

## **Interconnective Narrative in David Mitchell's Cloud Atlas**

**By**

**Waleed Khalid Rzayyig**

Al-Maarif University College - English Department, Iraq

**Marwan Khaleel Yousif**

Al-Maarif University College - English Department, Iraq

**Mohanad Hazim Hakkoosh**

Al-Maarif University College - English Department, Iraq

Email: [mohanad.hazim@uoa.edu.iq](mailto:mohanad.hazim@uoa.edu.iq)

### **Abstract**

David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* is one of the most important novels that deals with the break from traditional narrative structure. It uses a literary technique called Embedding. This paper examines the narrative complexities and thematic depths in the novel while also explaining how embedding changes the way reading a text transforms its meaning. There are six interconnected stories in *Cloud Atlas* spanning centuries but connected by themes, motifs, and most importantly by in-universe intertextuality, rather than being a collection of short stories, the six stories in the novel are nested within one another. The relationship between them can be understood by understanding the competing structures and clashes of fact-fiction continuity. Mitchell involves the creation of history and human identity in storytelling. The novel is essentially about the interconnectivity of human existence across time and space. The novel is ingenious in its structure, profound with its ideas, and its language is masterful. The purpose of this paper is to explore these narrative hierarchies Mitchell creates.

**Key words:** Intertextuality, David Mitchell, Embedding, Structure.

### **Introduction**

*Cloud Atlas* by David Mitchell is a novel published in 2004, the novel amassed critical appraisal for its unconventional narrative structure and its interconnected storytelling, each story lies in a different genre and complicated thematic heft. This paper focuses on how the author uses narrative syncopation to tell the story, while putting different kinds of reader for each story, while also making a combination on how each reader engages in a text. The erratic nature of reading arguably mimics the fragmentation of a memory, highlighting how in the process reading of the novel is similar to remembering the past as an event while narrative structure continues to delay a coming future. When we look at the novel from this perspective, we discover that there is a process of archiving in progress. Considering Mitchell's use of intertextuality and intertextual allusions in his novel and how he mimics a wide spectrum of narrative modes and genres. When we look at these techniques along with the intricate structural recurrences of its characters in between the pages, it raises a thematic concern related to the interconnected nature of the novel, the mundane routine of human activity.

The Nietzschean concept of eternal recurrence is prevalent in literature, the idea that there is a cycle of infinite recurrence happening as matter and energy go to a transformation process, a wheel of time as in Hinduism and Buddhism. Is taken from the writings from 19th century German thinker and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche who had been known for his wild

theories on existence and mortality, and one of his famous writings on the subject of eternal recurrence was *The Gay Science*, which is a collection of his writings, Nietzsche said in his famous Aphorism "The Greatest Weight".

"What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!' (Westacott, 2020: para. 4)

Reportedly, Nietzsche said that the thought of eternal recurrence came to him suddenly in August 1881 when he was walking alongside a lake in Switzerland, before this oddly, the notion of eternal recurrence never been mentioned in his writings, but after that bit of fate, he continued writing on the subject, like in his next book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Nietzsche's philosophy is mainly concerned with questioning the notions of freedom, will, and the action needed to live.

### ***1.1. Narrative Embedding in Cloud Atlas:***

We can find Narrative embedding where one narrative is subordinated to another narrative, embedding here requires a text with multitude of narratives that, the embedded text cannot exist without the other, i.e. the embedding. However the exception to the rule is when there is a multiple persons narrating as a group, a text which has more than one narrator does not mean that there is one narrative, sometimes, the consideration of a single character as two narrators is useful, however, the difficulty lies in the delimitation where one narrative becomes two narratives with a single narrator. Since time is continuous rather than static, that can be considered problematic, instead of arguing for exact division, we can see the individual stories to be both sections of the whole story or a portion that can stand on its own as a narrative. As much as it is worthwhile to discuss the function and importance of embedding, it is also important to point out its limitations, as Paisley Livingston has suggested that the embedding relationship requires the embedded narrative to be "displayed". I.e. it is not enough that a narrative describes or refers to another, the second narrative must be present and observable in the text, here we find a broad meaning of embedding as Livingston puts it. Waldron, S. J. (2012).

