

Knowledge, Belief, Reality, Truth and Cloud Atlas

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2009-1-93-019
MA in English

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December 2010

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Acknowledgement

I believe this thesis would not have been possible if not for the Almighty Allah's blessings that He graciously bestowed upon me. I would like to thank Dr. Fakrul Alam, who encouraged me to work on this topic and for all his help, support, guidance and advice throughout the thesis. I am grateful to Shafqat Choudhuri for introducing me to *Cloud Atlas* which has now become one of my favorite novels.

I am also grateful to all my friends and family members for believing in me and for their love and support and prayers. I do not think that I would be the person I am today if it not were for all their prayers. I owe everyone my deepest gratitude.

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Introduction

Cloud Atlas by David Mitchell is a complex novel narrating six different stories of six different characters living in different times in different parts of the globe. What makes the novel even more dizzyingly interesting is its matryoshka doll like structure, its varied narrative style and its wide-ranging language use from different cultures and worlds. Once the first story ends abruptly, one turns the page to get sucked into the next story but remains unquestionably a bit puzzled as to how and why the previous story had stopped in the middle so unexpectedly. This happens with each story until one reaches the 6th story which is complete. After the sixth story, the remaining halves of the first five stories are continued but in reverse order with the second half of the first story coming at the very end.

So what is the connection between all these stories? Is there any bond between the central characters of each individual story? Well, on the surface there is none evident except for two things: firstly the comet-shaped birth mark that each protagonist mysteriously has and secondly the way each story is embedded in the next, e.g. a diary, or letters, or film, etc. However, when reading each individual story, we see that there are themes that connect them in a very complex

manner. Some of the themes dealt with are history, enslavement, science-fiction, time, reality and the unreal and power. Also, all six stories represent man's quest for truth, knowledge and ultimately for freedom.

W.R. Greer writes in his review of the novel,

The six stories in *Cloud Atlas* all explore similar themes, but each is presented in a different way through vastly different perspectives. Each of the six protagonists lives in a dystopian world where brutality, enslavement, and violence threaten their well-being. If survival or redemption is to be found, it can only be achieved by reaching out to someone else. By telling each of their stories in some sort of recorded format, David Mitchell explores the idea that the written or recorded word is an essential part of human survival. It is this sharing of stories and personal experiences that bind mankind together across generations and time that provides hope that similar challenges against the evils of the world can be overcome (Greer).

"The vastly different perspectives" of similar themes that Greer speaks of and the variations in perception of survival and redemption that occur are due to individual differences. They also occur because of differences in time and culture, religion and race. As Greer points out, Mitchell tries to show how the recording of stories is fundamental to the survival of our species. This idea of recording for survival is not new in literature, and there are countless accounts of a poet's attempt to be immortal through his poems but what is new is how Mitchell tries to show us how we perceive history and link ourselves to past events and how our judgments are founded upon what we believe is true about the past.

Each story being recorded differently and being discovered by a new means makes the novel even more fascinating. In my paper I want to discuss how the novel deals with truth and

reality, what are the factors that influence our perception of the real, our understanding of history and how Mitchell artistically plays with what is true and what is real and how they are interrogated individually in every story throughout the novel. As with all novels, this one is a work of fiction where the author tries to connect the lives inside the pages to real lives and where we come across different levels of reality. What is most intriguing is to see how Mitchell depicts the unchanging nature of man and presents him over centuries snatching from the recorded past to the unseen future, one which we can only imagine. Mitchell shows how man has always attempted to gain power and rule over others for satisfying his greed, for control, or money and how it has always ended negatively for him, usually in destruction. The 6th story of the novel is set in an apocalyptic future, where we find that the world has been destroyed gradually over time due to man's own actions, and where only a few tribes survived to lead the life of the early man. Hayes Patrick writes about Mitchell in his article, "the postgraduate author of a dissertation entitled 'Levels of Reality in the Postmodern Novel', who has been driven to do something other than cynically gaze into the void of relativism" (Culture Wars).

Despite our knowledge that the six stories are all written by the same author, the identity of the real author is brought into question as Mitchell presents all sorts of characters, each with a different history and culture. It is up to the readers to determine who the narrators of the stories are and how to interpret them. According to Roland Barthes, "The birth of the author must be at the cost of the death of the author" (Barthes 150). Readers thus must analyze the novel without regard to the author.

Cloud Atlas – The Novel

Each of the characters of Cloud Atlas, their inner and outer characteristics, their stories, their circumstances and narrations will be examined closely over here. It is a very complex novel and there is no simple and straightforward way of analyzing it, as there are a lot of intertextual references and puzzles put forward for readers at every step. An attempt will be made here not to get carried away from the central storyline though sometimes this may not be possible for the sake of a better understanding of the novel.

It must be made clear that it is not possible to reach any one interpretation for this novel. It is filled with different symbols and meanings, signs and languages, references and intertextualities woven out of different times and backgrounds. Barthes argues, “Once the Author is gone, the claim to ‘*decipher*’ a text becomes quite useless. To give an Author to a text is to impose upon the text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing” (Barthes). And as we understand from Derrida, there can be no final signification as meaning is continually changing. Chris Lang points out, “The work of Derrida and others had cast grave doubt upon the classic notions of truth, reality, meaning and knowledge, all of which could be

exposed as resting on a naively representational theory of language. If meaning, the signified, was a passing product of words or signifiers, always shifting and unstable, part-present and part absent, how could there be any determinate truth or meaning at all?" (Lang).

