

## BRICOLAGE OF HISTORY, FICTION AND GENDER CONUNDRUMS - A STUDY OF ELEANOR CATTON'S *THE LUMINARIES*

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### Abstract

*Ms Eleanor Catton created a veritable storm in the literary world by having two remarkable feats to her credit viz. winning the famed Booker prize in 2013 at the youngest age and for the lengthiest work ever to have been awarded the coveted prize. The initial reactions to the publication of her book were critical and judged her on gender principles of what is expected out of women's writing rather than individualistic parameters. The *Luminaries*, which is Ms Catton's second work, delineates 12 characters on the basis of the 12 signs of the zodiac and their chance encounters and common concerns mirror the astrological phenomenon and planetary positions in the year 1866. The text, besides foraying into the genre of historical and experimental fiction, has numerous astrological references and surprisingly contrasts the capitalist enterprise with the working of fate. Set in the town of Hokitika during the New Zealand gold rush, the text is populated heavily with gold diggers and goldsmiths, fortune hunters, inn-keepers, ambitious politicians, jailers and chaplains, with only two women finding a place in the form of Lydia Wells and Anna Wetherell. The latter is the pivotal point around which the entire text revolves. Arriving to make and mend her fortunes in the land of gold and opportunity, Anna is beguiled and reluctantly becomes a 'member of the oldest profession' while willingly adopting opium to assuage her conscience. The *Luminaries* has been chosen as a text for this research paper since it gives an insightful account of the lives of women in mushrooming urban spaces during the 19th century, especially places where they were cornered and at the periphery rather than the centre of the action, and offers a wonderful bricolage of historical fiction and gender perspectives holding contemporary relevance in identifying stereotypes of female presence in public spaces as well as examining the motivations behind the Capitalistic enterprise.*

**Keywords:** *Gender Stereotypes, Enterprise, Astrology, Historical Fiction, Neo-Victorian*

“History – is at once a site of fact and fiction, consensus and contestation, ideology and materiality – has provided a particular and powerful imaginative resource for writers over the past few decades” wrote Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss in *Introduction: Spectacles and Things – Visual and Material Culture and/in Neo Victorianism* (2011).

Besides its role as a pivotal point of convergence of diversity, history also has importance in making contemporary life more diversionary, analytical and fruitful. History seems most fruitful when studied and analyzed through the prism of truth but fictitious representations of history are also multitudinous.

Truthfulness or eye wash in historical writing is the subject matter of some of the fiercest contemporary debates in our world so the presentness of history is as important as its pastness.

In the context of the ongoing debate on preserving the sacrosanct objectiveness of history, Mark Twain had ironically and memorably written, “The older one gets, the more vivid the recollection of things that have not happened.” A similar idea is explored in Fowles’ narrative as he states-

“You do not even think of your own past as quite real; you dress it up, you gild it or blacken it, censor it, tinker with it...fictionalize it, in a word, and put it away on a shelf - your book, your romanced autobiography. We are all in the flight from the real reality. That is the basic definition of Homo sapiens.” (Fowles 97)

Asserting the imperative desideratum of attaining historical precision, Edward W. Said wrote in *Culture & Imperialism*,

“Appeals to the past are among the commonest strategies in interpretations of the present. What animates such appeals is not an only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms, perhaps. This problem animates all sorts of discussions – about influence, about blame and judgment, about present actualities and future priorities ... Past and present inform each other, each implies the other and, in the ... ideal sense intended by [T. S.] Eliot, each co-exists with the other ... [H]ow we formulate or represent the past shapes our understanding and views of the present.” (Said 1994 pp. 3)

In the midst of this ongoing debate about history, historiographic metafiction is a fast-emerging sub-genre in modern fiction which self-consciously adopts the notion of history and simultaneously problematizes its historical understanding. According to Linda Hutcheon who coined the term, “postmodern historical fiction is the type of fiction that self-reflexively and paradoxically makes use of the notion of history and simultaneously denies its truthfulness.”

