

The Start of an Inquisition into Post-postmodernism: Observations from Reading David Mitchell's *Number9Dream*

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Abstract - The following essay seeks to examine literary texts of the 21st century that precedes an era of postmodernism in what can arguably be labelled post-postmodernism. In studying the experimental works of David Mitchell, post-postmodernism is suggested to take on a notion of totality and globality in the great wake of postmodern traits such as fragmentation and a destabilized reality. Postmodernism has been defined as an “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard 25). In challenging such metanarratives, post-postmodernism seeks to further question if a new Metanarrative with a capital M can ever be defined, within the encapsulation of intertextuality.

Keywords - Postmodernism, Post-postmodernism, Contemporary, David Mitchell, Fragmentation, Intertextuality, Narratology, Narrative theories, Existentialism, Philosophy

INTRODUCTION

At the height of 21st Century Realism, David Mitchell's position as a writer of the post-postmodernist period gives rise to questions of Reality. In *Number9Dream*, Mitchell defends the postmodernist thought of a destabilized centre of meaning, yet glimpses at the hope of another “life” through the unreality of dreams. The novel's fragmentation of 9 chapters symbolizes 9 dreams, and in each dreamscape, a new life and a new narrative. In line with the seemingly contradictory nature of postmodernism, the protagonist Miyake echoes that life is the “utter weirdness of normality” (Mitchell 225). Going beyond postmodernism, Mitchell not only celebrates fragmentation, but seeks to make a composite out of fragmentation – what he calls an “Uberbook”, much like the Nietzschean ideal of an Übermensch – the superior existence of the human race. Mitchell's attempts to immortalize all lives and hence all narratives are encapsulated in his novels where intertextuality flows around the circles of existence. If there is existential nothingness in the postmodern, Mitchell challenges the open ending of Nothingness as an opportunity for new beginnings and narratives.

The assumptions that are made in this study is that modern writers in the 21st century such as Mitchell has preceded the postmodernist era to become an era in its own right. While it is possible to drawn upon

postmodern theories from McHale, various modern 21st century theories, along with longstanding philosophical studies by Camus, there is an inherent limitation into defining what exactly postmodernism is (as with any literary era), and therefore, a difficulty in a defining fully, the traits of 21st century novels in the era of post-postmodernism.

Hence, in reading Mitchell extensively, with a focus on the author's *Number9Dream*, I suggest the following observations I have made in an attempt to understand, and perhaps define, the traits of the post-postmodern era of 21st Century novels. Arguably a successor to the era of postmodernism, I seek to establish the similarities, differences, oppositions, and extrapolations of post-postmodernism as a breakthrough of its well-established predecessor.

MAIN CONTENT

FRAGMENTATION, NARRATOLOGY, AND INTERTEXTUAL PROLIFERATIONS

The narrative structure of *Number9Dream* is clearly fragmented and broken down into 9 chapters, each representing Miyake's different dreams. Each dream presents a new start to a different life, and thus, narrative that contributes to a larger composite of all fragmentation. Fragmented narratives echo and mimic the diaspora of lives, as well as the fragmentation or bending of plotlines. The dreamscape thus become the perfect landscape for Mitchell to carry out a “many worlds model”. Boni echoes Mitchell's attack on the one world – one story model in her essay *The Aesthetics of Proliferation* that modern narratology is capable of proliferation. She defines narrative proliferation as “a world with many stories” and ontological proliferation as “a story with many worlds” (32). While postmodernism often deals with only one kind of proliferation, the post-postmodernist encompasses both narrative and ontological proliferation. Mitchell's use of a dream scape in *Number9Dream*, reincarnation in *Cloud Atlas*, and the Huxleyan/Orwell dystopia of *Ghostwritten*, allow for such an all-encompassing proliferation to occur. Further understanding from McHale that postmodernist ontological indeterminacy is a result of accepting a multitude of universes, knowable or not, Mitchell as a

post-postmodernist furthers this thought by using such open-ended techniques.

The classic Mitchell trait of resisting proper endings and beginning extrapolates on postmodern techniques. This is evident in *Number9Dream* where the novel “begins” several times and ends with a blank chapter. The very first chapter opens with Miyake’s dream of invading into the PanOpticon building to find his father. He fails and dies at the hands of Ms Kato, only to “restart” in the very same chapter as Miyake attempts to enter the Panopticon again, this time with a different end. The fact that each chapter are “dreams” also allow, like postmodernist authors, to deny responsibility and credibility for each narrative, making space for an explosion of possibilities that grow into a composite of fragmentary narratives.

Mitchell’s resistance of certain beginnings and endings are not only employed in *Number9Dream*, but across his array of novels. Each narrative of *Cloud Atlas* begins and ends twice, giving rise to a multitude of endings. This in turn gives the effect of a never-ending narrative, true to the thematic concerns of the novel and Mitchell’s perspective as a writer. Mitchell’s ending of *The Bone Clocks* reinforces this notion: “For a voyage to begin, another one must end, sort of” (609).