On the back cover of the novel, the author of *Cloud Atlas* is described as a "postmodern visionary". John Walsh writes in *The Tribune* about Mitchell that, "He has pushed, to the furthest corner of the envelope, the principles of post-modernism — its smorgasbord of styles, its death-of-the-author anonymity — without, amazingly, putting off readers" (Walsh)." We do not have to go too deep in the novel to understand why it is being termed as "postmodern". Split into six different stories, the novel does not have a central plot. Rather, it is fragmented; its stories give no signs of any specific path; everything happens as if by chance. The novel mocks the idea of fixed genres and interweaves all sorts of genres, making it difficult to outline any boundaries. There is no one meaning to be understood, no one interpretation, but rather multiple interpretations are possible. It is also important to understand the concept of "deconstruction" when talking of postmodernism, as "deconstruction" is regarded as an aspect of the postmodern movement.

The French philosopher, Jaques Derrida first introduced the notion of "deconstruction". David Lodge summarizes Derrida's theory thus, "deconstructive criticism aims to show that any text inevitably undermines its own claim to have a determinate meaning, and licenses the reader to produce his own meanings out of it by an activity of semantic "freeplay" (Lodge). That is, because there can be no fixed meaning to signifiers, the meaning of a text cannot be constant. Derrida coined the term "differance" meaning both "difference" and "deferral" (or temporalizing). Derrida claims that "differance" denotes both "the note of primordial difference but also the temporalizing detour of deferring (Derrida 288)". Deconstruction is a key element to

understanding Mitchell's novel as through it we understand that there can be no fixed meaning. Signifiers resist and defer fixed meanings and float as unfixable signs. Like Derrida, Linda Hutcheon too claims that language cannot be seen as not self-signifying anymore.

Although language is a crucial element of all novels, the combination of languages in *Cloud Atlas* (each story having its own unique style and vocabulary) creates for readers unique worlds. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism* Linda Hutcheon makes it clear that the notion of language being a "self-sufficient signifying system" does not exist anymore. Rather she feels that language "yields meaning by context and by who is speaking stressing the time, place and reason of speaking" (Postcolonialities). The six worlds that make up "Cloud Atlas" will be analyzed individually as well as in connection with each other to understand the novel. Not only will the different cultures, languages, settings of time and place be looked at closely, but the way these factors affect notions of reality and belief and truth and how these are linked to our knowledge and perception of history will also be examined.

The first story of the novel, "The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing", is presented as journal entries by the story's protagonist, Ewing, an American notary who is crossing the Pacific, "to locate the Australian beneficiary of a will executed in California." He records his experiences in the Chatham Islands and presents the history of the Moriori and Maori tribes (Mitchell 10). Through the entries in his journal, we read how Ewing comes to the realization that "As many truths as men. Occasionally, I glimpse a truer Truth, hiding in imperfect simulacrums of itself, but as I approach, it bestirs itself & moves deeper into the thorny swamp of dissent (Mitchell 17)".

On his way back home to his wife and son, Ewing is treated by Doctor Henry Goose who gives him the news that his "Ailment is a parasite" (Mitchell 35). We do not know for sure the

entire truth except for what is recorded in the journal. Was there really a parasite inside Ewing's brain or is it an explanation invented by the doctor for his migraines and dizziness to get money out of him? Or is the parasite actually the thought inside Ewing's head of a stowaway Indian hiding in his cabin on the ship? The journal breaks off suddenly and readers move on to the second story, "Letters from Zedelghem" which starts in the 1930s. Readers read the letters of Robert Frobisher to "a louche bisexual Cambridge musical student", his friend from Belgium, where he attempts to become the amanuensis of a British composer (Walsh).

Frobisher writes to his friend about how he came across half of Ewing's journal in a library at Chateau Zedelghem. He requests him to track down a complete copy of it as "A half-read book is a half-finished love affair" (Mitchell 64). Frobisher questions the authenticity of the journal, published by Ewing's son, saying, "Something shifty about the journal's authenticity – seems too structured for a genuine diary, and its language doesn't ring quite true – but who would bother forging such a journal and why?" (Mitchell 64).

James Wood writes in *The New Yorker*, "The revelation that, say, Adam Ewing's journal might have been fabricated by his son... actually strengthens the autonomous reality of these fictions" (Woods). He notes that, "the exposure of fiction's fictionality only buttresses its reality" (ibid). We realize that even though the story of Adam Ewing is fiction, yet its truth coincides with the truths of this world. Ewing brings out these truths through his reflection in his entries.

For example, Ewing writes "Peace, though beloved of our Lord, is a cardinal virtue only if your neighbors share your conscience" (Mitchell 16). At the end of the journal, Ewing writes, "My recent adventures have made me quite the philosopher," (Mitchell 507). He goes on to philosophize on "history" and "outcome" and "vicious acts" and "virtuous acts" and "beliefs". The voice of the narrator tries to give a warning to readers about the harsh reality the world will

have to face if we don't confront those who try to dominate and rule over others. We can assume that he predicts with certainty, both for the book as well as for the world that, "...a purely predatory world *shall* consume itself...selfishness uglifies the soul; for the human species, selfishness is extinction" (Mitchell 508).

