

Mapping the narrative web: Exploring utterance, metamodernism and intertextuality in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*

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Abstract

The novel as a genre is widely regarded as a fictional work composed in prose, a phenomenon that varies in form and style from other literary genres. The paper looks at two aspects of David Mitchell's experimental novel *Cloud Atlas* – the narrative as well as the metamodern aesthetics of the novel. David Mitchell employs diverse narrative techniques to craft a multidimensional storytelling experience. The novel intersects with the metamodernist sensibility to blur boundaries between past, present and future narratives, fostering a dialogue between disparate genre and epochs and offers a fresh insight into the dynamic approach of storytelling in contemporary literature. *Cloud Atlas* consists of six interlinked stories, each written in a different style, that unfold over a span of centuries. Using Bakhtin's concept of the utterance which is regarded as the actual unit of communication and which includes the novel in itself as a type of utterance, the research explores the ways in which the narrative of *Cloud Atlas* functions as an utterance. The main objective of the article is to look at the complexities associated with labeling *Cloud Atlas* as a postmodern novel in its entirety and to explore how the novel straddles the genres of the postmodern novel and the metamodern novel.

Keywords: Utterance, narrative, postmodernism, metamodernism, intertextuality

Introduction

The novel, a fictional work in prose, is a phenomenon that varies in form and style from other literary genres. The novel forms the basis of all ventures into communication, as does language. Language pervades all human activity and just as human activities are diverse in nature, so are the uses of language and its forms. In his article *Answering as Authoring: Mikhail Bakhtin's Trans-linguistics*, Michael Holquist speaks about Bakhtin's philosophical stance – he believed that there existed a distinction between matter and consciousness. Matter consisted of everything which was there, while consciousness comprised all that was a creation of the mind. The term 'dan' was used for the former and the term 'zadan' for the latter. Language, according to Bakhtin, occupies a middle position between these extremes – it is simply out there and it is also created. Further, it could be used to bridge the gap between mind and matter. Bakhtin distinguishes between language as a system, or *langue* and language as speech performance, or *parole*. This distinction is also on the level of mind and consciousness. The features of language that Bakhtin identifies as *langue* are like matter, given their proximity to the material world. These are the aspects of the language that are repeated and are different from speech. However, they cannot be separated from speech and they operate as a single unit. Holquist suggests that the space where these meet and "the force that binds them and the arena where the strength of each is tested, is the utterance" (310). The utterance, and not words or sentences, is the actual unit of communication. Every sphere in which language is used has its own "relatively stable types" (Bakhtin 60) of utterances which are called speech genres. Speech genres include commentaries (political or social), everyday dialogues, literary genres including proverbs and "multivolume novel[s]" (Bakhtin 61). The speech genres are grouped into two – primary or simple speech genres and secondary or complex speech genres. The novel is a secondary speech genre. It is, as a whole, an

utterance. Bakhtin suggests that the secondary speech genres, in their creation, absorb several primary genres. For instance, letters and rejoinders in everyday dialogue that are incorporated into the novel lose their significance as a part of everyday life and are subsumed under the reality of the novel as a whole. Since a novel in its entirety is treated as an utterance and since it is often composed of a set of simple utterances, it can be argued that each utterance in itself is composed of utterances. This paper aims to trace the similarities between Bakhtin's concept of utterance and the narrative of David Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas*. Narrative, according to Robert Scholes, is the place where language and sequence intersect. Since the language in itself is "realized in the form of individual concrete utterances" (Bakhtin 60), the narrative can function as an utterance, consisting of a series of utterances. These concrete utterances enable language to enter into life and vice versa.

The Narrative of *Cloud Atlas* and Bakhtin's Concept of Utterance

Known for works such as *Ghostwritten* and *The Bone Clocks*, apart from *Cloud Atlas*, Mitchell's narratives are rather experimental in that they are at times a unification of the linear and the cyclic narrative style. The novel consists of six interlinked stories, each written in a different style, that unfold over a span of centuries beginning in the nineteenth century and ending in a post-apocalyptic primitive world. Bakhtin suggests that the boundaries of an utterance are demarcated by a change of speaking subjects. Each story in the novel is then an utterance in this sense as each story is narrated by a different character, at times by an omniscient narrator. The first section is written in the form of a journal, where Adam Ewing narrates his adventures in the South Pacific and his encounter with Autua, the last Moriori, Moriori being an indigenous tribe that suffers at the hands of the Maoris and the Englishmen.

