When Terror Comes Home: Domestic Spaces and Covert Manipulation in Hilary Mantel's *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher*

Francis Arnaud M'BRA
University of Bondoukou, Côte d'Ivoire
francismbra.arnaud@gmail.com

Abstract: Using insight from Adam Hodges' war discourse[1] and psychoanalytical theory, this paper examines the unsettling convergence of political violence and domestic threat in Hilary Mantel's fiction in the mainstream of terrorism and surveillance studies literature. It critically provides an analysis on the discursive power abuse of the most polarising British Political leader, Margaret Hilda Thatcher, in the Northern Ireland to legitimate British political hegemony in the region, contain the protracted Irish guerrilla and dehumanise hunger strikers. Zooming in on Thatcher's discursive narratives, this study, then, explores the Prime Minister's rhetrickery- a shoddy rhetoric term coined by Wayne C. Hooth to describe the "art of producing misunderstanding"- to ideologically manipulate the politics and British public opinions to perpetrate political violence in the Northern Ireland (Wayne C. Hooth: 2004, p. x). It also purports to analyse the discursive power of the Irish sniper to imprint threat and psychological terror on the mind of the narrator while intruding her domestic space.

Keywords: Covert manipulation, domestic space, Margaret Thatcher, psychological terror, rhetrickery

Résumé: Tout en s'appuyant sur le discours de guerre d'Adam Hodges et de la théorie psychanalytique, cet article examine la convergence troublante entre la violence politique et la menace domestique dans la fiction de Hilary Mantel, dans le cadre des études littéraires sur le terrorisme et la surveillance. De façon critique, il propose une analyse de l'abus de pouvoir discursif du leader politique Britannique le plus controversé, Margaret Hilda Thatcher, en Ireland du Nord afin de légitimer l'hégémonie politique Britannique dans la région, contenir la guérilla Irlandaise et déshumaniser les grévistes de la faim. En zoomant sur les discours narratifs de Thatcher, cette étude explore, à cet effet, la supercherie rhétorique du premier ministre – un terme introduit par Wayne C. Hooth pour décrire « l'art de produire les quiproquo » servant à manipuler idéologiquement les politiques et opinions publique Britanniques pour instaurer la violence politique en Ireland du Nord. Il vise aussi à instaurer la menace et la terreur psychologique dans l'esprit du narrateur au cours de la violation de son espace domestique.

Mots clés: Manipulation subtile, espace domestique, Margaret Thatcher, terreur psychologique, supercherie rhétorique

[1] To Adam Hodges, war discourse is a concept that refers to the "use of language and social interaction as a mediating element in the outbreak, conduct, and disputation of armed political conflict. As an organized and purposeful form of group action, war depends upon the organizational capacity of discourse to create unity and mobilize support among an in-group, to construct an out-group enemy and direct actions against that enemy, and to legitimate the (actual or potential) use of lethal force in the eyes of domestic and international audiences" (Adam Hodges, 2015: p. 1).

Introduction

Few would disagree that Margaret Thatcher's years of premiership (from 1979 to 1996) she inherited from the persistent "troubles"[2] of the 1980s in Northern Ireland was "one of considerable social and economic turbulence for the UK" (Farrall et al: 2017, p.2). During her tenure as the first woman Prime Minister of Britain, Margaret Thatcher was often believed to be taken as the most important and polarising political figure who shaped the political landscape of British society. Her rise to power is a story that kept dividing British public opinion for her heavy-handed policies she implemented to legitimate British political hegemony in the region and contained the protracted Irish insurgency at the dawn of the "trouble".

Thatcherite policies typically entailed oppressive political systems, the arrest of the "enemies" and refusal to grant them political status. The elongation of the brutality and insensitivity of Thatcher's government exacerbated the grievance and tension between Unionists and the Irish republic, accentuating the symptoms of civil unrest and division between the working class in Northern Ireland's history. Margaret Thatcher's toxic legacy of "trouble" bore psychological scars on the memory of the Irish for years.

The ghost of the trauma of political violence in Northern Ireland still continues to haunt the psyches of individuals and societal structures. It invites itself into the daily lives of British citizens, turning domesticity into a site of anxiety rather than a refuge. Traditionally perceived as a safe haven, domestic spaces are now weaponized into a site of surveillance and terrorist attacks targeting British political leaders.

