

Original Paper

An Analysis of *Cloud Atlas* from the Perspective of Queer

Theory

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Abstract

British author David Mitchell's novel *Cloud Atlas* is set in 1930s England and tells the story of Frobisher's growing experience as a homosexual. Frobisher, the protagonist, suffers from unequal treatment as a result of his homosexual identity and is disciplined and oppressed by heterosexual hegemony and gender dichotomy. Therefore, he performs different gender identities and changes his gender identity. Finally, Frobisher bravely challenged heterosexual hegemony and gender dichotomy to realize self-identity. Based on queer theory, combined with Michel Foucault's power discourse theory and Judith Butler's gender performance theory, this paper takes the oppression and resistance of homosexuals in the heterosexual hegemony in the novel as the entry point to think about gender performativity of the protagonist to explore the challenge of queer people from heterosexual hegemony and the bondage of gender identity, to achieve diversity and freedom of sexuality and gender.

Keywords

queer theory, heterosexual hegemony, gender dichotomy, gender performativity

1. Introduction

David Mitchell is a famous contemporary British writer and screenwriter for television and film. So far, David Mitchell has written nine award-winning novels. Among them, *Cloud Atlas* is his best and most famous work and has been adapted into a TV series. The description of queer community such as homosexuality in the *Cloud Atlas* shows David Mitchell's concern and thinking about the situation of queer community.

David Stephen Mitchell (1969-) is a distinguished English novelist, television writer and screenwriter. He has written nine novels, two of which, *Number Nine Dream* (2001) and *Cloud Atlas* (2004), were shortlisted for the Booker Prize. He has also written articles for several newspapers, most notably for *The Guardian*, and translated books about autism from Japanese to English. He was educated at Hanley Castle

High School and at the University of Kent, where he obtained a degree in English and American Literature followed by an M.A. in Comparative Literature.

David Mitchell's third novel *Cloud Atlas*, one of the best novels, has been given the British National Book Reward in 2004. At the same time, this novel is also shortlisted simultaneously for the Man Booker Prize, the Nebula and the Clark medal. The work is successfully adapted into a movie and receives polarized but widespread reactions. The work combines metafiction, historical fiction, contemporary fiction and science fiction, with interconnected nested stories that take the reader from the remote South Pacific in the 19th century to the island of Hawaii in a distant post-apocalyptic future (Schmitz, 2018, pp. 1-25).

The novel consists of six stories, among which "Letter's from Zedelghem" runs through the whole text. Set in England at the turn of the 20th century, it tells the tragic story of a gay man named Frobisher. When Frobisher was at the conservatory, he had a loving boyfriend. However, homosexuality was considered heresy at the time, and Frobisher was expelled from college and then kicked out of his family as well as disowned by his father. Financially, Frobisher went to work in Zedelghem, where he lived disguised as a heterosexual. However, it was not long before Frobisher was exposed as a heterosexual and once again unfairly treated. In the end, Frobisher shot the man who threatened him with his gay identity. After finishing his masterpiece, he committed suicide. In the suicide note, he declared his gay identity and took his life as resistance to defend his rights.

2. Theoretical Framework

The queer theory emerged in the 1980s, and the representative thinkers included Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, who jointly laid the foundation of queer theory. At the core of this theoretical basis is the social constructivism of sexual identity and gender distinction, which emphasizes the role of power and discourse. Moreover, such social constructivism downplays or even negates the role of biological factors in the construction of sexual identity and gender distinction.

2.1 Michel Foucault and *The History of Sexuality*

Michel Foucault is a French historian and philosopher. His *The History of Sexuality* is regarded as a classic work of queer theory and has had an important influence on queer theorists since then. "We can think of Foucault as a catalyst, a new beginning, a model and a pioneer, but also as a constant source of inspiration for new ideas" (Li, 2009).

Foucault's views on knowledge, power, sexual desire and their relations constitute an important source of queer theory. First of all, Foucault denies that sex is the biological expression of human beings, and believes that it is acquired through historical discourse. Foucault believed that "sex is not a natural feature or fact of human life, but a constructed category of experience, which has its historical, social and cultural roots rather than biological roots" (Li, 2009).