Bakhtin identifies a characteristic feature of the utterance – it has an absolute beginning and an absolute end. He later suggests that this might not be true for rhetorical and artistic genres, but the narrative of *Cloud Atlas* suggests otherwise. Mitchell composes labyrinths of time and space in his novels, but these labyrinths are “unicursal labyrinth[s]” (Harris 04). The labyrinth is also a labyrinth of Anthropocene time, “stretching from the deep past to the foreseeable future in which humanity is confronted with its predacious nature, an evolutionary drive that fuels the rapacious colonial-capitalist consumption of the earth's resources and species, including its own” (Harris 05). The narrative is linear which is made to appear non-linear. At the same time, the narrative also forms an endless loop in time. Each story in the novel is interrupted except for the sixth one, with the end of civilization being reached in the sixth story. It is after the sixth story has been narrated that the novel goes back to conclude each story in the reverse order. Therefore, the novel begins and ends with Ewing's journal. An absolute beginning and an absolute end here is suggested with respect to time – the novel begins and ends in the nineteenth century. Through Ewing, this section addresses the politics and consequences of colonialism and expresses support for the Abolitionist movement. During one of his excursions, Ewing falls deep into a crater where he comes across dendroglyphs – human figures carved onto the trunk of trees. Dr. Goose diagnoses him and concludes that the reason for his declining health is owing to a parasite. While he treats Ewing, he warns him that the treatment might leave him feeling worse until he fully recovers. At this point, the narrative is abruptly interrupted. The next section, written in the manner of an epistolary novel, is set in the twentieth century. In this section called “Letters from Zedelghem” Robert Frobisher, a musician, writes letters to his lover Rufus Sixsmith. Frobisher is in pursuit of a renowned composer called Ayrs, who has syphilis and is turning blind. He manipulates his way into working for Ayrs and moves in with Ayrs and his family. Frobisher, upon browsing through the books in his room, finds a journal. Frustrated at not being able to find the rest of the pages, he writes to Sixsmith, requesting him to enquire about the journal. It is the journal of Adam Ewing, which as we discover in this section of the novel, has now been published. Bakhtin opines that utterance is responsive in nature and this response could be active or passive. The utterer or the speaker wishes for an active understanding of his speech. At the same time, the speaker himself is a mere respondent. By doing so, the speaker not only presupposes the “existence of a language system” (Bakhtin 69), but he also presupposes the “existence of preceding utterances” (Bakhtin 69). Each utterance is “a link in a very complexly organised chain of utterances” (Bakhtin 69). Thus, no utterance operates in a vacuum, in complete isolation from other utterances, but it rather interacts with and responds to other utterances. Since the novel consists of embedded narratives, each narrative in a way responds to the previous one, thereby functioning like an utterance. Ewing's journals are enclosed within the letters that Frobisher writes to Sixsmith which come into Luisa Rey's possession. Luisa Rey's story becomes a manuscript for a novel that Timothy Cavendish comes across. The experiences of Cavendish are turned into a movie that Sonmi-451 is fond of and Sonmi-451's interview gets passed on to the post-apocalyptic world of Hawaii. The story following that of Frobisher's is written in the form of a