The reconfiguration of the domesticity of terror in British literature has received fairly hard knocks in recent years with fascinating and provocative works by the British two-times winner of the Man Booker Prize, Hilary Mantel. Mantel's *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher* is a collective of ten short stories whose title epitomises the most provocative one. Her story politicizes private settings by giving voice to marginalised angry persons. The plot centers on the political hatred of an IRA gunman willing to take revenge on Thatcher's former political actions to imprison the leaders of the 1981 hunger strike, Bobby Sand and nine other

[2] The "Troubles" refer to the period of political violence shaking Northern Ireland from the late 1960s to 1998 until the signature of the Good Friday Agreement. This term has been employed to undermine the scale and intensity of the events taking place during this period, as many unionists still refuse to talk about a "war" to qualify the conflict (Nathan Pluquet, 2023, p.2).

strikers, who died following their claim of special category status. The would-be assassin who inveigles his way into a woman's flat in Windsor manipulates her innocent thoughts to exert control over her mind, emotions and attitudes, coercing her into complicity in his intention to murder the former British Prime Minister during her visit to a hospital for eye surgery. Terror and domestic intrusion, from this perspective, are deployed in the narrative as metaphors for the acts of political resistance and dissent perpetrated by the conspirators to subvert the dominant legitimate power of Thatcherism.

Using insight from Adam Hodges' war discourse and psychoanalytical theory, with the main focus on "call to arms rhetoric," "the discursive construction of social identities" and the "use of legitimating devices in language," this paper examines Margaret Thatcher's rhetorical positioning in manipulating the political context with great success. As a political leader, she resorts to rhetrickery to mobilize British politicians and public opinions to adopt the same position while muting dissenting voices. This study also endeavours to analyse the discursive power of the IRA intruder to instill threat and psychological terror in the mind of the woman, and the ways she responds or mediates her hysteria she suffered from.

In accordance with these objectives, this paper focuses on the following questions: In what ways does Margaret Thatcher's leadership in Northern Ireland shape the socio-political tensions in the novel? How does Hilary Mantel construct domestic space as a site of terror for political and psychological violence? And how do characters respond to this psychological terror in the stories? This text is organised as follow: section one examines the discursive power abuse of Baroness Thatcher unveiled through the IRA gunman in the context of British politics since the 1980s. It remains a privileged site for uncovering how Thatcherite policies in Northern Ireland dismantled the social and economic systems of the United Kingdom. Next, section two analyses the IRA's ideological reaction to recent political actions, deploying his assassination attempt as a counter-political subversion strategy. Then, an effective response to the victim's hysteria and psychological terror will be briefly discussed.

1- The Rhetrickery of Margaret Thatcher: Political Subversion in Northern Ireland

Hilary Mantel's short story, *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher*, vibrantly weaves narratives of Margaret Thatcher's voice that delves into the visceral memories of the Irish Catholic community. Her narrative immersively captures Thatcher's political rhetoric as a "ghost" whose words resonate in collective memories as a "state violence". As to Ruth Blakely, state violence is used to "coerce populations into complying with the wishes of elites, by using violence to instill fear in an audience beyond the direct victim of the violence.

State violence of this kind is usually intended to achieve certain political objectives, particularly curtailing political opposition" (Ruth Blakely, 2014, p.1).

Thatcher's collusion policy closely fits Ruth Blakely's conceptual definitions of state violence. Her political discourse echoed long after the "troubles" still continue to haunt individuals' minds, reopening the wounds of the survivors. The Mantelism narrative discloses Thatcher's call to arms rhetoric within sight of an unnamed IRA survivor, revealing the manipulative strategies she utilizes to mobilize British politics and the public to take up arms to consolidate her power and reshape the British political landscape according to her ideology.

The British political leader weaponizes patriotic sentiment and polarizing issues in her official speeches to rally supports and justify her hardline stances on Northern Ireland. The IRA survivor seems to be well aware of the discursive tricky nature of her neoliberal ideologies in the history of the Irish conflict. He extremely feels resentful of Thatcher's rhetrickery she used to manipulate and oppress Irish people, revealing that:

> My great-uncles (and he was right about them) wouldn't have known a wild harp if it had sprung up and bitten their bottoms. Patriotism was only an excuse to get what they called pie-eyed, while their wives had tea and ginger nuts then recited the rosary in the back kitchen. The whole thing was an excuse: why we are oppressed. Why we are sat here being oppressed, while people from other tribes are hauling themselves up by their own ungodly efforts and buying three-piece suites (*T.A.M.T, 222).*

These words from the IRA survivor are revelatory to the Thatcherite manipulability of patriotism. This short passage brilliantly captures the visceral anger of the speaker in rejecting whatever official discourse of Margaret Thatcher in defending and maintaining order in Ireland during times of turmoil. It sounds like a direct accusation professed against Thatcher's government for maintaining oppression through the fallacious pretext she invented.

