



The universal nature of human soul in David Mitchell's literary legacy

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays when the majority of themes in literature have been already explored, it is hard to find something topical and yet not studied. In this case David Mitchell's works are the treasury of philosophical ideas covered by author's fantasy.

The novel under our investigation *Cloud Atlas* is a complicated work in terms of system of characters, plot development and mixture of themes. At the same time this difficulty attracts researchers from all over the globe and provides them with the enough material to study. As each part is a separate story united only by the reincarnation theme (a comet shaped birth mark). Thus, our objective is to study this binding element which reflects the author's concept of a soul's universal nature. Even though this concept is a corner stone in this novel, it was left poorly studied. Therefore, this research is an attempt to fill in the gap in literary criticism. In this article we determined how the author expressed this concept in the novel. Moreover, we analyzed how the theme of reincarnation in the novel imitates elements of Hinduism. Thus, we conclude that *Cloud Atlas* is a complex philosophical novel of the new era

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SUMMARY

The main objective of this work is to study David Mitchell's concept of human soul in his magnum opus *Cloud Atlas*; more precisely how the metaphor of cloud atlas is reflected in content of the novel. In order to reach this goal we begin with the literary legacy of the author. David Stephen Mitchell is a modern and shortlisted for Booker prize British author. He was born in January 1969 in Southport, Merseyside, England. Mitchell studied at the University of Kent and received his degree in

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English and American literature. He lived in Sicily for a year, and then moved to Hiroshima (Japan), where he taught English to Japanese students. Eight years later, David returned to England with his wife Keiko and two children. Mitchell has made a huge impression on the modern literary scene. Nevertheless, his works have not yet been properly analyzed. Therefore, the benefit of this study is reflected in the attempt to fill the gap in literary criticism. Mitchell's choice of themes and styles in the novels is quite extraordinary as he deals with postmodern techniques of text composition and after death philosophy and rebirth. Despite such a rich thematic range of the novels, the work in which the theme of human soul was thoroughly developed is *Cloud Atlas*. Here the author expresses his vision of human soul as a universal essence. This universality is shown through the rebirth of the heroes which happens despite gender, time or race differences. In order to point out this transformation the plot was built in the form of six independent stories. Within these stories happens the rebirth of main characters' souls. Thus, there are six chronologically ordered stories in the book: The events of the first chapter *The pacific journal of Adam Ewing* takes place in 1849; the drama of the second chapter *Letters from Zedelghem* – in 1936, the investigation of Luisa Rey in the third chapter *The first Luisa Rey mystery* – in 1973, the misadventures of Timothy Cavendish in the fourth chapter *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish* – in 2012; the feat of Sonmi 451 in the fifth chapter *An orison of Sonmi-451* – in 2144; finally, the meeting of Zachry and Meronim in the last sixth chapter *Sloosha's crossin' an' ev'rything after* – in 2321. Both the rebirth and transformation of souls happen within these various timelines. In order to trace this transformation and aspiration for development through time the author used a comet shaped birthmark on the torso of the main characters. As a result, we come to the conclusion that the author uses reincarnation as the single thread that holds the stories of *Cloud Atlas* together. As a major theme within the text, reincarnation advances the plot, influences character interactions, and compliments the novel's parting theory that all life on earth is connected. Consequently, we can interpret the cloud atlas as a metaphor as the one about souls being clouds floating through the sky. This metaphor implies that our lives are dictated by forces outside our control. We can only go with the flow of fate. At this point we cannot judge the characters in the novel as they only submit themselves to the power of fate. Here comes the question what the author comprehends under this term "fate". The answer to this question lays in the traces of Hinduism in the plot and in the theme of rebirth in the novel. Firstly, in Hinduism the soul is considered immortal like in the other major religions. After physical death the soul travels into another world or realm for a time and then returns to earth and is reborn in a new body. Secondly, Karma

determines the quality of the new body based on the conduct of the soul's previous life and their spiritual needs. The new body is chosen to obtain spiritual fulfillment which includes human, animal, insect, and even plant form. In the novel rebirth happens only in the human body.