Narrative levels concepts gives an incomplete picture to the narrative relationship, when we look at the six narrative levels of *Cloud Atlas*, all are supposed to represent the same fictional world, although different parts of it, and at different times, we can consider it to be one text with six different levels, but more accurately, it is a narrative with six different stories, the only different is from an ontological level. Moreover, whereas narrative levels include narrative subordination, ontological levels merge realities and worlds, the subordinated world here is fictional, the only subordination is as it relate to the real world because it doesn't have any independence existence, just what is imagined in the real world, each story on its own doesn't require any complicated terminology, it's at its simplest levels, its located in a subordinated world, there is a distinct both reality and fiction, but narrative embedding can muddy the water, if the embedded narrative is represented as fictional within the narrative, then we will have three worlds, the fictional world, the real world from the reader's point of view, and another world which is fictional which is also presented within the first fiction, here the complicated issue that fictional worlds and worlds so fictional that the readers see them as

fiction, the different worlds here can be seen as the the first and second ontological levels of the text.

### ***1.2 Intertextuality***

Literature is not exclusive to one nation, it is the amalgamation of the experiences of all nations, thus, there is a notion of inheritance or connection between the literary texts all over the world's literature. Kristeva defined that inheritance in her work "Word, Dialogue and Novel" as "Intertextuality" which is "a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another". (Kristeva, 1986:212). Intertextuality is something in a text that is shaped by another text, that can be a film, novel, or even a song. Intertextuality is something that you cannot escape, it is as old as storytelling, all languages reaches back and it is informed by how it was used in the past, intertextual references can point to genre conventions, they can point to the text's influences, or cultural and historical contexts, By this standard, any work of art that is influenced by another work is considered intertextuality. When we look at how the world is changing and the technological leaps happening all over it, it is easy to see the common interaction between the nations, like the merchants of old exchange spices and silk so is the exchanges between them can create a network of ideas that can revolutionise and shape the way our literature, art, and even science flourish. And all of it wouldn't be possible without the use of languages and more specifically our use of literary devices such as intertextuality. Cloud Atlas reveals six interconnected stories, each story is interrupted by the next story except the last one which finishes and then completes the fifth story and then on till the last one descently. Not only that but the complexion of the story extends to time as well. Each story is allocate to different time periods and a different genre which from a narrative point of view is expansive both thematic and in scope, thus, chronologically, the first story is the "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing", the titular narrator who crosses the Pacific ocean while writing a journal, the second narrative is "Letters from Zedelghem", a disowned composer who escapes to Belgium to work for an old celebrity and writes to his lover. Next we have "Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery", this thriller starts when a young reporter who wants to uncover an energetic conspiracy. This story lead to the fourth story which is entitled "The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish", a picaresque story of a eccentric old man who gets locked up in a nursery home, which gave way to the fifth story "An Orison of Sonmi-451" where a slave clone kept in servitude as a waitress in a dystopian future who is waiting for an execution order and having in interview. The final story is "Sloosha's Crossin' an' Evrythin' After", a post-apocalyptic story about a character named Zachry, a shepherd threatened by a cannibal tribe. The novel give the impression that we are meant to understand that we are reading the journey of one sou through time and space, five of the main six characters are reincarnated and one secondary character of the sixth story, and in the meanwhile repeating reiterating the same struggle for freedom from a bondage and confinement.

in Cloud Atlas, every main character tells the story read by the next character, but it is even more complicated when you realize every story is a fiction, half lives the first Luisa Rey mystery is unequivocally a work of fiction in the Cloud Atlas novel, letters from zedelghem shares a character from Half Lives and therefore is also fictional, in letters from zedelghem Frobisher remarks that the pacific Journals of Adam Ewing might be a forgery.