Ewing learnt about the history of the Maori and Moriori tribes of the islands. His account is based on history, but does it actually represent the truth? No. It is a history that is altered and many might argue, distorted. But then no history can be considered to be completely accurate and objective.

Ewing saw greed for power in the people around him: the desire in the white man to rule over Maoris and in the Maoris to rule over Morioris. He saw how the Morioris struggle to be free and he notes how this lead to the destruction of races. He wishes to change things and stand up "because I owe my life to a self-free slave & because I must begin somewhere"(ibid). So is it a totally unreal world that is described to us? This depiction of the character deciding to do something, wanting to make a difference is also a true characteristic of man.

Man is symbolized as having opposing natures. One makes him the oppressor; a tyrant wanting to rule, while the other makes him the oppressed, the slave wanting to be free.

"If we *believe* that humanity may transcend tooth and claw, if we *believe* that divers races & creeds can share this world as peaceably as the orphans share their candlenut tree, if we *believe* leaders must be just, violence muzzled, power accountable & the riches of the earth & its Oceans shared equitably, such a world will come to pass. I am not deceived. It is the hardest of worlds to make real" (ibid).

The story of Robert Frobisher is learnt through his letters to his friend. Readers discover from his letters that he is an ex-music student, kicked out by his father (Mitchell 74) and

penniless. His early letters also reveal that he is not a completely honest man and does not hesitate to consort to lies and falsehood when the situation demands. For example, he tricks the policeman in Belgium into letting him borrow a bicycle by telling how he is “Belgium’s most famous adopted son in the service of European music” (Mitchell 48). In Frobisher’s conscience, “Implausible truth can serve better than plausible fiction,” (Mitchell 49).

Frobisher is the sort of man who takes every opportunity he gets and does not mind resorting to falsehood and twisting history and facts, for his benefit. He tells his friend Sixsmith that when inquired about background he “Answered truthfully, though I veiled my expulsion from Caius behind an obscure malady” (Mitchell 51). And so the readers read his amusing tales of deceiving and manipulating others for his own gain at every step of the way. Frobisher confesses to Sixsmith, “I’ve manipulated people for advancement, lust, or loans, but never for the roof over my head” (Mitchell 57).

We are thus taken into a world which we know to be unreal but where the real world is reflected. Moreover, Mitchell also confuses and plays with readers who cannot determine how truthful Frobisher’s story is from his letters. Readers cannot be sure if Frobisher is in fact the composer he claims to be in his letter: “more than a few of its best ideas are mine” (Mitchell 65). There is no one to say he is not. Is he really an original composer, or is he just stealing from Ayrs’ compositions like he was doing with his books? Frobisher’s character not only shows someone who manipulates others when in need, but also one who tries to take advantage of others and creates his own false world which he also sometimes feels is true.

In “Letters from Zedelghem” we also read about Vyvyan Ayrs’ wife who has become Frobisher’s lover. However, she does not show any guilt for cheating upon her husband. Frobisher writes, “she is selective about her occasional affairs but unapologetic about her right to

conduct same. She insisted that she still loves Ayrs. I grunted, dubiously. That love loves fidelity, she riposted, is a myth woven by men from their insecurities” (Mitchell 69).

Frobisher lies to Ayrs when he asks him if Jocasta “ever made advances” (80). He thinks he is the one who has power and control over Ayrs because of his wife. He also assumes that he has control over Ayrs because Ayrs needs him and will not be able to compose without him. However, in the second half of “Letters from Zedelghem” we discover that Ayrs knows that Frobisher is “disinherited, gambling, bankrupt” and threatens to slander his reputation by telling everyone that the “scoundrel named Robert Frobisher forced himself upon purblind Vyvyan Ayrs’s wife,” (Mitchell 456). The world Frobisher wove for himself suddenly seem unreal. He imagines that Eva, Vyvyan’s daughter has fallen in love with him. But Alas! Reality catches up with him. He is caught trying to steal Vyvyan’s books by the same policeman from whom he had borrowed the bicycle. Frobisher’s world falls apart, and yet he tells Sixsmith, “Don’t let ‘em say I killed myself for love, Sixsmith, that would be too ridiculous” (Mitchell 470). And yet, he has a gun with him that he refers to as “Luger” in his last letter. Once again readers are not sure what to believe. Had he not been in love with Eva?

Before he finishes his letter, he writes rather poetically, about how history repeats itself and how his story will be repeated. He says, “We do not stay dead long...ten years later I’ll be back in this same room, holding this same gun, composing this same letter, my resolution as perfect as my many-headed sextet” (Mitchell 471). Turning the page, readers are transported to the world of Rufus Sixsmith, Frobisher’s friend.

“Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery” is the story of a journalist who investigates the cause of death of an eminent British scientist, Rufus Sixsmith. Frobisher wrote his letters to Sixsmith, and readers assume from the letters that they are both lovers. As Frobisher mentions in

his last letter to Sixsmith, “we both know in our hearts who is the sole love of my short, bright life” (Mitchell 470).

“Half Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery” takes the form of a typical detective story. Luisa, a columnist, tries to investigate the murder of a scientist and uncover the deception at the nuclear power plant where he works. A typical detective story, it has Luisa luckily falling upon clues and surviving attacks and finally victoriously uncovering and revealing the hidden scheme of the power plant to the world, thus saving the day for all. However, it is not until we get to the next story of Timothy Cavendish that we realize that “Half Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery” is a script for a movie. This changes the perception of the readers once again. If it is a script for a movie, then Sixsmith is also a fictional character in the script. And if he is not real, who is Robert Frobisher writing to?