Thirdly, they believe the soul is genderless. Each "class" of being has a different level of awareness. The human body in comparison to other life forms is most aware and strives for spiritual connection. The ultimate goal of the righteous soul is to reach the purest state of being, nirvana. Of the major religions, Hinduism's beliefs concerning reincarnation are largely absent from *Cloud Atlas* aside from the general principal of the immortal and genderless soul. However, not only in the frames of Hinduism the theme had developed as early Christians may have believed in some form of reincarnation as had the Jews. Yet, there are several aspects of Christianity within *Cloud Atlas* that influenced the character's interpretation of reincarnation. For example the Valleymen believe their souls are weighed down by stones whenever they do wrong. Stones are suggestive of the concept of sin. Furthermore, the Valleymen's prayers to Sonmi-451 for spiritual guidance are similar to that of the Christian ideal of the forgiveness of sins. Regardless of where Mitchell drew his inspiration for the various aspects of reincarnation in the novel, it is the primary theme which connects the characters together. It is not a strong or coherent theme but the only one which is consistent throughout the sections. Having considered all the above mentioned information it can be concluded that David Mitchell is a very creative writer who implies postmodern techniques of narration and molds various stories and even novels together. On one hand such a sophisticated way of narration confuses, but on the other hand it gives much space for researchers to contemplate over everlasting questions of existence. In spite of the popularity the author's concept in the novel *Cloud Atlas* was left unstudied. In this story the author successfully applied the idea of reincarnation in an unconventional manner, molding it to fit the lives of his characters and making no attempt to explain its deeper significance within the overall plot. Therefore each reader interprets the novel variously but the core idea remains unchanged to show that the soul is a universal essence depending on the outside force and circumstances. With each rebirth of a soul further development happened let it be the development to a positive or destructive side. In general Mitchell's writing is brilliant but the slim connection between scenes and characters; nonetheless, the mixed theories of reincarnation, leave something to be desired.

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Ключевые слова:

Идея
Развитие
Индуизм
Перерождение

В наши дни, когда большинство тем в литературе уже исследовано, трудно найти что-то актуальное и в то же время еще не изученное. В данном случае работы Дэвида Митчелла - сокровищница философских идей, окутанных авторской фантазией. Исследуемый роман «Облачный атлас», представляет собой сложное произведение с точки зрения системы персонажей, развития сюжета и смешения тем. В то же время эта трудность привлекает исследователей со всего мира и дает им достаточно материала для изучения. Ведь каждая часть – это отдельная история, объединенная только темой реинкарнации (родимое пятно в форме кометы). Таким образом, наша цель - изучить этот связывающий элемент, отражающий авторское представление об универсальной природе души. Несмотря на то, что эта концепция является краеугольным камнем в этом романе, она оставалась малоизученной. Таким образом, данное исследование является попыткой восполнить пробел в литературной критике. В этой статье установлено как автор выразил эту концепцию в романе. Более того, было проанализировано, как тема перерождения в романе имитирует элементы индуизма. Следовательно, «Облачный атлас» – это сложный философский роман новой эпохи.

INTRODUCTION

David Stephen Mitchell is a modern and shortlisted for Booker prize British author. He was born in January 1969 in Southport, Merseyside, England. Mitchell studied at the University of Kent and received his degree in English and American literature. He lived in Sicily for a year, and then moved to Hiroshima (Japan), where he taught English to Japanese students. Eight years later, David returned to England with his wife Keiko and two children. He started his writing career in 1999 and with just five books Mitchell has made a huge impression on the modern literary scene. His choice of themes and styles in the novels is quite extraordinary as he deals with postmodern techniques of text composition and after death philosophy and rebirth.

Now David Mitchell resides with his family in Cork (Ireland).[6]

Problem development status is based on the fact that this author has not yet been thoroughly investigated. This lack of research is seen in the thematic range of few researches that have been already done. Mitchell's literary works have been analyzed through the view point of screenplay [9], metafiction as an aesthetical and ethical tool, debt and convention in fiction [5], the relation between contemporary fiction and cosmopolitan theory [8], time in postmodernist fiction, interconnection between time, space and characters [3], metafiction in the precise novel [2].

Therefore, we can state the reflection of author's concept in the novels has been left without proper attention by the researchers. Thus, the novelty of this research is defined by the scholars' insufficient attention.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

David Mitchell is a prolific author nowadays he has written nine novels. However not all of them were translated into Russian, here are given those novels which were: «Литературный призрак» («*Ghostwritten*»), «Сон № 9» («*number9dream*»), «Облачный атлас» («*Cloud Atlas*»), «Лужок Черного Лебедя» («*Black Swan Green*»), «Тысяча осеней Якоба де Зута» («*The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*»), «Простые смертные» («*The Bone Clocks*»), «Голодный дом» («*Slade House*»), «Я источаю то, что вы называете временем» («*From Me Flows What You Call Time*»). [1]

His debut novel, *The Ghost of Literature*, published in 1999, was able to compete with the books of the universally recognized pillars of English prose Antonia Bayette, Lawrence Norfolk and Rachel Kusk, won the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize (as the best English book written by an author under 35) and was nominated for the Guardian First Book Award.

