. Loss of culture also proves the key cause of displacement in the novels. Physical move from one place to another for any purpose like career, money, revenge, recognition, peer pressure, societal pressure, etc.

Mantel herself has suffered this displacement when she was just a child and when a man called Jack Mantel entered her house, which was situated in a Roman Catholic Mill Village of Hadfield, in Glossop of Derbyshire, and replaced her father. And later when villagers in the vicinity started the gossip about this illicit relationship and liaison, the whole family moved to Glossop leaving behind the buzz of the village to avoid more defamation. Therefore, whole family moved and shifted from there to a new place called Romiley, in Cheshire. This incident had left the lasting impression on the mind of young Hilary Mantel. She had never forgotten that moment when she had been displaced from her own home. In her memoir, *Giving up the Ghost* (GG), she has described in detail about her displacement of memory and emotion.

In *Every Day is Mother's Day*, Hilary Mantel's first novel, Evelyn Axon lives with her mentally retarded daughter Muriel Axon in a house which in the vicinity is called haunted. Evelyn is a medium who can invoke the dead souls that is why her neighbor Mrs. Sydney often visits this house so that she could talk to her deceased husband. In Mrs. Sydney's house live her son Colin Sydney who is history lecturer and his wife Sylvia, a housewife is pregnant for the third time. Florence Sydney is sister of Colin Sydney who is unmarried. Isabel Field is a novice social worker who has been assigned to care Axon family. She has illicit relationship with Colin Sydney. She has responsibility of her aged father who is suffering from dementia. Because of her carelessness Muriel got pregnant. Her mother Evelyn thought this baby is a changeling and she convinces Muriel to bury this baby alive. Later we came to know that she was raped by the father of Isabel Field. Evelyn dies at the steps and Muriel was sent to rehabilitation centre.

In '*Every Day is Mother's Day*', Hilary Mantel's first novel, we find a story of emotional and psychological displacement. The house itself is a symbol of detachment. Although the name of the town is not given yet it is very similar to the town of Mantel's birthplace Glossop, where too people were detached. In the novel, Mantel describes how Mrs. Sidney, Who is neighbor of Axon family reacted at the house of Evelyn and Muriel- "She stopped by the house called 'The Laburnums' by the straggling privet hedge spatted white with bird-droppings and ravaged by amateur topiary; and tears misted over her eyes." (EDMD 7).

This house was situated on a corner of the village. Mantel writes- “The Axons’ house stood on a corner. There was a little gate let in between the rhododendrons. No weeds pushed up between the stones of the path. And this was odd, because you would not have thought of Evelyn Axon as a keen gardener” (9).

All the characters in *Every Day are Mother’s Day* and its sequel *Vacant Possession* are displaced. They feel themselves displaced. Everyone in both the novels, it seems, has stuck and from where they want to get free because they do not belong there. Thus, Evelyn Axon the owner of the house was stuck there because she was assuming that her cruel dead husband Clifford Axon is always present there in the house and he would not allow her to go outside. She lives with her mentally challenged daughter Muriel in a claustrophobic atmosphere. She does not like any visitor at her home. That is why when Isabel Field tries to visit her house to execute her assigned duty, Evelyn tries to check her assuring that everything is fine in the house.

Muriel Axon is the protagonist of both the novels. Although she is mentally challenged, yet she plans everything and avenges for her misfortunes in the *Vacant Possession*. Later we came to know that it was she who was planning to go out. She herself was feeling displaced. She meets Isabel Field and goes out into the Care. But situation worsened when her pregnancy was discovered without any clue about the father. Evelyn thinks that this baby does not belong here and for sure it must be a changeling. She convinces Muriel to drown the baby so that real baby could return to her.

Colin Sydney too does not enjoy homely life. In order to avoid going home he has joined evening classes and is having illicit relationship with Isabel Field. He is responsible for the lost file of Muriel, which brought the catastrophe into the life of Muriel. He changed his house and shifted into the house of Axon family which he purchased after the death of Evelyn Axon and Muriel shifted to the mental hospital.

Isabel Field too is stuck in her life. She does not handle the case assigned to her because of her illicit relationship with Colin Sydney which she knows, is just a time pass because it will move nowhere. In *Vacant Possession* she marries a clerk. She realized her mistake. She says, “I shouldn’t talk about it-oh, but I must. I must. Spit it out” (VP 69).

Memory is a literary device used by the writers to give depth into their characters. It includes identity Quest, personal trauma, nostalgia, collective consciousness, loss, personal experiences. Etc. which shapes the present of the character. It is often subjective and personal. Stream of consciousness novels, memoirs, autobiographies, and personal essays are some of the genres where writers have employed this device consciously and intentionally. ‘*Giving up the Ghost*’ (2013), is a famous memoirs written by Mantel. In this book she has portrayed her own life based on her memory and recollections. In the very first chapter, “The Second Home” she writes-

*You come to this place, mid-life. You don’t know how you got here, but suddenly you’re staring fifty in the face. When you turn and look back down the years, you glimpse the ghosts of other lives you might have led. All your houses are haunted by the person you might have been. The Wraiths and phantoms creep under your carpets and between the warp and weft of your curtains; they lurk in wardrobes and lie flat under drawer liners. You think of the children you might have had but didn’t. When the midwife says ‘It’s a boy’, where does the girl go? When you think you’re pregnant, and you’re not, what happens to the child that has already formed in your mind? You keep it filed in a drawer of your consciousness, like a short story that wouldn’t work after the opening lines.* (GG 20-21).

In her essay “*The Day is For the Living*” (TDFL) (2023), Mantel writes- “my concern as a writer is with memory, personal and collective: with the restless dead asserting their claims” (TDFL 244). She writes- “we don’t reproduce the past, we create it” (244). Memory as a literary device in the works of Mantel is all

pervading and pervasive. She believes that there is no facts only memory. She writes- “[e]vidence is always partial. Facts are not truth; though they are part of it- information is not knowledge.” (244).