The ghastly ordeal of Timothy Cavendish is peppered with notes for the future director of the film adaptation. Sonmi herself admits that she embellished parts of the story for the sake of propaganda and Sloosha's Crossin' ends with Zachry's son dismissing his father's story as exaggeration, but despite their inaccuracies, they still build off and take inspiration from the text they consumed. Frobisher ponders the conviction of Ewing, Cavendish imagenes himself to be the protagonist of a thriller novel, and Zachry worships Soomi as a deity. This isn't as far-

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fetched as you may think if you consider how actual literature and media builds up itself, Ovid writes a story of Pyramus and Thisbe which is parodied centuries later by William Shakespeare in *midsummer night's dream*. Each character is drawing inspiration from media like Mitchell himself drew inspiration from the past genres of adventure, romance, thriller, and science-fiction. To quote french literary theorist Ronald Barthes:

“The writer can only imitate a gesture forever anterior, never original; his only power is to combine different kinds of writing; to oppose some by others, so as never to sustain himself by just one of them. Life can only imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, a lost, infinitely remote imitation”! (Barthes, 1967:45)

That quote is from Barthes' 1967 essay “the death of the author, but in this novel, the author is not dead, the author is the protagonist. Mitchell heavily implied that all the birthmark carriers are the same soul. When you look at the novel from this perspective you can find that you can distill all the characters to one soul, and that soul can be male and female, young and old, rich and poor, African, European, Asian, and all things in between, because this soul is transmigrating from realm to realm, all the way from Deva to Naraka, and this soul keeps running into himself, or rather he keeps getting to know himself, to the nature of his journey, he keeps leaving things behind, journal entries, letters, novels, films, and artifacts. And he keeps rediscovering what he left himself, even if his record keeping is not exactly good, but each time he finds himself, he builds off his own ideas, and makes new ones, so he may find them again in a state of eternal recurrence or Samsara as it is known in Buddhism, there is a moment in the book where Zachry looks up at the sky and says future speak “Souls cross ages like clouds cross skies, an' tho' a cloud's shape, nor hue, nor size dont stay the same, it is still a cloud and so is a soul, who can say where the cloud blowed from or who the soul'll be 'morrow? Only sonmi, the east, the west, an' the compass an' the atlas, yay, only the atlas o' clouds.”

#### ***1.4 Narrative structure***

With the long history of narrative development, classical or traditional structure, or as it is known for so long as ‘the aristotle's arc’, which has a structure where a sequence of events and actions that leads to a certain inevitable conclusion, the beginning, middle, climax, and conclusion, this structure has dominated the literary domain since the beginning, the traditional structure puts less emphasis on the sequence of events, on plot, and on strictly formal beginnings and endings, endured more than any other method. For modern readers, the traditional beginning, middle, and end may find its patterns obvious, but to the audience of ancient greece, they wouldn't find it familiar, its simple structure reflected

Robert Mitchel depended on the russian doll narrative technique to achieve the connected nature of his novel. Matrioshka is a literary device in which to examine narrative authority, the reliable and unreliability issues, even the circulation of knowledge in the novel, to combine the Matrioshka approach with Mitchel's overlapping modes of narration is widen, the various aspects of his narration: a not so reliable journal, a thriller, a recording from Sonmi-451, and a campfire story. Like i said before, the reliability of each reality is undermined by constant interpretation by both Mitchell and the protagonists. Mitchel puts his characters in the position where they have to question the reliability of the previous narrator. As many critics noted, the postmodernist writings depends greatly on the reader's attention to the discrepancies and gaps in the narrative, between the story and the awareness needed, i.e. the story as it is and the edited version of it that could be told, the edited version would include new information, new emphasis which would eventually result in a completely different story altogether. In the novel, Mitchell uses metalepsis and prolepsis to give way to transitions between the narratives,

the Russian doll structure gives him leeway to nest each story inside each other, he makes Cavendish read the story of Frobisher and Luisa, but then Sonmi-451 sees Cavendish's 'past' story in his 'future'. By exploiting these devices, Mitchell enables the reader to question narrative authority, reliability and unreliability, and most importantly, the circularity of knowledge through several historical realms.

In the fifth story in the novel, we have 'An Orison of Sonmi-451' which portrays a dystopian future lined with M.H. Abrams' views, "omniscient tendencies of our present social, political, and technological worlds are projected into"<sup>1</sup>. The Papa song corp diner on the outside is just another realistic diner where all the food tastes the same, but even the waitresses are just clones which collide with the view of heterogeneity that corporations fabricate everything to fit the specific standards for the general consumers.