Secondly, Foucault investigates how sex intermingled with different authority systems, sexual discourse and gender identity in different historical periods. Foucault argues that we cannot understand sex as a

given by nature, as a realm beyond comprehension, on the contrary, as revealing the nature of all knowledge and purpose about sex. Sex maintains a consistent stance with knowledge and power (An, 1996).

Finally, Foucault profoundly reveals the relationship between power, sexual desire and sexual knowledge. He believes that power does not merely constitute a simple state of suppression and control over sexual desire and sexual knowledge. Sexual desire, sexual knowledge and power are closely related. The former is generated and evolved under the stimulation of the latter.

2.2 Judith Butler and “Gender Performativity”

Judith Butler is another important queer theorist, and many of the core ideas of queer theory come from her. Judith Butler’s theory of “Gender Performativity” is also of special importance to the construction of queer theories. Her three important related theoretical monographs, *Gender Trouble*, *Undoing Gender* and *Bodies That Matter* and so on further suggest that the body has a complex but unstable relationship with its sexual identity and subject desires. She sharply points out that sex is a gendered category, being ideally constructed as pre-discursive prior to culture. Creating an illusion of the substantive effect of gender, sex conceals the fact that gender is “Gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” (Butler, 2006). Therefore, she puts forward “gender performativity” in her challenge to the categories of sex, gender and sexuality.

According to Butler, gender is formed through constant performance. In her work *Gender Troubles*, she believes that gender is not innate, but constructed by society. Gender is a kind of rehearsal of repetitive behaviors and the result of people’s acquired repetitive behaviours (Butler, 2006). In this process, only normatively conforming expressiveness leads to a normal gender identity, while non-conformity leads to a dysfunctional gender identity, becoming denied and marginalised.

3. Disciplines and Oppression Experienced by Homosexuals

In the novel *Cloud Atlas*, “Letter’s from Zedelghem” tells the tragic story of a homosexual. In the novel, Frobisher’s letter to his same-sex lover tells us the disciplines and regulations of heterosexual hegemony over homosexuality. Drawing on Foucault’s theory of power discourse, queer theory argues that heterosexual hegemony has long dominated people’s minds. According to Foucault, the classification of sex itself, such as gay, straight and similar categories is the product of power and knowledge (Huang, 2005). Human beings unconsciously internalize heterosexuality and assume that the union of men and women is natural. In order to adapt to the development of society, people will also voluntarily adapt to this social norm of behaviour, which eventually leads to the emergence of heterosexual hegemony.

What is hidden under the statute of heterosexual hegemony is the social recognition and internalization of the gender dichotomy system. Since the ancient Greek philosophers Aristotle and Plato, sex and gender have existed in a dichotomous form. According to Butler, the binary construction of gender identity makes heterosexuality become a unified, normative and legal social order and controls the power

discourse of human society for a long time (Butler, 2006). First of all, discipline and oppression are represented in the exclusion of Frobisher's college and family. As a gay man, Frobisher has a loving partner, Skesmith. At the same time, Frobisher is a musically gifted student who works hard and should have had a bright future. However, the college discovers Frobisher's homosexual behaviour and expellees him. Then Frobisher, who is expelled from college, is ostracized by his family. Frobisher's father is a priest and homosexuality is regarded as a grave sin and moral weakness in Christianity in the religious sense. After refusing father's discipline, Frobisher was disowned by his father and kicked out of the house. At this point, "college" and "family" represent heterosexual hegemony. Britain in the early 20th century was still conservative, and homosexuality was still considered heresy. When homosexuals are identified in society, society disciplines or excludes the "other" on the basis of statutes. Conservative language considers heterosexual relationships in marriage to be universal and to have a standard priority, and views homosexuality as an immoral and sinful threat to family values. Homosexuals are caught in the delima of a heteronormative hegemony and a gender dichotomy.

4. The Performativity of Main Character

Butler believes that there is no original subject before the gendered process, and the subject just emerges from the gendered process. There is no such thing as the essence of gender, but the repetition of a series of behaviours subject to gender norms (Butler, 2006). In other words, gender exists by performing. In the social environment, Frobisher engages in the performance of gender, which involves the enactment of behaviors and expressions aligned with societal expectations. Through this continuous process of performing gender, Frobisher ultimately navigates the complexities of identity and makes a selection that aligns with the identity they wish to embody. This identity selection is not a fixed or inherent trait, but rather a result of ongoing and dynamic interactions with the social and cultural norms that shape and define gender.