Rather than postmodern intertextuality, Mitchell elevates the idea to one of circularity. While the novels are in perpetual motion of intertextuality, circularity becomes a prevalent theme in Mitchell’s work from *Number9Dream* as his second novel. He writes, “circles are born, while circles born a second ago live. Circles live, while circles living a second ago die. Circle’s die, while new circles are born” (269). Schoene explains of the somewhat contradictory theme between intertextuality (to be thought of as different plot lines), and the larger circular narrative (to be thought of as circles). “These circles need not be neatly concentric, immediately tangential, or even perfectly round; what matters is that they originate from the same impulse, exist within the same medium, and are bound by the same set of laws” (99). Narratives should thus be thought of as circles, and the overlapping vein diagrams should be thought of as beautiful moments of intertextuality. Hence, intertextuality in post-postmodernism becomes non-linear, but instead ever-growing plasma cells that become a composite of fragmented narratives, an Uberbook.

The following quote from Mitchell in Harris’ essay is thus vital for understanding the essence of the 21st century writer:

“In the same way that my novels are built of hyperlinked novellas, I’m sort of building what I’ve taken to calling in a highfalutin way the ‘uberbook’ out of hyperlinked novels, because I’m a megalomaniac, and I like the idea of maximum scale”.

As the saying “things fall apart, the centre cannot hold” (Yeats) describe postmodernism, post-postmodernism becomes the centre in which holds things that fall apart – a melting pot of narratives and endless possibilities, an Uberbook. Thus, fragmentation in post-postmodernism is not only celebratory as it is in postmodernism, but a necessity towards creating a composite of fragmented narratives. The notion of circularity rather than linearity is echoed once more in Schoene:

“The apparent brokenness... needs to be reviewed as an elaborate compositeness, caught in an ongoing process of self-constitution – of coming together. Opposed to postmodernist fragmentation, this compositeness is designed to preserve the singularity of each segment as an integral building block” (98).

The completeness of the composite of fragmentation can be thus likened to the Borgean Library. Similar to how the library is complete in its labyrinth of narratives, Mitchell’s work presents an infinity of worlds within words, and possibly beyond (any ontological determinacy).

MAN AND AUTHOR/GOD AS EQUAL

In the maximizing of all possible narratives (especially with the “many worlds model” of a dreamscape), the idea of an almighty God is minimized. Mitchell presents this as a hilarious scene in *Number9Dream* where God is “levitating on his surfboard” when he comes to Mrs Comb’s aid (221). For postmodernism is an “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard 25), post-postmodernism retains the same kind of playfulness. If postmodernism posits the Man versus Author argument, then the 21st century writer allows Man the possibilities of selfhood. This suggests that the position of Man and God are equalized.

The metanarrative of religion is undermined as an almighty God is subjected to humanly actions in a world full of possibilities. Humanizing God paradoxically dehumanizes the metanarrative of religion. By equalizing an almighty being, the notion of transcendentalism is stripped away, and what is left is a human ability to craft individual lives and narratives that are not dictated by a higher force. If God is an Author of lives/an Author is an Author God, post-postmodernism allows individual beings to direct their own lives/narratives that serve the magnitude of an Uberbook. Instead of a single Author/God, individuals are now given the power to write their own narrative, likened to cellular mitosis where there is multiplication by division. Therefore, while staying true to postmodernist subversion of metanarratives, post-postmodernism seems to suggest its own metanarrative of an Uberbook which not only allows for such a play of universal truths, but encompasses all possibilities

written by a multitude of lives. This gives rise to a notion of globality and totality, a composite of all fragmented narratives that have been multiplied by dividing authorial power.

EMPTY ENDINGS: TOWARDS EXISTENTIAL AND TRANSCENDENTAL AWAKENING

For the almighty god becomes humanized and universal truths are left wanted and testing, the post-postmodern subversive questioning of metanarratives predictably leads to existential questions. If there could not be a God so unattainable and transcendental, post-postmodernism perhaps shifts this transcendentalism towards the process of small narratives joining the larger metanarrative of an Uberbook. Instead of a metanarrative that excludes, the Uberbook is all inclusive. In attempting to answer existentialism, postmodernism thinks of the end as an empty space – and so does Mitchell in positing Chapter 9/Dream 9 as a mere blank. This could mean a variety of things – the classic postmodernist take of an existential nothingness, a literal “awakening” of Miyake from the previous 8 dreams he has had, the end of Eiji Miyake himself (i.e. death), and the list goes on. Neither the reader nor arguably Mitchell himself can ever say what happened for sure, because indefinite endings that resist meaning opens up new narratives altogether. This is best encapsulated in Miyake’s dreams: “Endings are simple, but every beginning is made by the beginning before” (Mitchell 345).