Else, the IRA survivor, while appealing to historical memories, consistently emphasizes patriotism as an ideological tool of control to raise sympathy for the British people across the UK and rally them behind the British cause. Those alienated national communists see her as a mere embodiment of British oppression epitomized by the "wild harp." The colloquial expression, "pie-eyed" meaning to be "very drunk" or "intoxicated," he uses, here, is likely to provide an illustrative token to justify her fallacious pretext for loving one's nation. He implicitly treats her as a hypocrite who uses the "patriotic sentiment" to corrupt the spirit of the nation to build and cultivate her self-image.

More seriously, this quotation comes to deconstruct the performance of her political discourse, revealing that Thatcher's approach combs harsh security measures systematically exacerbate broad division in the UK. While she argued that such measures were capital on counter-terrorism, her approach arguably escalated the conflict, radicalized a generation, and delayed peace negotiations. In his speech, the IRA survivor strongly denounces the class division in these terms:

> While we are rooted here going la-la-la auld Ireland (because at this distance in time the words escape us) our neighbors are patching their quarrels, losing their origins and moving on, to mod-ern, non-sectarian forms of stigma, expressed in modern songs: you are a scouser, a dirty scouser. I'm not, personally. But the north is all the same for southerners. And in Berkshire and the Home Counties, all causes are the same, all ideas for which a person might care to die: they are nuisances, a breach of the peace, and likely to hold up the traffic or delay the trains (*T.A.M.T, 223).*

The line of reasoning of the IRA man points to the regional identity and class divisions of British society. The discursive narrative exposes the crushing burden of Thatcherism on contemporary British society, illustrating the transformation of regional prejudice from ancient to modern times. The humming of the old song "the dirty scouser", comes to shed light on the social malaise caused by the Thatcherite neoliberalism. By evoking that song, the IRA survivor not only recalls the traumatic experience of the Irish nationalist community within colonial times, but also evidences the rhetoric of the exclusion of Thatcherism. He, even, reiterates the repressive stance of Margaret Thatcher's policies as follows:

> They may have been blind at the end, but their eyes were open when they went into it. You can't force pity from a government like hers. Why would she negotiate? Why would you expert it? What are a dozen Irishmen to them? What's a hundred? All those people, they are capital punishers. They pretend to be modern, but leave them to themselves and they'd gouge eyes out in the public squares (*T.A.M.T, 230).*

This passage poignantly illustrates the complex emotional landscape surrounding the socio-political context of the Northern Ireland. It vividly reveals the harness of power of the Thatcherite ideologies onto the Irishmen. By using the rhetorical image of "blindness", the IRA man is showing, here, the mental state of the Irish working class (- probably the miners) in which they are being indoctrinated by the Thatcherite policies (laws and order) to silence the people. In their distorted reality, they even felt powerless to confront Thatcher's oppression. The IRA survivor refers to the British government that he scornfully attributed to "hers" – a possessive pronoun- government as a cold and despotic government treating the Irish opponents as "terrorists" or "criminal". To the IRA survivors' mind, negotiating with such a government is anathema. He is seeing her a "cruel" and "wicked" person (*T.A.M.T, 227).*

2- Domestic Spaces : Sites of Terror

"Domestic spaces" is a generic term for the private space, the household or the home as opposed to the public space of the street or the urban space of the city as a whole (Irene Cieraad, 2017). Gaston Bachelard observes that domestic spaces function as a felicitous space – intimate – which safely evokes position feelings, memories and a sense of well-being. Always containers, sometimes contained, the house serves Bachelard as the portal to metaphors of imaginations (Gaston Bachelard, 1994, p.viii).

Hilary Mantel's short story, in *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher*, maps out the setting of the narrative in both the urban and domestic space. At the story's outset, she initially zones the urban space in the "quiet street, sedate, shaded by old trees: a street of tall houses; their facades smooth as white icing, their brick work the color of honey" (*T.A.M.T, 207).* The writer also depicts the "genteel corner bypassed by shoppers and tourists" contrasting its beautiful buildings with the invasive presence of newspapermen and TV crews and onlookers on the Trinity Place (*T.A.M.T, 209).* The political climate is charged, with people – dissidents - discussing strong feelings about Thatcher, uncovering a blend of admiration and hatred. Domesticity is embedded in the quiet narrator's Windsor flat, a location associated with monarchy and order undermining the symbolic stability of the British authorities. The narrator, a middle-class woman, is living in that quiet space, carrying out routine domestic tasks. Yet, the quiet familiar domestic order is quickly disturbed by the intrusion of an armed IRA man, shifting her private refuge into his vantage point for the assassination of the former British political leader. The tension created within domestic space significantly captures the way the quiet spaces yet charged atmosphere of Windsor reconfigured, under the shadow of Thatcher's presence, and reveals the impact of political decisions on ordinary citizens.