thriller, featuring Sixsmith as a character who is now in his sixties. Sixsmith is murdered as he knows some of the secrets of the organization that he works for and his death is covered up as a suicide. Luisa Rey, the protagonist of the story and a journalist, tries to investigate the case which leads her to the letters that Frobisher wrote to Sixsmith. Luisa is slightly perturbed to realise that Frobisher also had a comet-shaped birthmark like herself. Almost every protagonist in the novel, including the clone Sonmi-451, is born with the comet-shaped birthmark, suggesting that the souls of the characters are reincarnated time and again, signifying a thread of unification within the novel. Furthermore, when the organisation sends its agents to prevent Luisa from exposing them, Luisa attempts to escape and has a *déjà vu* – she is reminded of Frobisher “doing a dine and dash from another hotel” (Mitchell 146). She gets into her car, which is rammed into by one of the members working for the organisation. The car falls off the bridge into the river. In the fifth story as well, one sees a similar episode of *déjà vu*. This section is entitled “The Orison of Sonmi-451” and is set in a futuristic state in Korea dominated by a large corporation. It is in the form of an interview between an archivist and Sonmi-451 who is a clone and works as a waitress. Clones, whose consciousness is made to remain numb by the administration of amnesiacs called “soap”, are made to work for the purebloods. Their gaining of consciousness is termed ascension. Ascended clones are then ordered to be executed. Sonmi-451 is one such clone. As Sonmi-451 attempts to escape from the agents of the corporation sent to kill her, she gets into a ford. When the ford crashes, Sonmi-451 has a *déjà vu* and remarks:

The final drop shook free an earlier memory of blackness, inertia, gravity, of being trapped in another ford. Where was it? Who was it? (Mitchell 318).

While not strictly a flashback, the incorporation of *déjà vu* in the narrative suggests another way in which the narrative can be seen as an utterance. Furthermore, the use of foreshadowing in the narrative is also a manner in which it functions like an utterance, by predicting and thus responding to other sections of the story. One such instance of foreshadowing is found in the stories of Cavendish and Frobisher. Cavendish works as a publisher and is in debt. His conditions force him to turn to his brother for help. Cavendish does not share a good relationship with his brother. Unable to provide financial assistance, his brother promises him a place at a hotel where he could hide from his creditors. Cavendish reaches the hotel only to realise that it was a nursing home. On his first day at the nursing home, a woman enters his room and goes through his personal belongings which infuriates him. When he shouts at her, she threatens him that she will feed him soap powder. In the second story as well, Ayrs approaches Frobisher after he dreams of his music being played at a futuristic café where the waitresses had the same face and the food that was served there was soap, which is a reference to Sonmi-451's story.

***Cloud Atlas* and Metamodernism**

Cloud Atlas has a complicated relationship with postmodernism. It is a postmodern novel in some aspects and a metamodern work in others. Nick Bentley views metamodernism as a category under the rubric of postmodernism. Metamodernism is not a new term and has

been in use for quite some time. Robert van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen borrow from Raymond Williams's 'structure of feeling' to suggest that metamodernism is a "structure of feeling that emerges from and reacts to, the postmodern as much as it is a cultural logic that corresponds to today's stage of global capitalism" (Akker, *et al.* 26). While Williams's concept might be vague and therefore interpreted differently by critics, what is certain is that this structure of feeling is deeply embedded in the lives of individuals and therefore evades a summarization. The art of each period or generation expresses a dominant structure of feeling which might be different from the dominant structure of feeling in another period. For instance, fragmentation was a dominant structure of feeling following the First World War. Similarly, skepticism became associated with the postmodern world and van den Akker and Vermeulen suggest that metamodernism is the dominant structure of feeling in present times. Metamodernism, according to Mary Holland (Akker, *et al.* 33), is a modernism that is self-aware, i.e. metamodern literature is aware of it being literature which is brought about by the employment of postmodernist writing techniques. As opposed to postmodern writers who recycle canonical works or works of popular culture by means of parody or pastiche, writers of metamodern fiction upcycle literary styles, conventions and techniques of the past (Akker, *et al.* 33). They "pick out from the scrapheap of history those elements that allow them to resignify the present and reimagine a future" (Akker, *et al.* 32). Bentley suggests that such techniques might be common to both postmodern and metamodern works. and opines that *Cloud Atlas* is postmodern stylistically, whereas thematically and philosophically it is metamodern. Intertextuality and metafiction are the characteristic features of a postmodern novel. *Cloud Atlas* opens with the lines:

Beyond the Indian hamlet, upon a forlorn strand, I happened on a trail of recent footprints. (Mitchell 11)