We find another idea of truth in Luisa Rey’s story, when Joe Napier says, “I lied, yes, but that doesn’t make me a liar. Lying’s wrong, but when the world spins backwards, a small wrong may be a big right” (Mitchell 400). For Joe Napier this is the truth about life even though it doesn’t make sense. And Mitchell, by letting Napier’s voice speak, brings out a different reality.

Mitchell connects the stories in more ways than one, and does not allow readers to interpret any significant meanings from them. For example, Frobisher writes in his last letter about history repeating itself, “Rome’ll decline and fall again, Cortes’ll lay Tenochtitlan to waste again, and later, Ewing will sail again” (Mitchell 471). Many years later, Luisa comes across the *Prophetess* in which Ewing sailed. “The nineteenth century ship is indeed restored beautifully... Luisa is distracted by a strange gravity that makes her pause for a moment and look at its rigging, listen to its wooden boards creaking...Luisa’s birthmark throbs. She grasps for the ends of this elastic moment, but they disappear into the past and the future” (Mitchell 430).

Here readers are left to come to their own conclusions. Does Luisa have any connection with Adam Ewing? She did not read Ewing's journal but only knew of Frobisher's letters. So is there any significance? Mitchell is again shifting the thoughts of readers to a different interpretation. Ewing does not have the birthmark that Luisa has, and Frobisher had. Woodring interprets this thus: "The use of the phrase "elastic moment" only serves to reinforce the idea of the fluidity of time and perception, and the idea that the "ends" disappear "into the past and the "future" is another method of shifting our perspective" (Woodring).

Also in "Half Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery" readers find Luisa saying, "It's a small world. It keeps recrossing itself" (Mitchell 418). This is one of the aspects of the novel where Mitchell links fiction with reality. Mitchell does not emphasize the significance of these associations between the six stories, but lets them hang loosely, just as in real life there are coincidences and matters that recur over time in history.

However, I feel that these coincidences may be interpreted in another way. Mitchell displays these shifting worlds, which we know to be fictional, and raises doubt about the reality of the stories within the fictional worlds, so that we as readers perceive and understand the reality of what happened in the past differently, based on our knowledge and experience and our present circumstances. Each story is interpreted in the next one uniquely, and there is always more than one interpretation. Mitchell does not give any definite meaning or want readers to get to any definite conclusions because reality does not allow it. Reality carries the unreal with it and Mitchell is trying to reflect just that insight through his stories.

Another interesting observation on the real and the unreal is made when we read Isaac Sachs' diary. He is another character in "Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery" who talks about how history changes what is real and what we perceive to be real. He writes about the

sinking of the Titanic and mentions how “*the disaster as it actually occurred descends into obscurity as its eyewitnesses die off, documents perish... Yet a virtual sinking of the Titanic, created from reworked memoirs, papers, hearsay, fiction – in short, belief – grows ever “truer”*” (Mitchell 392). Readers realize that what is written by Isaac Sachs in his diary is true for the world, for all times. The “actual” events become more difficult to grasp, because “virtual” events are embedded through various means. Sachs also notes that, “*He who pays the historian calls the tune*” (Mitchell 393). This he points out because he realizes that it is only those with power and wealth who control the truth. So whoever can pay the historian, will be able to control history.

On the same note of power, but in rather different circumstances we read Timothy Cavendish’s view in the next story “The Deathly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish”, “unlimited power in the hands of limited people always leads to cruelty “(Mitchell 180). Cavendish describes himself as an “experienced editor”. He is an old and proud man with a very sarcastic sense of humor who is also very disapproving. His story takes readers into the life of an editor in the 21st century who suffers from humiliation after being attacked by three girls, but who is full of pride. He is at the peak of his career after one of his books became a best-seller. However, when he has to flee some gangsters, he ends up in a nursing home.

Cavendish is unaware that it is a nursing home on the first night. He is glad to have gotten rid off the gangsters feels safe in it. He thinks, “In the morning life would begin afresh, afresh, afresh. This time round I would do everything right” (Mitchell 173). This sign of redemption seen in Cavendish is human nature, for only after difficult times does one realize what one has to be grateful for. For Cavendish, his life at Aurora House is a struggle against the powers of an institution trying to control him. He wants his freedom and fights to escape, unlike some of the others there who give up. Readers are amused as they turn the pages about his

experiences at the nursing home and read his sarcastic thoughts. He says “Prisoner resistance merely justifies an even fiercer imprisonment in the minds of the prisoners” and plans to fight for his rights, “rights must be horse-traded and accrued with cunning” (Mitchell 181).

Even in this story, we find the previous story. Cavendish finds “Half Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery” as a manuscript written by someone named Hilary V. Hush. Readers again have to reset their thoughts as they realize that the first half of the mystery story they read a few pages back was a script. They wonder what the connection is and where it leads. Also, readers’ thoughts are again transported back to Luisa Rey when Cavendish mentions that he too has a birthmark below his left armpit described by his lover as “Timbo’s Turd” (Mitchell 357). Despite these links, readers cannot find any meaning in them. Another interesting point that is realized by the readers by now is that, the protagonist in each story finds only half of the previous story, and then only later after the sixth story do the protagonists as well as readers find out what had happened.