The initial infiltration of the middle-class woman's home was perpetrated by means of manipulative tactics the unexpected visitor deployed to control her cognitive environment. The IRA gunman's dark psychology, in the story, strategically operates through a mix of covert deceptive and coercive strategies he employs to trick out the innocent thoughts of the woman under the guise of a plumber she was expecting. More subtly, the intruder anchors the woman into a false sense of sympathy, opening a breach of ideological dialogue in which he not only has control of the physical space, but also the moral and emotional framing of his hostage. The IRA sniper erodes her psychological defenses, forcing her to clearly articulate her position on Thatcher's personality. As such, she deliberately asserts that:

> "It's the fake femininity I can't stand, and the counterfeit voice. The way she boasts about her dad the grocer and what he taught her, but you know she would change it all if she could, and be born to rich people. It's the way she loves the rich and the way she worships them. It's her philistinism, her ignorance, and the way she revels in her ignorance. It's her lack of pity. Why does she need an eye operation? Is it because she can't cry?" (*T.A.M.T, 220).*

Still under the power of the covert manipulation of her ravisher, the woman strongly stages a critique of the mannerism of the British Prime Minister. When she accuses her of "fake femininity," the woman consciously or not aligns with the IRA's political ideology, criticizing Thatcher as a person culturally and intellectually shallow despite her political power.

On a symbolic level, when the IRA assassin invades the narrator's flat, he ideologically reflects on it as the microcosm of contested British society, allowing psychological terror to operate both as a narrative force and a reflection of the socio-political tensions of the Thatcher era-Britain. The writer, by embedding her narration within the narrator's familiar structure, purports to demonstrate that terror under the Thatcher's political era was not exclusively confined to the battlefield of Northern Ireland, but can also intrude on citizens' everyday lives. Sigmund Freud would speak about it as the "uncanny" or "eerie"-unfamiliar and scary – to describe the uncommon thing that terrifies a person he/she cannot identify.

The IRA sniper's Thatchericide attempt resonates as a symbolic act of political violence, a reversal of state-led terrorism from which he seeks to redirect violence against the British government. It mirrors the deep-seated anger toward Thatcher, rooted in the history of Irish oppression. Unexpectedly, the graphic imagery of the "minor eye surgery" of Thatcher offers a glimpse into the loss of political vitality from which she ideologically refuses to "see" the suffering her policies cause in Northern Ireland. As the assassination plan unfolds, the IRA gunman evokes his motivations tied to his personal and national strife in these terms: "I'm not shooting her because she doesn't like the opera. Or because you don't care for –what in sod's name do you call it? Her accessories. It's not about her handbag. It's not about her hairdo. It's about Ireland. Only Ireland. Right? (*T.A.M.T, 229).* By staging the possibility of Thatcher's assassination, successful or not, the IRA sniper enters cultural memory as a political resistance builds up in defense of Irish cultural identity. The rhetor, in these lines, clearly seeks the historical validity of his political struggle. He frames his political grievance

not just as a random crime, but as a retribution for accumulated historical antagonism in Northern Ireland, whereby the nationalist community was denied the ounce of sense of humanity. The broader political and national wounds motivations are tethered back as follows:

> I think of those boys on hunger strike," he said, "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. You wonder if she can't laugh? I see nothing to laugh at" (*T.A.M.T, 229-30).*

Here, the IRA survivor uses that stark and factual statement to justify his grievance. He recalls the collective memories and the violent history of the Irish nationalists tied to Thatcher's rise to power. By invoking the young boys as the symbols of innocence and vulnerability, the IRA sniper intends to condemn Thatcher's cruelty as revealed through those deaths. His Thatchericide stance is heavily reinforced by her intransigence in granting political status to the miner strikers. By the effect of backlighting, the narrator's kitchen window overlooking the hospital where the British Prime Minister is envisaged as what Michel Foucault refers to as "panopticon" to increase his axial visibility and power. Foucault suggests a panopticon is a "machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen" (Michel Foucault, 1977, 202). The woman's kitchen flat is being weaponized as a liminal site of surveillance for terrorism.