Moreover, unlike many aspiring authors who built the plot of their first books on speculation around their personal experience, David managed to create an incredibly convincing narrative, which was a fusion of stories that took place simultaneously in different parts of the world and were told by completely different people. The author's breadth of views and manner of presentation is strikingly different from modern trends in English literature, which strives to isolate and focus on the internal "microcosm of the country". [9]

Mitchell's second novel "Number 9 Dream" was released in 2001, in this book the author decided not to resort to mixing a wide range of genres and styles, but focused on creating a single storyline, colorfully telling about the searches of a Japanese teenager his father in modern Tokyo. The novel was nominated for the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and shortlisted for Britain's most prestigious Man Booker award.

In *Cloud Atlas*, published in 2004, Mitchell decided to return to the narrative tradition of his first novel and vary genres from science fiction to historical sketches. The awards were not long in coming and the novel received the British Book Literary Fiction Award, was named the British Book Awards Richard & Judy Best Read of the Year, and was nominated for the Booker Prize, and the author received the title of "Best Young British Writer" from the influential *Granta* association.

In 2006, David's novel *Black Swan Green* was published and nominated for the Costa Novel, Quill Book and Commonwealth Writers Prize (in the category "Best Eurasian Book"). And in 2010, Mitchell released the historical novel *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* in which he compares Japan during the reign of the shoguns and Napoleonic Europe. Separately, it is worth noting the fact that all of Mitchell's novels take place in the same universe, and his novel *The Bone Clocks* (2014) brings them all together.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Despite such a rich thematic range of the novels, the work in which the theme of human soul was thoroughly developed is *Cloud Atlas*. Here the author expresses his vision

of human soul as a universal essence. This universality is shown through the rebirth of the heroes which happens despite gender, time or race differences. In order to point out this transformation the plot was built in the form of six independent stories. Within these stories happens the rebirth of main characters' souls. Thus, there are six chronologically ordered stories in the book: The events of the first chapter *The pacific journal of Adam Ewing* takes place in 1849; the drama of the second chapter *Letters from Zedelghem* – in 1936, the investigation of Luisa Rey in the third chapter *The first Luisa Rey mystery* – in 1973, the misadventures of Timothy Cavendish in the fourth chapter *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish* – in 2012; the feat of Sonmi 451 in the fifth chapter *An orison of Sonmi-451* – in 2144; finally, the meeting of Zachry and Meronim in the last sixth chapter *Sloosha's crossin' an' ev'rything after* – in 2321. [6, p. 381]

Both the rebirth and transformation of souls happen within these various timelines. In order to trace this transformation and aspiration for development through time the author used a comet shaped birthmark on the torso of the main characters.

Below are presented several paths of transformation. Each soul is reborn several times in different times and under different circumstances.

The first one took place in 1849: Tilda, daughter of the slave trader Haskell Moore. At the beginning she was afraid of her father. At the end of the chapter she married Adam Ewing and together they join the abolitionist movement (fighters for the abolition of slavery). [6, p 28] Then this soul is shown in 1973 as a Mexican woman working in an underground factory. The woman killed the pursuer of Luisa Rey, a truth seeking journalist. The last transformation of this soul is presented in 2144 as a protagonist of the story, Sonmi-451. Even though Sonmi-451 belonged to the lowest social class, she gained the ability to think critically and make decisions. She became the head of an uprising having known that at the end she would be executed. Finally, in 2321 local tribes revered Sonmi-451 as a deity. Her words were written in the sacred books. Having traced all the rebirths of this soul we can say that on the outside, the heroines are weak and powerless, but each of them is ready to show courage. Tilda opposes the tyrant father; the Mexican raises her hand against the man who insulted her. The final incarnation of this soul, Sonmi-451, becomes a symbol of freedom for all revolutionaries in New Seoul and a goddess for post-apocalyptic tribes. Moreover, the development from the weak and powerless daughter of a tyrant to a symbol of freedom and a goddess also took place in the story. [6, p. 422]