After his escape from Aurora House and all his troubles having been solved, Cavendish feels a sense of salvation in his newly found freedom. He says, “Middle age is flown, but it is attitude, not years, that condemns one to the ranks of the Undead [old people at nursing homes], or else proffers salvation” (Mitchell 387). Turning the page from Cavendish’s resolved ordeal readers are transported into the future into a world where clones have become an ordinary part of human life.

In the fifth story “An Orison of Sonmi-451” in *Cloud Atlas*, the language is very imaginatively and artistically articulated to give the feel of an actual clone speaking in a world that has advanced rather rapidly. The clone speaks as if in a time not very far away, and through various clues one assumes it to be Korea. The language created for this story, the voice and the

distinctive vocabulary introduced in it plays a major role in creating the image of a dystopian world. Readers learn of this world through an interview with a clone, who had supposedly risen and become more human-like in form than the rest of the clones. While other clones eat soap, and follow fixed routines day in and day out, and have no vocabulary outside their fixed set. Sonmi-451 ascends and becomes more human than the rest. She works at Papa Song's, a dinery, and manages to stop eating the soap each night, allowing her to grasp more from the humans who come to eat there.

As we read on, we read the thoughts of a clone, who speaks about humans. Observing the human world around Sonmi-451, she tells her interviewer (the Archivist) that the idea that fabricants [clones] do not have personalities is a “fallacy propagated for the comfort of the purebloods” [humans] because “to enslave an individual troubles your consciences” (Mitchell 187). Humans would not feel any prickings in their conscience if they thought that fabricants are without personalities, making them less than human. However, Sonmi-451, claims that “Corporacy is built on slavery, whether or not the word is sanctioned” (ibid).

In this story, once again the subject of power arises, with the [purebloods] humans having control and power over the fabricants [clones]. Sonmi-451 observes that, “fabricants cannot dictate even the terms of their own death” (Mitchell 214). A story filled with similarities to the modern world and the ways of men in it, it visualizes what a near future would possibly look like. It shows the nature of man to be greedy for power and control and depicts how man's actions are what bring about destructive consequences. And Sonmi-451 explains that purebloods will not blame themselves, “not until they are made to” (Mitchell 222).

How is the story of Sonmi-451 linked to the other stories? We once again read of the birthmark in her interview,

“I was frightened of incriminating myself, but only my birthmark provoked any passing comment.

Your birthmark? I didn't know fabricants have birthmarks.

We do not, so mine always caused me embarrassment in the steamer. Ma-Leu-Da-108 called it ‘Sonmi-451’s stain.’

Would you show it on my orison, just as a curio?

If you wish. Here, between my collarbone and shoulder blade.

Xtraordinary. It looks like a comet, don't you think?

Hae-Joo made exactly the same remark, curiously. (Mitchell 198)

And just like the birthmark, once again we find that the previous story is embedded in the current one, this time in the form of a movie that Sonmi-451 comes across and watches on a *sony*, i.e. tv. Not only so, readers also find out that just like they had to adjust their perception of truth previously, they have to do so once again, as the entire story of Sonmi-451 of revolutionizing the lives of clones was all just a record “to make every last pureblood in Nea Sea Copros mistrustful of every last fabricant (Mitchell 348).

If “An Orison of Sonmi-451” visualizes for readers a world in the near future, then this story is one that would transport readers to the distant future where the world is in a post apocalyptic stage. One has to understand the vocabulary that has been formulated to resemble the language of man gone forward in time but backward in development and civilization. Zachry, the protagonist in “Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After”, reflects: “Civ’lize needs time, an’ if we

let the clock die, time 'll die too, an' then how can we bring back the Civ'lize Days as it was b'fore the Fall" (Mitchell 247)? The intriguing part of it all is how this sixth story depicts how the world will consequently face its inevitable destruction, the root cause of which will be man's greed for power.

In "Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After", readers read about a world that seems to be at a very primitive stage. They read of a civilization that seems to have started not long ago, with beliefs and practices not based on any proof. Zachry the narrator of this story tells about his life on "Big Island", presumably Hawaii, after the Fall (referring to some major event of their past). When Zachry visits the *Icon 'ry* (a term used for a place where they keep records of all the dead people) with his father, he notices that the people dead outnumbered the people living. He says, "the gone-lives outnumber the now-lives like leaves outnumber trees" (Mitchell 245). The Valleysman refers to Zachry's tribe, and they believe in a God and pray to it. The name of the God is Sonmi (interesting to note that Sonmi is a female), and readers again try to adjust their perception as to how the name of the clone from the previous story has become a God for people in this one. Readers try to make connections which are not clear and they have to make assumptions from what is given.

We realize that the knowledge of the Valleysman is very limited and that something must have happened in their past. They don't know or understand much about the world outside their own Big Island. A ship comes to their island each year, from another island called Prescience I, Valleysman notice many differences that they had with the Prescients. They were of a different race, with different skin tones, customs, manners of speaking, and were unlike any of the other tribes that Zachry and his people came across. The Prescients came to Big I to barter things with the Valleysmen. It is understood that they were more advanced than Zachry's people as they

came to get fruits, vegetables and meat in exchange for ironware. However, the Prescients refused to give the Valleysmen any weapons.