This bears a striking resemblance to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, where Crusoe also mentions seeing footsteps for the first time. Furthermore, Defoe himself is mentioned in the journal. There are thematic parallels between the two. As Crusoe finds Man Friday, so does Ewing find Autua. Ewing rescues Autua and is rescued by him in return. Furthermore, Crusoe's reflections on God and Christianity are also seen in Ewing's journal. At one point Ewing also suggests that he approaches the journal as a Catholic approaches a confessor. One further sees that the literary style of the past is being parodied here (Bentley 732). The artificiality of the style is further accentuated by Mitchell's usage of archaic spellings. For instance, "Complete" is spelt as "compleat" and Catholic is spelt as "Catholick". In the second section of the novel, Frobisher upon reading the first half of Ewing's journal doubts the authenticity of it and suggests that it "seems too structured for a genuine diary, and its language doesn't ring quite true..." (Mitchell 71).

As metafiction, the narrative of *Cloud Atlas* calls attention to its own artificiality, which is more experimentally expressed in the first section. Ewing's journal entry ends abruptly, in mid-sentence. This sentence is then resumed in the second half of the journal, as Frobisher has found the second part. The first story is also the last story in the novel and one realizes that the journal was meant for Ewing's son, who not only publishes it but also supplies footnotes to it, thereby enhancing the fictionality of the narrative. Thus, one

reads a published work, i.e. the journal as one reads the larger published work, i.e. the novel. Furthermore, the novel, Bentley argues, abandons the "postmodern ethical skepticism" (Bentley 733), thus suggesting that the novel in this aspect is not entirely postmodern. Comparing the first section with the fifth one, he suggests that one could see throughout the narrative that "connections of solidarity are made between the marginalized and exploited across human history and projected into the future in order to suggest that as long as there are exploitative systems, there will be collective (and successful) resistance to them" (Bentley 735). In the second half of the first section, it is seen that Ewing is sick. After the entry on 30th December, the next entry is on the 12th of January. Goose has been poisoning him to the extent that he is not able to write in his journal. While Ewing realizes Goose's plotting too late, Autua comes to his rescue. He takes Ewing to a nunnery where he undergoes treatment. Ewing decides to dedicate himself to the Abolitionist cause as he owes his life to Autua, who was formerly a slave and who made several attempts to escape, succeeding finally with the help of Ewing. Ewing states that he does not wish to leave behind an evil world for his son to inhabit. He remarks:

In an individual, selfishness uglifies the soul; for the human species, selfishness is extinction. (Mitchell 507).

The narrative thus entails ethical implications. Each narrative entails one protagonist who recognizes some injustice occurring either to himself directly or to a community at large. Most, if not all, of the characters are purely good, trying to resist pure evil. Thus, each story is a parable where good is pitted against evil. Similarly, when the narrative jumps to the dystopian future, we see the oppressor-oppressed trope at play again. The clones, just like the slaves, are made to toil and are prohibited from having a consciousness of their own. They are also made to have access to only a fixed range of words and it is only when they ascend that they are able to expand their vocabulary. Thus, they are also subjugated linguistically. A group of rebels encourages these clones to explore their consciousness and to ascend, thereby putting up a fight against the "hyper-capitalist state." (Bentley 735). Metamodernism "oscillates between ...postmodern and pre-postmodern (and often modern) predilections: between irony and enthusiasm, between sarcasm and sincerity..." (Akker, *et al.* 33). In doing away with "postmodern recalcitrance" (Bentley 735), the novel tends towards the metamodern.

Conclusion

Man has been an indispensable part of literature. In each era, there emerges a novel interpretation of mankind at large within literature. Milan Kundera suggests that a novel entails an examination not of reality, but of existence. Existence does not mean that which has already happened but is rather a "realm of human possibilities" (Kundera 23). Existence entails the myriad possibilities of what man can become and what he is capable of. Novelists like David Mitchell probe these possibilities to show that man, in his various shades, is capable of resisting the forces that threaten the balance in the world and that there is hope for redemption as long as one believes in the goodness of mankind.

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