The term *Loss* can be defined as deletion of most valued thing from one’s life. It may be loss of emotion, like in ‘*One Who Rides a Tiger*’, loss of love, like in ‘*Wuthering Heights*’, loss of innocence, like in ‘*Lord of the Flies*’, loss of person, like in ‘*A Farewell to Arms*’, loss of Identity, like in ‘*Animal Farm*’, Existential loss, like in ‘*Miracle of the Rose*’, cultural loss like in ‘*A Passage to India*’, Historical loss, like in ‘*Midnight’s Children*’, ‘*Train to Pakistan*’, ‘*Beloved*’ etc.

In literature the theme of loss is being represented through, alienation, displacement, identity quest, nostalgia, missing the loved one, regret, grief, etc. It is depicted like an experience of absence of the most valued thing in the life of the protagonists, which they keep on longing for throughout the novel. Hilary Mantel has imbued the theme of loss in almost every novel by her. She herself has suffered this trauma of loss. She lost her father because a new father entered her life who replaced her previous father. She lost her beloved home because their parents left that place to avoid gossip. She married her boyfriend Gerald McEwen, a geologist. She lost her baby. She was diagnosed endometriosis and at the age of 27 after the surgery she was told that she could not become mother again. She divorced her husband due to this trauma. She travelled far and wide around the world and this trauma keeps on haunting her.

Mantel writes- “The book of me was indeed being written by other people: by my parents, by the child I once was, and by my own unborn children, stretching out their ghost fingers to grab the pen” (GUG 70). At another place she writes- “Sometimes 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 stop writing you find that’s all you are, a spine, a row of rattling vertebrae, dried out like an old quill pen” (GUG 222).

She says, “I am not writing to solicit any special sympathy” (GUG 222), but because she had to. After the loss she had undergone, nothing was meaningful in her life. She tells about herself that, “I am writing in order to take charge of my childhood and my childlessness; and in order to locate myself, not within a body, then in the narrow space between one letter and the next, between the lines where the ghosts of meaning are” (222).

Identity Quest is a literary device which can be equated with ‘search for self’. Writers employ this device to depict the inner progress and victory over the various obstacles and hindrances. Collapsing of the true self of the protagonist is the source and origin of identity quest. Bildungsroman, coming of the Age, Post Colonial Novels, Diaspora Fictions, are some major genres where the theme of identity quest has been used prominently. Writers like James Joyce in ‘*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*’, and Charles Dickens in ‘*Great Expectation*,’ have used identity quest as a major theme.

In literature we see various kinds of the quest for the identity for example psychological identity, historical identity, cultural identity, national identity, personal identity, ethical identity, moral identity, social identity, etc. Mantel in her novels does not discuss an identity quest which was hereditary but that type of identity quest which would be achieved by the protagonists through various atmospheric pressures like societal pressures, psychological pressures, political pressures, historical tensions, etc. through which the Mantelian protagonist undergoes.

**Conclusion:** In EDMD Muriel rebels against her mother to establish her identity. In VP she feels the psychological pressure to avenge the injustices meted out on her. She plans everything flawlessly to succeed in this quest. In EMGS, Frances Shore feels herself an alien in Saudi Arabia, for being a western woman. She not only faces cultural alienation but also for her being a female who always remain under surveillance. She feds up with the cynicism and hypocrisy there and always feels to exert her identity but every time her husband Andrew forbids her. In AEIL, Carmel McBain reflects on her college days when

quest for identity was more important than friendship or emotions. In ‘*Wolf-Hall Trilogy*’ the protagonist Thomas Cromwell because of his quest for identity, left his home as the son of a blacksmith and later rose up to the level of chief minister of England, advisor of the king, and the most powerful man of England after the king Henry VIII. Hilary Mantel is known for thematic varieties. Displacement, memory, loss, and identity quest, are the major themes in her works. She herself has undergone and experienced these emotions. Belonging from Ireland she herself never felt at home in Britain. Sara L. Knox writes, “Her novels described, with unromantic realism, a non- Britain. She portrays Britain and Britons abroad without mythologising or nostalgia, writing fiction in which the problem of belonging is most starkly drawn in those spheres that define it: home, neighbourhood, region, nation” (Knox 323).

### **Works Cite and Consulted**

Mantel, Hilary. *Every Day Is Mother's Day*. Chatto & Windus Ltd, 1985

Mantel, Hilary. *Vacant Possession*. Chatto & Windus Ltd, 1986

Mantel, Hilary. *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*. Viking Press, 1988

Mantel, Hilary. *An Experiment in Love*. Viking Press, 1995

Mantel, Hilary. *Wolf-Hall*. Fourth Estate, 2009

Mantel, Hilary. *Bring up the Ghost*. Fourth Estate, 2012

Mantel, Hilary. *Bring up the Ghost*. Fourth Estate, 2012

Mantel, Hilary. *The Mirror & the Light*. Fourth Estate, 2020

Mantel, Hilary. *Giving up the Ghost*. Fourth Estate, 2003

Knox, S. L. (2010) Giving Flesh to the 'Wraiths of Violence': Super-Realism in the Fiction of Hilary Mantel. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 25(65), 313-323. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2010.504295>

Mantel, Hilary. “The Day is for Living.” The BBC Reith Lectures, BBC Radio 4, 13 June 2017, [www.bbc.co.uk/radio4](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4)

---

**Declaration by Author (s):** *"I hereby declare that this manuscript is my original work, free from plagiarism, and that all sources and any use of Artificial Intelligence tools for content generation or editing have been fully disclosed and verified for accuracy." Mukesh Kumar*