4.1 Gender Identity Construction in Social Norms

Judith Butler believes that people's life is in a kind of social expectation about gender, which is authoritative by mainstream values. This expectation can be understood as the society's expectation of stereotyped behaviour and speech of people of different genders, and finally produces the expected phenomenon (Butler, 2006). According to Butler's argument, gender performance in most cases a mandatory rather than voluntary behaviour due to social norms, and Frobisher is also in such a dilemma. Ferenczi pointed out that homosexual men exaggerate their heterosexuality as a "defence" against their homosexuality (Butler, 2006). Unable to resist the social norms and heterosexual hegemony, Frobisher chose to self-cover and even want to change himself. Expelled from his family for being homosexual, Frobisher loses his financial resources. Out of immense social pressure and in order to appear to fit in, Frobisher begins to go against his heart and to hide his homosexual role and portray a heterosexual one. In order to make a living and continue to pursue his musical dreams, Frobisher moves to the Zedelghem estate, where he works as a recording clerk for the famous musician Ayers, and continues to pursue his

musical dreams in his free time. While serving Ayers, Frobisher hides his real reasons for leaving school because of pressure from “heterosexual society” and being able to stay in Ayers’ home, hiding his gay persona and trying to transition to heterosexuality. Tempted by Ayers’ wife, Frobisher has sex with the woman. Under the heterosexual discourse pressure, Frobisher also tries to conform to social conventions, compromises with society, and converts to heterosexuality. Frobisher’s feelings at this point were very different from the discrimination he had experienced at school when he played a homosexual character. “Am now Zedelghem’s golden boy. Been a v. long time since I was anyone’s golden boy, and I rather like it” (Mitchell, 2012). However the heterosexual rendition does not endear Frobisher very much and he has sex with Mrs. Ayers, but on a spiritual level he is very disgusted with this lady. “There’s a joylessness in her lovemaking. No, a savagery” (Mitchell, 2012). In the meantime, he has been secretly corresponding with his lover, looking for the support of a spiritual partner.

At the moment, Frobisher is forced to play a “normal” gender identity according to heterosexual norms, with the result that his body and mind are distorted by these norms. Frobisher becomes a victim of heterosexual hegemony. However, the act of pretending to be heterosexual while refusing to give up his homosexual identity reflects Frobisher’s gender confusion as a queer, as well as his disguise and escape from his real sexual identity under the oppression of social conventions. Subservient to the heteronormative hegemony, Frobisher enacts and constructs a heteronormative identity for himself through sexuality, but doing so causes Frobisher pain.

4.2 Gender Identity Selection Following The Heart

Despite Frobisher’s attempts to adopt a heterosexual identity, Frobisher’s life in Zedelghem does not go well. Ayers wants to steal Frobisher’s work and keeps the brilliant work for himself. Frobisher tries to refuse, but Ayers threatens to discredit him by telling the world that Frobisher has been expelled for homosexuality and adultery. The threat and stigma of homosexuality become the last straw for Frobisher, who eventually shoots Ayers with a pistol. This act shows that Frobisher is still playing his gay character, which is his violent resistance as a gay man. Eventually, after his music is finished, Frobisher shoots himself. At this moment, he is no longer willing to pretend, no longer willing to be oppressed by society, so he takes his own life, and announces his resistance to the world, firmly choosing to play out his homosexual identity.

“There is only one really serious philosophical problem,” Camus says, “and that is suicide. Deciding whether or not life is worth living is to answer the fundamental question in philosophy” (Camus, 2000). In the struggle to leave or stay alive, the suicidal are proud spirits who give up their bodies so that the hard mind can stand tall in the desert of illusion. In the suicide note, Frobisher writes, “It had nothing to do with cowardice. It took a lot of courage” (Michell, 2012, p. 440). In Frobisher’s suicide note, only two things are recorded -- music and his lover. He has finished his most satisfying work and could go away in peace, declaring to the world that the only person he had ever loved in his short, happy life was Skksmith.

After experiencing a disguised heterosexual identity, Frobisher realises that he cannot overcome his own body or change the way others perceive him. Not only does the rendition against his own heart cause him mental anguish, but his former homosexual identity continues to be rejected by others.