The second one took place in 1849: The protagonist of the story, Adam Ewing. [6, p. 32] At first, he had no opinion and agreed to work for the father of his fiancée, the slave trader Haskell Moore. However, what he saw on the plantation terrifies Adam. After the fugitive slave Autua saved Adam's life, Adam decided to become an abolitionist and burnt the contract between Moore and the planter Horrocks. Then the reader meets this hero with the comet shaped tattoo in 2144 as Hae-Joo, who was a member of the New Seoul Revolutionary Movement. Hae-Joo helped Sonmi-451 to escape from Papa Song Cafe and become a free-minded person. Here we observed how the soul came all the way from a timid youth to a selfless fighter for freedom. [6, p. 430]

However not all the transformations in the novel were positive some negative which formed antagonists also appeared. For instance, Robert Frobisher a young composer who was the protagonist in the chapter *Letters from Zedelghem*.

He gained bad reputation for having affairs with men. Later, he entered into a relationship with the wife of his employer Jocasta, and then tried to seduce the employer. However, this personage wrote the *Cloud Atlas* sextet, which would appear in another chapter as link between the narratives. The reincarnation of this soul happened in 2012 as Georgetta, wife of Denholm Cavendish. She was the mistress of Timothy Cavendish, her husband's brother. Well, it is difficult to say where this soul is heading. The incarnations cannot control their sexuality and thus they create problems for themselves and others. Frobisher's bisexuality forces him to leave the university and becomes a reason for blackmail. When Denholm sends his brother to a nursing home, he explains his act as revenge for Georgetta's betrayal. [6, p. 312]

Having analyzed the examples above we can say that the author uses reincarnation as the single thread that holds the stories of *Cloud Atlas* together. As a major theme within the text, reincarnation advances the plot, influences character interactions, and compliments the novel's parting theory that all life on earth is connected. [1]

Consequently, we can interpret the cloud atlas as a metaphor as the one about souls being clouds floating through the sky. This metaphor implies that our lives are dictated by forces outside our control. We can only go with the flow of fate. At this point we cannot judge the characters in the novel as they only submit themselves to the power of fate. Here comes the question what the author comprehends under this term "fate". The answer to this question lays in the traces of Hinduism in the plot and in the theme of rebirth in the novel.

Firstly, in Hinduism the soul is considered immortal like in the other major religions. After physical death the soul travels into another world or realm for a time and then returns to earth and is reborn in a new body.

Secondly, Karma determines the quality of the new body based on the conduct of the soul's previous life and their spiritual needs. The new body is chosen to obtain spiritual fulfillment which includes human, animal, insect, and even plant form. In the novel rebirth happens only in the human body.

Thirdly, they believe the soul is genderless. Each "class" of being has a different level of awareness. The human body in comparison to other life forms is most aware and strives for spiritual connection. The ultimate goal of the righteous soul is to reach the purest state of being, nirvana. Of the major religions, Hinduism's beliefs concerning reincarnation are largely absent from *Cloud Atlas* aside from the general principal of the immortal and genderless soul.

However, not only in the frames of Hinduism the theme had developed as early Christians may have believed in some form of reincarnation as had the Jews. Yet, there are several aspects of Christianity within *Cloud Atlas* that influenced the character's interpretation of reincarnation. For example the Valleyemen believe their souls are weighed down by stones whenever they do wrong. Stones are suggestive of the concept of sin. Furthermore, the Valleyemen's prayers to Sonmi-451 for spiritual guidance are similar to that of the Christian ideal of the forgiveness of sins.

Regardless of where Mitchell drew his inspiration for the various aspects of reincarnation in the novel, it is the primary theme which connects the characters together. It is not a strong or coherent theme but the only one which is consistent throughout the sections.

CONCLUSION

Having considered all the above mentioned information it can be concluded that [David Mitchell](#) is a very creative writer who implies postmodern techniques of narration and molds various stories and even novels together. On one hand such a sophisticated way of narration confuses, but on the other hand it gives much space for researchers to contemplate over everlasting questions of existence. In spite of the popularity the author's concept in the novel *Cloud Atlas* was left unstudied. In this story the author successfully applied the idea of reincarnation in an unconventional manner, molding it to fit the lives of his characters and making no attempt to explain its deeper significance within the overall plot. Therefore each reader interprets the novel variously but the core idea remains unchanged to show that the soul is a universal essence depending on the outside force and circumstances. With each rebirth of a soul further development happened let it be the development to a positive or destructive side. Mitchell's writing is brilliant but the slim connection between scenes and characters; nevertheless, the mixed theories of reincarnation, leave something to be desired.

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