Hilary Mantel's fiction underlines the fragility of security, whether on the battlefield or at home, under Thatcher's Britain. By showing the narrator's vulnerability within sight of the intrusion of the IRA gunman, the writer symbolically seeks to imagine the collapse of the British state's protective shield around its leader.

3- Mediating Psychological Terror

Hilary Mantel's Hollywoodish scene of hostage-taking of the middle-class woman is eerily reminiscent of domestic insecurity in a broader political and patriarchal system of Great Britain. Her short story juxtaposes two models of feminity under patriarchy: Margaret Thatcher's survival in power, imitating masculine codes of authority vs. the narrator's mediation of psychological terror within vulnerability. The juxtaposition of both distinct characters ironically suggests a paradox of female survival in patriarchy, one in which is

embedded within aggressive power and the other in resilience and negotiation. The woman, even, scorns her for her "fake feminity [she] can't stand, and the counterfeit voice" in politics, which has nothing to do with feminist liberation, if not to comply with patriarchal violence.

Mantle foregrounds the subtle strategies by which the woman negotiates terror. The narrator successfully navigates her way through a balance of survival strategies, conversation and compliance; she explores negotiating her psychological terror. When the IRA gunman intrudes on her home, she easily detects the lack of professionalism, noticing that "it wasn't something he was used to, tricking himself into private houses. I was more annoyed with myself than with him (*T.A.M.T, 216).* Yet, she quickly recognizes the imbalance of power and does not resist.

The narrator deflects her anxiety and psychological terror through conversation she entertains with him, using calmness as a form of psychological defence. The conversation she engages with him – about the hunger strikers and Irish oppression by Thatcher's government- is somehow moderate in tone, showing him the same cultural background when she contested that: "You're a bit of a fake yourself, I think. You're no nearer the old country than I am. Your great-uncles didn't know the words either. So you might want supporting reasons. Adjuncts" (*T.A.M.T, 229).*

By claiming the same cultural origin with her aggressor, the woman subtly frames a moral unease in his mind to prevent him doing harm. Instinctively, the narrator negotiates terror by making herself valuable. Her survival instinct leads her to comply with the intruder's demands, offering him twice "tea" for his taste. At a certain point, her negotiation tactics lie in her persuasive argument she puts forward to destabilize his lethal plan. The woman bets on her sensibility to change his mind, admitting that: "I would deter you if I could, but it would only be out of fear for myself and what's going to happen to me after you've done it: which, by the way, is what? I am no friend of this woman, though I don't (I felt compelled to add) believe violence solves anything. But I would not betray you, because . . ." (*T.A.M.T, 221).*

From this quotation, the narrator is obviously testing the water with her ravisher to change his mind, probing what fate would befall her. By leaving the hanging "because…" she intentionally seeks to let the intruder interpret her stance in a way that can render possible her safety. At other times at risk, she convincingly tries to buy time and deliver them from that situation that seems "unnegotiable", offering him the tactical edge they need to escape. She points out the structural quirks of the building and the neighbor's house by ensuring that:

> It is a slender chance but the only one. From the house next door, he will emerge a few yards nearer the end of the street: nearer the right end, away from town and castle, away from the crime. We must assume that, despite his bravado, he does not intend to die if he can help it: that somewhere in the surrounding streets, illegally parked in a resident's bay or blocking a resident's drive, there is a vehicle waiting for him to convey him beyond reach and dissolve him as if he had never been (*T.A.M.T, 238).*

This calculated aid to the intruder mirrors effective survival tactics. The woman, by showing him a possible escape route, intentionally wants to save her life by reducing the risks that he would panic after his actions, turn on her, or treat her as collateral damage.

Hilary Mantel presents the woman's hostage situation as an allegory of women's negotiation of power in a complex patriarchal system that intrudes, threatens and sometimes demands compliance and silence as survival strategies. She insists on the narrator's subtle reclaiming of her domestic space to implicitly gain psychological leverage over the IRA's presence.

Conclusion

Definitely, Hilary Mantel's literary fiction critiques and reimagines the Irish colonial times under Thatcherism. Her provocative book places real-time politics into domestic spaces, revealing its emotional underpinning: class resentment, national trauma and psychological terror. Baroness Thatcher's story teaches us two great coded messages. The first is that Thatcherite policies in Northern Ireland were deeply divisive. The coercive ritualization of violence she implemented radically transformed Irish Catholic social and economic life during the "troubles," stirring up deep national grievance. The second is that it invites the reader to see that "terror" is not always confined to the battlefield. It can also intrude familiar structures through covert manipulation.

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