When Zachry is sixteen, he narrates to his grandchildren how a Prescient named Meronym had come to live with them, and how he was full of doubt and skeptic about her true motives, suspecting she might be a spy. Meronym had come to observe the lives of the Valleysmen more closely, and used to draw sketches and record her observations. She gives medicine to Zachry to cure his sister, but she doesn't promise him that she will live. She tells Zachry how Old Georgie is not true for her, but that it could be true for him and the rest of the Valleysmen.

Just as each of the previous stories are recorded and embedded in the subsequent one, so is the Orison of Sonmi-451 recorded in Zachry's story. Meronym tells Zachry the truth about the God he and his Valleysmen believe in and pray to, "Sonmi was killed by Old -Un chiefs what feared her, but b'fore she died she spoke to an orison 'bout her acts'n'deedin's. I'd got her mem'ry in my orison 'cos I was studyin' her brief life, to und'stand you Valleysmen better" (Mitchell 277). Here readers find that the belief of Zachry and his people has been shaken, because of this new revelation about Sonmi that they had no knowledge of in their past. Zachry's awareness of the truth now changes his perception about the world and Sonmi and his people..

Meronym carries an *orison* with her and shows it everything that they discovered in the buildings on top of the mountain. The buildings had inside them remnants of a lost civilization, of which Meronym knew more than Zachry. She describes the Orison to Zachry thus:

"An Orison is a brain an' a window an' it's a mem'ry. Its brain lets you do things like unlock observ'tree doors what you jus' seen. Its window lets you speak to other

orisons in the far-far. Its mem'ry lets you see what orisons in the past seen 'n' heard, an' keep what my orison sees 'n' hears safe from f'getting'' (Mitchell 276).

Readers are once again confronted with the birthmark that appears in previous stories, this time on the shoulder blade of Meronym. However, unlike the other stories, this one is complete. But just like Mitchell casts doubt upon the rest of them, he does so here as well, bringing in Zachry's son at the end who knocks away most of his father's tale as "musey duck fartin'" (Mitchell 309). And the readers are once again doubtful of their understanding as now with this observation by Zachry's son, they cannot truly trust everything Zachry had narrated.

In *Cloud Atlas*, we find that the subject of knowledge, leading to an understanding of truth, freedom and power that in turn lead to perceptions of reality and the unreal and history are dealt with in a number of ways. Being a novel, it is fictional, and yet in each of the six stories, readers find characters struggling to understand the world from their perspectives. Mitchell toys with various ideas and beliefs and makes readers question the reality of this world that they have come to believe and life in general.

What we know to be the story of the world and of our lives may not be so; it all depends on what we believe to be true. And how do we know what is true? And what really happened in the past? It is only through events recorded in history and tales told by those who participated in them that we know the truth, but even these assumptions are questioned by Mitchell. For how can we retrieve the past? And how do we understand what the present is? In "The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish", the titular character finds it difficult to change what is already said or written: "You can't go changing what you've already set down, not without botching things up even more" (146).

Catherine Belsey says in "Realism in Postmodern Literature",

“The postmodern novel often subverts and undermines the traditional pecking order of discourses. Indeed it appears that instead of smoothing over contradictions, it fills the air with uncertainty...In their introduction of a multiplicity of discourses, there is no single privileged discourse which contains and places all the others”(Cutajar).

In *Cloud Atlas* there is no one voice which prevails over the others, or has more authority than the others. The power lies in separate voices. And we also find that the medium of discourse in each story is unique. Adam Ewing’s story is in the form of a journal, Frobisher’s letters, and Luisa Rey’s a manuscript and Zachry’s a story narrated by a grandfather to his children and probably great grandchildren. And each voice, each narrative is distinctive because they are all characteristic of distinctive times and cultures.

Belsey also says that in postmodern literature, there is an “unreliable narrator” and “multiple discourses” (ibid). According to her,

“The author thus becomes the “product or effect of the text” and is constructed by readers who are “authors” working through linguistic, artistic and cultural conventions ... Consequently, authorial authority is displaced and instead becomes a role to be inferred by the reader reading the text. The reader is not presented to the one, unified, coherent and absolute truth but must now take on the role of determining the plurality of meaning in the text” (ibid).

We as readers become the “authorial authority” that Belsey speaks of, as we turn the pages of the novel and analyze the languages and the cultures and are presented with more than one interpretation of the text.

On reading and looking at history books closely, we realize that our knowledge of history is limited to what we read in them and what we tend to perceive about them. Events happen and

they are recorded through some means or the other. However, the person narrating the history will probably narrate in terms different than someone who has actually been a part of that history. It is interesting that we consider what we read to be the truth in its entirety. We often overlook the possibility of omissions, exaggerations, and even the limits of objectivity. As Chris Lang remarks, “So the question becomes, not whether language holds power, but who will control language” (*A Brief History*). And so it is the power of the historian, the theorist, the philosopher, the writer, the speaker and the narrator that one depends for understanding the reality of things. As Jane Tompkins puts it, “When discourse is responsible for reality and [is] not merely a reflection of it, then whose discourse prevails makes all the difference” (*A Brief History*).

For example, Adam Ewing records his experiences and thoughts in a diary. We do not know the other end of the story: the story as seen by the other characters. Does Ewing really have an illness? We are put in doubt when Robert Frobisher writes to his friend doubting the genuineness of the diary, as well as hinting that Dr. Henry may be just making up an illness for Ewing to fool him and get money out of him.

So events depend on who is reading them, for example, Robert Frobisher reading the diary of Adam Ewing for instance. The person at the receiving end, i.e. the readers, can draw an infinite number of conclusions as each reader’s reading will be different.

