

Subversion and Containment: Metahistorical Trauma in Ken Follett's *The Armour of Light*

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Abstract

Historical narratives are records of subversion, revolution, and containment. The subversion of power and authority is a direct result of centuries of oppression, the dramatic entrances of rebel-heroes, the glory of revolution, and the establishment of states that promise equality and freedom. But beyond these deceptive markers lie the truth - the rebel-heroes are hanged in public, the revolution results in slavery and worse conditions than before, and the heroes' families endure centuries of trauma. Ken Follett's 'The Armour of Light' is a metahistorical narrative that undermines the truths behind the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, trade unions, and the end of feudalism.

This article aims to research centuries of historical trauma endured by the labour class through the lens of metahistorical approaches. The narrative of Follett has been examined with the theories of Stephen Greenblatt, Hayden White, Karl Marx, and Cathy Caruth. Commencing with Greenblatt's concepts of subversion and containment, the paper establishes the origin and results of centuries of feudal oppression that ease into hard labour in factories and jails. Marx's theories of the Infrastructure and the Superstructure prove that the oppressed labourers are essential for the existence of society, but they must remain poor so that others can enjoy their wealth. Finally, Caruth's theory on historical trauma concludes the paper, revealing the secrets behind hard labour, poverty, and unemployment, and how the people managed to cope with trauma.

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Introduction

Metahistory is associated with historical narratives, their semantics, and the significance of historical transformation through the ages. Historical narratives abound with revolutions, the sudden appearances and demise of rebel-heroes, historical trauma experienced by a society, cultural hegemony and their containment tactics, and the evolution of a new era which is nothing more than a shadow of the past. Public executions and punishments functioned as instruments of political containment, intended to discourage dissent and reinforce the authority of ruling governance. Ken Follett's historical fiction, namely the *Kingsbridge Series* - *The Pillars of the Earth* (1989), *World without End* (2007), *A Column of Fire* (2017), *Evening and Morning* (2020), and *The Armour of Light* (2023) - spans across the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries. These colossal narratives record the medieval period in Europe, the Black Death, the Viking Raids, the Elizabethan Age, and the Industrial Revolution.

Existing historical research delves into historical trauma, especially during the Holocaust, but lacks the analysis of other historical events. The research is limited to certain ethnic groups and races, but does not look into global trauma. This paper is a study on the domains of metahistorical and trauma studies to evaluate the impact of history on generations of the social psyche. The major literature review for this paper includes Ken Follett's *The Armour of Light*, Stephen Greenblatt's *Invisible Bullets*, Hayden White's *Metahistory*, and Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*.

Feudalism and Containment

The Armour of Light begins in 1792, when feudalism was still the prevailing form of government. The plot concludes in 1842, encompassing the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and the Napoleonic Wars. These decades were marked by profound political and economic upheavals that reshaped the social structure of Europe. The transition from agrarian feudalism to industrial capitalism created new hierarchies of power and intensified the vulnerability of the working classes. Within this turbulent historical background, individual lives become deeply entangled with larger structural forces. The Clitheroe family experiences complex and collective historical trauma for generations. Their experiences reflect how systemic oppression operates across generations, producing a cycle of suffering that is both personal and historical. The family's struggles demonstrate how political authority and class hierarchy penetrate everyday life, shaping the psychological and emotional realities of the poor. They are abused physically and mentally by Squire Riddick and his son. The latter murders Harry Clitheroe because of his inability to manage a loaded cart

and victimises poor Sal Clitheroe by banishing her from Bedford. Her expulsion also reflects the gendered dimension of social injustice. Women from the lower classes often faced harsher punishment and social exclusion, revealing how patriarchy reinforced class oppression. Her only son, Kit Clitheroe, who works as a boot boy in the manor, is also harassed by Will. The world of Follett is “a world in which virtue was usually betrayed, talent perverted, and power turned to the service of the baser cause” (White 234).