## **Russian Doll as a narrative device**

Due to the multilayered structure of *Cloud Atlas*, the experience of unraveling the nested narratives of the novel, is like stumbling unaware into the exciting experience of opening Russian dolls a.k.a. matryoshka dolls. The Russian doll could be taken as an analogy to the structure of the book. Although, this structure could be complicated, however it is thrilling to break the stories apart and the reassuring confidence that ultimately the fragmented parts will fit perfectly makes up for the complicity of the structure. The structure of the book offers hints that can enhance the overall appreciation of the novel. Thus As Jonathan Boulter uprightly states that "any consideration of *Cloud Atlas* must begin with the novel's structure" (130). The Novel's structure resists the conventional linear process of reading, while relying on a more circular reading by collecting the broken fragments of the stories. This technique of narration mirrors the fragmented nature of time in the book, a point stressed extensively by Mitchell throughout the sudden shifts in time that occur in the course of action.

One way to apprehend the narrative structure as well as the conception of time in *Cloud Atlas* is through the analogy of the Russian Doll. As a matter of fact the Russian doll appears visibly in two distinct instances in the book, by mentioning it Mitchell alludes to the structure of the novel. Firstly, it appears in the name of the musical composition of Vyvyan Ayrs, the English music composer *Matryoshka Doll Variations*. Secondly, the image of the Russian Doll clearly appears in the carefully crafted theory of time in the Luisa Rey-chapter as follows:

"One model of time: an infinite matryoshka doll of painted moments, each "shell" (the present) encased inside a nest of "shells" (previous presents) I call the actual past but which we perceive as the virtual past. The doll of "now" likewise encases a nest of presents yet to be, which I call the actual future but which we perceive as the virtual future." (Mitchell 2004, 409)

In the previous quotation, Isaac Sachs puts forward a theory of time which he establishes on the dichotomy between actual versus virtual time while emphasizing the vital role of memories in shaping people's past and thereby their future. There is a remarkable similarity between Sachs' views on time and more specifically future, and those of the famous French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Peculiarly, in his book *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida makes a distinction between the future and "l'avenir" which means (to come). Future according to Derrida is predictable, whereas "l'avenir" or (the other) is one that comes all of sudden

without the ability to predict its arrival and when this (other) arrives, it changes everything. “l’avenir” is the real future according to Derrida. (1982, 21)

In this vein, the structure of the Russian doll in this novel proposes to reach to the “real future”. The whole narrative in which the predicated future is interrupted suddenly by unexpected breaks which are represented by the several instances in the novel where a story is suddenly interrupted until finally the reader has to reach to “real future” by collecting the broken pieces of the stories.

Moreover, the Russian doll image suggests a number of similar things contained in one another. In this case the book *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing* can be considered the exterior narrative as it opens and closes the novel. Moving on to open the first doll (narrative) we have the Letters from Zedelghem, until we reach to the central doll Sloosha’s Crossin’, which is the only narrative that doesn’t contain another one. This is built upon the model or time of Sachs discussed earlier, according to his model the present is encased in previous presents whereas it encases the future presents.

## Conclusion

The current study offers a new reading to David Mitchel’s novel *Cloud Atlas* by exploring the unique narrative techniques utilized by the writer which adds an extraordinary layers of meaning and a new appreciation to the novel. The study concludes that David Mitchel utilized Narrative embedding in *Cloud Atlas* to bend the concepts of time, space, and even genre to form a puzzling unity. The six stories in the novel with its sudden breakages are in fact just one facet of a single all-encompassing narrative which represents the Nietzschean concept of eternal recurrence mentioned earlier in the study. Thereby, the study suggests that Mitchel presents to us the struggle for freedom of a single reincarnated soul over the span of many years.

Moreover, The study proposes the Russian Doll analogy to understand the structural complexity of the novel. By unraveling the stories one after the other and collecting the broken pieces of stories which resembles the process of opening a Russian Doll and the certainty that all the pieces will fit perfectly.

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