In the novel, Zachry does not understand Meronym and her people and does not trust them because they are quite foreign and unlike anything he ever came across. Man is afraid of the unknown, but also curious. Meronym knows from her experience that technology and weapons are only going to lead to war and power contests. She feels that the people of Hawaii are better off without them, living their simple lives. For them, their knowledge makes them

distinguish what is good or bad or true or false. Meronym tells Zachry that his people do not want to hear the truth as it is too difficult for them to believe that humans created civilizations through their inventions and achieved progress and then destroyed them too. She says, *'human hunger birthed the Civ'lise, but human hunger killed it too. I know it from other tribes offland what I stayed with. Times are you say a person's b'liefs ain't true, they think you're saying their lifes ain't true an' their truth ain't true.'* (Mitchell 273).

For Meronym, Zachry's 'Old Georgie' was not true. Zachry started realizing what Meronym was saying: that for every individual their beliefs were so important that to tell them that what they believe in is false, it would shock them and cause them to doubt themselves and their purpose and very existence.

Man adjusts history and distorts facts to suit him and to suit his present. So whatever history we read has fiction blended in and as events have occurred so long back very few people know the real truth, the way things actually happened. Those who do know have their own way of narrating and thus selecting and discarding things from their memories. According to Nietzsche, "truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions," he also observes that "he speaks most truthfully who recognizes the illusory nature of speech" (qtd. in Lang).

The fictional truth one reads about becomes the "truth". For example, In the Luisa Rey mystery, we read of how the true events of the Titanic are overshadowed by fiction just as Luisa's story of her father's death becomes more polished every time she narrates, so does that of the *Titanic*. We no longer have real truth, but virtual truth. And thus readers cannot agree more when they read, "He who pays the historian calls the tune" (Mitchell 393).

In “Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After”, Zachry realizes how he can believe in the ghost of Old Georgie and how for Meronym he does not exist simultaneously. However, he also realizes that he cannot go back and tell his Valleysmen that. He reflects, “Times are you say a person’s b’liefs ain’t true, they think you’re saying their lifes ain’t true an’ their truth ain’t true (Mitchell 273).

Mamoun Alzoubi & Jessica Goodrich explain Linda Hutcheon’s viewpoint that history has become a problem because of various “cultural and social assumptions” that influences our perception of history (Alzoubi). In the “set” Hutcheon lists the following points that affect our idea of history “origins and ends, unity, and totalization, logic and reason, consciousness and human nature, progress and fate, representation and truth... causality and temporal homogeneity, linearity, and continuity” (qtd. in Alzoubi). Simply put, the concepts of history that people believe in seem to be influenced by the ideologies they have about the world and its ways.

It is human nature that Mitchell draws on again and again in the stories in *Cloud Atlas*: the nature to deceive for one’s own benefit, the tendency not to ask too many questions, to not have the courage to go against or speak up even when doubting the facts or knowing they could be wrong. May be people are held back because of a lack of courage but also probably because others have more power and thus more control. A very appropriate example would be Adam Ewing who turns a blind eye to the miseries of the Maori tribe or Zachry, who is unable to do anything to save his father and brother from the Kona people.

In “Half Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery”, Mitchell gives an insight through his thoughts on Alberto Grimaldi, the villain of the story, on the subject of power:

“Power. *What do we mean? ‘The ability to determine another man’s luck.’ ...the will to power. This is the enigma at the core of the various destinies of men.* What drives some to accrue power where the majority of their compatriots lose, mishandle, or eschew power? Is it addiction? Wealth? Survival? Natural Selection? ...The only answer can be ‘There is no “Why.” This is our nature.’ (Mitchell 129)

However, Mitchell also brings into light the other side of man’s inherited nature: that of doing good and being true. Every character in the six stories has a conscience. Even Sonmi-451 acts as if she has a conscience and understands what freedom meant.

Zachry has the guilt that he never stepped up to save his brother and father from the Konas. Now that he is old, he wants to shout back at the nine year old Zachry who had cowered away when the Konas attacked and lied about it to Abel and had lived with the guilt at the back of his head for a long time. He wants to shout back more than forty years to himself, “*Oy, list’n! Times are you’re weak ‘gainst the world! Times are you can’t do nothin’. That ain’t your fault, it’s this busted world’s fault is all!*” (Mitchell 242)

Similarly, Ewing cannot forget the eyes of the Moriori who was being tortured. Cavendish cannot confess what really happened to him, because he does not want to say his three attackers were women. Rufus Sixsmith knew he was a part of a project that was not right but he worked for it. Sonmi-451 works as a server at Papa Song’s diners and she knows that they have to live by their twelve Catechisms and cannot go against them. Robert Frobisher does not like working under Vyvyan Ayr’s. However, he has to because that is his source of income. He also does not like sleeping with Ayr’s wife, but he realizes that he cannot just leave their house when he pleases.