Alderman Hornbeam can be seen as the central structure of containment. He suppresses the policies of his class and those of others. He even hangs little boys for stealing bread. The case of little Tommy Pidgeon, hanged at the market square for stealing a reel of ribbon to buy bread, is pathetic indeed. “King George refused to pardon Tommy Pidgeon” (Follett 502), and the townsfolk stand to watch him “suffer slow strangulation. . . His eyes seem to bulge and his face turned red.” (Follett 504). Wartime prices skyrocketed “while cloth workers were paid the same” (Follett 143).

Revolution and Subversion

Subversion, the undermining of existing authority and politics, is the spark that ignites revolution. Moreover, “power can only define itself concerning subversion, to what is alien or other, and at the heart of power is therefore the production and subsequent containment of subversion” (Brannigan 64). This theoretical perspective helps explain the political dynamics portrayed in *The Armour of Light* by Ken Follett. The ruling elite constantly attempts to suppress dissent while simultaneously producing the very conditions that generate rebellion. Speculators like Hornbeam store away the grain and wait for the price to increase, then sell it for an outrageous price: “Our grain is being sold to France, for the French are richer than us . . . How can people sell grain to the enemy?” (Follett 257). The hoarding of grain during times of scarcity illustrates how economic exploitation intensifies public anger. By adjusting food supply for profit, speculators transform basic survival into a political issue, provoking resistance among the working community and population. The women chant, “Bread and peace” (Follett 258), and the militia join them. Joanie sells the grain for the old price on condition that the bakers sell the bread for the old price. This collective protest reflects the growing political consciousness among ordinary people, particularly women who were directly responsible for feeding their families. Their demand for “bread and peace” represents not merely a plea for food but also a call for economic justice and social stability. Hornbeam states the Riot Act and accuses Joanie of “riot - a capital offence” (Follett 270), and she faces the death penalty. Jeremiah Hiscock is flogged for possessing *Reply to Archdeacon Paley*, a seditious pamphlet that supports the revolution in France.

The Socratic Society is dissolved for lecturing on Archdeacon Paley’s *Reasons for Contentment*, through which they indirectly discussed Thomas

Paine's *The Rights of Man*. Sadly, the workers learn that "Prime Minister William Pitt had announced the Workmen's Combination Bill, which would make it a crime for workmen to get together. . . the bill was said to be a response to the current plague of strikes" (Follett 372).

William Rosenau characterises subversive actions into three categories in his *Subversion and Insurgency*. They are "(1) establishing front groups and penetrating and manipulating existing political parties; (2) infiltrating the armed forces, the police, and other institutions of the state, as well as important nonstate organisations; and (3) generating civil unrest through demonstrations, strikes, and boycotts" (Rosenau 6). In Follett's novel, the establishment of the Socratic Society, infiltrating the militia and organising the housewives' revolution, can be considered a complete subversive act.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels used the term 'Infrastructure' or 'Base' for the economic structure of a society and Superstructure for the political, judicial, and governing systems of a state. Marx has stated in his *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (1867):

It is always the direct relationship of the owners of conditions of production to the direct producers - a relation always naturally corresponding to a definite stage in the development of the methods of labour and thereby its social productivity - which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure, and with its political form of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the corresponding specific form of the state. (519)

Hence, the Superstructure depends on the Infrastructure for its survival, but contains its ideologies by labelling them as crimes of revolution and treason. Kathleen Biddick believes that "In the debate over the transition from feudalism to capitalism, historians argue whether agrarian lordship produced medieval markets, was eroded by them, or both" (1). Alderman Hornbeam replaces English weavers with Irish refugees because they demand lower wages. If revolution is good for business, then the Superstructure will, in the words of Stephen Greenblatt, accept that "There is subversion, no end of subversion, only not for us" (29).

Metahistorical Trauma

In her *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Cathy Caruth explains trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11). This understanding of trauma emphasizes that the effects of catastrophic events are not always a sudden act instead the trauma often resurfaces through memory, behaviour, and emotional responses long after the initial event has passed. In literary narratives, trauma is frequently represented through characters whose experiences reveal the psychological consequences of historical violence. Sal is forced to send her son away to serve the feudal lord.