Thus, instead of delving into the meaning of the blank chapter, what is more pressing here is perhaps a post-postmodern reading of the emptiness. Postmodernism would posit it as an existential nothingness. Post-postmodernist Mitchell, on the other hand, sees blanks not as nothing, but an open-ended beginning to a something else. This fresh perspective of nothingness perhaps correlates to an “awakening” of not only Miyake as a character, but towards a transcendental awaking of small narratives joining the Uberbook. *Number9Dream* is a complete narrative in itself, yet opens up to something more as it joins the labyrinth of infinite texts in the library. This is perhaps, an explanation for Mitchell’s obsession with the number 9. (I will extrapolate on this further in the next section).

Shrouded in the ambiguity of apparent nothingness, one is reminded of Camus’ Sisyphus who toils in vain. In comparing Sisyphus and Miyake, both lead lives with a direction towards a purpose – Sisyphus rolls up his rock, and Miyake seeks reconciliation with his estranged father. The rock and Miyake’s father both serve to give a meaning and reason for living. However, as much as the rock rolls down every time Sisyphus pushes it up, Miyake discovers the true identity of his father in a disappointing anti-climax. There is no big dark secret about the man, only a hen-pecked husband who calls for pizza delivery. As much as Miyake toils his whole life in search for his father, rolling his own

rock towards this moment, the rock unwillingly rolls down and crushes him under the weight of disappointment. His exasperation is conveyed as such: “I want to smash your skull with a golfing trophy. I want to shout, and I think I want to cry” (Mitchell 352).

The let-down that this is the result of all his life efforts, much like Sisyphus, may be suggestive of existential ambiguity where man toils all his life for perhaps, nothing. However, Miyake eventually reconciles with “the utter weirdness of utter normality”, and lives a normal life without finding meaning, much like Sisyphus who rolls up his rock for nothing (Mitchell 225). Miyake reflects, “I feel sad that I found what I searched for, but no longer want what I found. I wait ... I feel release” (Mitchell 353). This suggests that there is a certain expectation of meaning to be something desirable. But when meaning ends up being nothing, there can only be acceptance and release. The blank ending may thus be read as an “awakening”, an acceptance of the weight of nothingness in life. One may therefore take comfort in accepting our part as a small narrative in the larger network of the labyrinth. Camus echoes this thought as he ends his essay on a positive note, emphasizing that “one must imagine Sisyphus happy” (Camus 24). While Camus suggests acceptance, post-postmodernism not only accepts existential ambiguity, but embraces nothingness as an awakening that brings about new narratives and intertextual possibilities.

THE NUMBER 9

Resisting numerological or biblical meanings, my suggestion towards Mitchell’s obsession with the number 9 is as follows. It may be a farfetched reading, but the number 9 was too pressing to be left unexplored. Prior to *Number9Dream*, Mitchell’s novel *Ghostwritten* was subtitled as “a novel in 9 parts”. A Huxleyan/Orwellian fiction, the globalizing theme of Mitchell’s novels become clear. If we look at the number 9 being made up by a circle and an extra stroke, we may look at circles as globes, as multiple world of collisions, and more (as characterized by the extra stroke). Instead of the all-encompassing zero, the number 9 allows both the narrative (the “circle”) and the plot (the “line”) to be unified as one. Mitchell’s recurring metaphor of circles also reinforces this notion. Circles of narratives reverberate to create ripples of intertextuality. If circles of intertextuality were to be unbounded, why not the infinite figure 8? Simply put, the infinity figure is one that is closed and unaccepting of other “outside” narratives, which the Uberbook does not posit. Yet at the same time, 9 will never be a complete 10. Mitchell perhaps recognizes the inability of perfection in fragmentation, for fragmented bits will be lost, somewhere beyond the ontological comprehensions of the infinite world. While postmodern celebrates fragmentation, fragmentation as a composite is perhaps what post-postmodernism is

about; that is a “communal web of the world that ... interweaves correspondences and resemblances together with apparent irreconcilabilities into a whole” (Schoene 103).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, post-postmodernism not only shares similarities with postmodernism, but goes beyond its predecessor in redefining the boundaries of fragmentation, narratology, and intertextuality. Metanarratives are not only questioned, but collapsed into the larger world of an Uberbook. While postmodernism thought of fragmentation as celebratory and existence as a nothingness, Mitchell’s novels suggest that the post-postmodern thought of fragmentation is necessary for a complete composite, and subverts nothingness into a transcendental awakening towards new beginnings. For “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (Aristotle), the totality and globality of the post-postmodern Uberbook may best be encapsulated in its Borgean completeness.

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