However, each of the characters goes through a transition that makes them try to do what they consider to be the right thing. In each case, their experiences allow them to understand the truth and their belief in truth leads them to make certain decisions. Thus, Sonmi-451 observes, “Reading is not knowledge. Knowledge without experience is food without sustenance” (Mitchell 224). On his way back to America, Ewing is scared that the captain or someone else will find out about the hidden slave in his cabin, and yet he does not mention him to anyone because he wants to save him. This is how Ewing feels he is doing the right thing. In the case of Rufus Sixsmith, we learn that he sent the report of his work and its dangers to Luisa Ray so that she may be able to do something to help stop all activities. She receives help from Isaac Sachs, an employee at the nuclear power plant, who tells her, “Isaac Sach’s tragic flaw, is this. Too cowardly to be a warrior, but not *enough* of a coward to lie down and roll over like a good doggy” (Mitchell 131). Cavendish realizes he isn’t old to be in an old home, and plots to escape from it. Sonmi-451 also has her adventures in quest of the truth and Zachry becomes braver and saves Meronym’s life because he believes her to be true.

Readers make assumptions where necessary to suit their thoughts and to fill in the gaps as they want them to be filled. We assume that Robert Frobisher and his friend Rufus Sixsmith are both gay although there is no clear indication that this is so. He talks about being able to “twist boys around his finger, but not women” (Mitchell 77) and does not mention who his “sole love is” (Mitchell 470). So readers simply assume that he and Sixsmith were lovers. Similarly, Luisa Rey reads in the letters that Frobisher sent to his friend Sixsmith, and is shocked to know that Frobisher has a comet-shaped birthmark. Although it isn’t mentioned if Luisa also has it, it is assumed by readers that she does because of her reaction. “I just don’t believe this crap. I just don’t believe it. I don’t (Mitchell 120).

Those with power also control the “truth” because what they say is what matters. And they can easily manipulate others into believing what they want them to believe. Individual perceptions may easily be manipulated through force or money. We have several examples of how the same story maybe understood differently by different individuals based on their knowledge of history and experiences. For example, the history of the Maori people depended on how Mr. Evans or Mr. D’ Arnoq told it. The Maori themselves were not asked to present their tale. Mr. Ewing in turn believe what his logic tells him to believe. So, history is further changed. Mitchell sets his first story among the Maori and Moriori tribes of New Zealand that appear to be based on true history. However, we also are presented with a fictional story within which we find differences in points of view. So, how do we know what had actually happened? What is the truth and the history of the Moriori people?

Frobisher writes to his friend. When one writes a letter then the power to enable discourse is in one’s hand and thus one holds the power of truth in one’s hands because the person receiving the letter, (over here Rufus Sixsmith) knows only Frobisher’s side of the story. Whether he likes it or not has to accept the contents of Frobisher’s letters as true.

In “Time and Emotion Study” that appeared in “The Observer”, Hephzibah Anderson writes:

“*Cloud Atlas* meditates on belief and religion, on the curses of rampant science, big business and human insatiability; it questions how capable we are of changing the course of our own lives, let alone history or humankind’s nature, and hints tantalizingly at notions of reincarnation. But it is times’ progression- linear or otherwise- that truly captivates Mitchell and, in a gesture at once terrifying and comforting, he sets his most futuristic tranche in a world that is the most ancient” (Anderson).

We are shown how people perceive things differently over time and according to their experiences, how people's thoughts and beliefs may be manipulated, and how history keeps changing, for every individual has a different notion of the truth.

In the novel, Mitchell brings out the importance of freedom and how man desires freedom. Cavendish reflects upon what freedom means to individuals while he is stuck at the nursing home, "Freedom! Is the fatuous jingle of our civilization, but only those deprived of it have the barest inkling re: what the stuff actually is" (Mitchell 356). In a different world, far away from Cavendish, Sonmi-451 reflects that "Perpetual encagement endows any mirage of salvation with credibility" (Mitchell 193).

Mitchell also goads readers into questioning their understanding of history, and interrogates their beliefs about recorded history, because various factors influence what is actually recorded. And he also shows how an individual's belief is constructed upon his experiences and his perception of reality. For example, in "An Orison of Sonmi-451" one is shown how both Meronym's and Zachry's belief can exist together even if contradictory.

Conclusion

Looking at the novel as a whole, one may reach many different conclusions. Mitchell not only leaves doors open for readers to assume things for themselves, but he also leaves doubts in readers minds so that they cannot reach any fixed conclusions. The multiple voices in the novel splits it into different directions with no individual story rising above any other.

“There is no longer a belief in a truth that can be obtained by reason as reason is just another attempt at ‘metanarrative.’ Instead truth is a socially constructed cultural given. Truth becomes immanent residing in each individual culture or person. No one has any greater claim to truth than any other as each is on an equal status” (Lang). And thus for every individual who reads the novel, a different notion of truth is formed.

History and ideas of reality are based on a person’s knowledge and belief as well as their notion of the truth. Mitchell connects all these things together to show how we perceive the world. Mitchell suggests that even in a work of fiction, we may get a glimpse of truth. As one of his characters says, “Most yarnin’s got a bit o’ true, some yarnin’s got some true, an’ a few yarnin’s got a lot o’ true (Mitchell 309).

I think that in *Cloud Atlas*, Mitchell reflects the postmodern world that we live in today. Postmodernism has become such an important part in all fields, be it architecture or literature or

art. *Cloud Atlas* represents with all its intertextual references and meaningless links and fragmented plots represents postmodernity successfully. Hayes writes that Mitchell has attempted to “historicize postmodernism”, a point which readers would definitely have to agree upon (Culture Wars). Mitchell, through his narrations and storytelling, has thus set a stone in history, taking readers on different plains of reality questioning the uncertainty of the past and the illuminating the infinite possibilities of the truth they believe in.

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