The original intention of queer theory is to resist heterosexual hegemony and pursue equal rights. In the end, Frobisher used words, music and acts of violence to announce to the world that he had chosen to insist on acting out his homosexuality. The resistance to heterosexual hegemony and the pursuit of self-gender identity make queers get rid of the statute of heterosexual hegemony and step into the camp of homosexuality. With this, Frobisher completes the transition from self-compromise under the heterosexual hegemony to the realization of self-identity as a homosexual.

4.3 The Challenge to Heterosexual Hegemony and Gender Dichotomy

Frobisher's struggles and uncertainties about sexuality reflect the normality of queer people's mental journey. "The first important part of queer theory is to challenge the hetero-homosexual dichotomy and the normality of society. The so-called normality mainly refers to the heterosexual institution and heterosexual hegemony" (Rubin, 2000). What is hidden under the statute of heterosexual hegemony is the social recognition and internalization of gender dichotomy.

"We can neither consider ourselves completely free of heterosexuality nor completely within it because it is in interdependence that these two concepts derive their meaning" (Rubin, 2000). Queer theory opposes heterosexual hegemony and gender dichotomy and requires the elimination of all claims of discrimination and prejudice. Therefore, while deconstructing the binary opposition between homosexuality and heterosexuality, the queer theory also challenges the strict binary structure of male and female. According to Butler, There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results (Butler, 2006). Therefore, gender is a variable rather than an objective existence, and everyone has the right to determine their own gender and to express their gender in the way they choose. This view shocks the legitimacy of the male/female binary.

In the novel, Frobisher's gender is always in a fluid and ambiguous state. Discovering that he is gay, then pretending to be heterosexual, and then confirming his homosexual identity also reveals the author's rejection of gender orientation. He has traditional male physical characteristics but also longs to become a woman in front of an adoring lover. Frobisher's rejection of both his biological sex and the social gender imposed on him reflects a rebellion against identity politics, a tearing apart of the binary structure. A person's gender is not born but formed later in life, and society should and must accept that different people differ in their gender identity. Frobisher breaks through the traditional gender dichotomy and became a transgressor of sexual and gender norms.

5. Conclusion

This article employs certain perspectives from queer theory to reveal the different situations faced by homosexuals when exploring their gender identity and the various choices they make. Through the process of exploring gender identity, it helps readers understand that gender is merely a performative construct, and that heterosexuality is nothing more than a so-called “normal” sexual orientation internalized under long-term heterosexual hegemony. This understanding guides people to view the existence of homosexuals correctly and respect the complexity and diversity of gender identity. The novel *Cloud Atlas* depicts the protagonist Frobisher’s reflections and transformations regarding his self-identity in the face of harsh realities, ultimately leading to the formation of his own gender awareness and breaking free from the confines of binary gender opposition. The essence of gender issues lies in the limitations they impose on the possibilities, diversity, and richness of our lives, leading to various inequalities. The emergence of queer theory affirms the legitimacy of the existence of these marginalized groups, providing theoretical support for them to establish their own identities while also identifying their object of resistance—the traditional binary structure. This resistance is not only about individual identity recognition but also involves profound changes in social structures, promoting the widespread dissemination and acceptance of values of diversity and inclusivity. Queer theorist Gail Rubin once proposed his vision, “Not only the elimination of oppression of women, but also the elimination of coercive sexuality and gender roles, and the establishment of an androgynous, genderless society in which a person’s sexual anatomy has nothing to do with who they are, what they do, and with whom they have sex” (Rubin, 1975). When identity exists in a state of ambiguity and the rigid classifications that once defined individuals become less stringent, it opens up a realm of possibilities that fosters the development of diverse ways of thinking. This loosening of traditional boundaries allows for greater intellectual flexibility and creativity, encouraging people to explore new ideas, perspectives, and experiences without being confined by predefined labels or societal expectations. In such an environment, individuals are empowered to make freer, more authentic choices that align with their true selves rather than conforming to the pressures of fitting into narrowly defined categories. This shift not only promotes personal freedom but also enriches the collective human experience by embracing a broader spectrum of identities and expressions, ultimately leading to a more inclusive and dynamic society where diversity is celebrated rather than suppressed.

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