But the trauma of leaving makes her the leader of revolution: “It forced me to leave home, but it also freed me”(Caruth 20). The separation from her child becomes a moment of profound emotional rupture. This personal suffering also transforms her into a source of resistance, motivating Sal to challenge the oppressive social structures that control her life.

“Historical trauma refers to a complex and collective trauma experienced over time and across generations by a group of people who share an identity, affiliation, or circumstance”, asserts Mohatt et. al. (2). Sal “would have welcomed more children, but she had suffered two miscarriages and a stillbirth. She had stopped hoping and begun to tell herself that, poor as they were, one child was enough” (Follett 5). These personal tragedies deepen Sal’s emotional suffering and illustrate how poverty and instability affect intimate aspects of life such as family and motherhood. The accumulation of such losses reflects the hidden psychological toll of social inequality. Sal is sentenced to hard labour, called hemp-beating: for twelve hours a day” (Follett 394), but worst of all, “the jailors had abused the women” (Follett 417) and the women cannot talk about it to anyone - “They would keep the secret of the prison rape” (Follett 418). The harsh labour imposed on imprisoned women reveals the punitive nature of the legal system, which sought to discipline and silence those who challenged authority.

Napoleon’s master plan of selling Louisiana to the US leaves him enough funds to try and conquer Britain. The Navy is always in need of men, and there are press gangs who would practise impressment. This is “the practice of forcing seamen to serve the British Royal Navy” (“Impressment”). Jim Pidgeon’s drink is laced with drugs, and he is impressed by the press gang. Later, his family suffers the trauma of loss and debt. The Reign of Terror saw so much violence, with Robespierre guillotining aristocrats by the thousands. They coped with all these terrors quickly enough because terror helped them heal. In the words of Di-Capua, “Contemporaries of the Reign of Terror believed that the effects of terror were therapeutic and regenerative for the community” (9). Retraumatization led them to self-assertion and liberation. History is full of bloody violence, skin-crawling massacres, centuries of war, glorious revolution and innovative executions. But people healed because they loved the terror. Children had toy guillotines, people followed the fashion of the executioners and “Novelty guillotines also found their way onto some upper class dinner tables, where they were used as bread and vegetable slicers” (Andrews).

Conclusion

Follett’s *The Armour of Light* is a canvas of revolution in industry and the state. There cannot be a revolution without subversion; hence, the narrative is ornamented with the peasants’ Revolution for bread and peace, and the revolution of Bonaparte for power and authority. Perpetual war leads to inflation, poverty, and vagrancy. All this ends in historical trauma - a trauma

experienced by the peasants-turned-labourers for centuries. The Irish immigrants are homeless, Russian serfs serve Napoleon, and the impressment system brings the US into war. In the words of Greenblatt, people cannot “intervene in the processes at work in history, processes which are alienated from all of those who enact them” (55). No matter how hard the fight, how glorious the revolution, those who subvert authority remain slaves one way or the other. The people accepted their positions and accepted all the violence through retraumatization. They learned to love the violence and took it into food, fashion, and language. The struggles of workers and revolutionaries in Follett’s narrative illustrate the paradox of historical change: those who challenge authority frequently remain trapped within the very systems they attempt to transform. Even victorious revolutions may fail to dismantle the structural inequalities that shape everyday life. The trauma of history does not disappear; rather, it becomes embedded within cultural memory. Follett’s narrative suggests that revolution is not simply a story of heroic resistance or political transformation, but it also reveals the cyclical nature of power, where each attempt at subversion may lead to new forms of control. The peasants who become factory workers, the migrants who search for survival, and the soldiers who fight in imperial wars all participate in historical change, yet they remain vulnerable to the same structures of authority and exploitation. Through this portrayal, *The Armour of Light* emphasizes that the true cost of revolution is borne by those whose lives are most deeply shaped by its consequences.

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