In the realm of literature, the result of growing interest in historiographic metafiction has been the proliferation of historical novels which thematically and/or structurally resemble, reflect or reconstruct Victorian literature. According to Hutcheon, novels classed under this term are “intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically [laying] claim to historical events and personages.” (Hutcheon 5)

William Dalrymple’s tryst with Mughals in *The White Mughals* and *The Last Mughal*; Hilary Mantel’s *Cromwell trilogy*; Rushdie’s *The Enchantress of Florence* and Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis trilogy* are all recent examples of authors fueling their imagination by a prism-like and chimerical viewing of the past.

Eleanor Catton’s *The Luminaries*, if bracketed generically, would also fit the bill as a piece of historiographic metafiction with a neo-Victorian lineage. Set in 1866, the text juxtaposes the pinnacle of conservative Victorian sensibilities with the binary of liberal colonial adventurism while tackling the primeval issues of human existence namely – love, fortune, Fate and living.

With reference to the sobriquet of Neo-Victorian text, Mark Llewellyn and Ann Heilmann suggest in their book *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (2010), “the ‘neo-Victorian’ is more than historical fiction set in the nineteenth century. To be part of the neo-Victorianism, [...] texts (literary, filmic, audio/visual) must in some respect be self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians.” (4)

But the categorization of Ms Catton’s text is not so easy and expedient. Besides being an interesting piece of Neo-Victorianism and historiographic metafiction, the text is also a bildungsroman with multiple omniscient narrators and authorial intrusion throughout the text. The text is Dickensian in its leisurely character depiction and the keen eye on bringing out the eccentricities in each character. The narrative is a bricolage of diverse themes- gender, astrological phenomenon, the motley temperament of human characters, the movement of human history and giving voice to the subaltern, the geographically antipodean perspective with a fine description of planetary movement and zodiac signs making human action predictable. Prof. John Scheckter opines that the text is “framed by a heavy armature of astrology” (123) while simultaneously carrying multiple levels of meaning “symbolism, allegory, irony, scientific method, legal process, ” sailor’s lore etc. while detailing the avarice for gold which has formed the subject matter of many important treatises on human need and greed.

The text can easily be labelled as on its way to becoming canonical since the author Ms Catton created a veritable storm in the literary world by having two remarkable feats to her credit viz. winning the famed Booker prize in 2013 at the youngest age for the lengthiest work ever to have been awarded the coveted prize. The initial reactions to the publication of her book were critical and judged her on gender principles of what is expected out of women’s writing rather than individualistic parameters. Commenting on her gendered conundrum, she confessed in various interviews that she was largely asked about her *emotions* rather than her *opinion*, working on the presumption that women’s writing was all about *experiencing* rather than *thinking*. "I have observed that male writers tend to get asked what they think and women what they feel.... The interviews much more seldom engage with the woman as a serious thinker, a philosopher, as a person with preoccupations that are going to sustain them for their lifetime" she says.

The subtle and methodical inter-connection between geographical location, planetary movement, human actions and mathematical and nautical calculation of destiny set on the vast landscape of gold-digging down under, was a canvas too vast for many critics who had the conventional notion of women’s fiction writing being repetitive polishing of *2 inches of ivory*.

*The Luminaries*, which is Ms Catton’s second work, delineates 12 characters on the basis of the 12 signs of the zodiac and their chance encounters and common concerns mirror the astrological phenomenon and planetary positions in the year 1866. The text, besides foraying into the genre of historical and experimental fiction, has numerous astrological references and surprisingly contrasts the capitalist enterprise with the work of Fate. Set in the town of Hokitika during the New Zealand gold rush, the text is populated heavily with gold diggers and goldsmiths, fortune hunters, whoremongers, inn-keepers, ambitious politicians, jailers and chaplains, with only two women finding a place in the form of Lydia Wells and Anna Wetherell. The latter is the pivotal point around which the entire text revolves. Arriving to make and mend her fortunes in the land of gold opportunity, Anna is beguiled and reluctantly becomes a ‘member of the oldest profession’ while willingly adopting opium to assuage her conscience.

*The Luminaries* gives an insightful account of the lives of women in mushrooming urban spaces during the 19th century, especially places where they were cornered and at the periphery rather than the centre of the action, and offers a wonderful bricolage of historical fiction and gender perspectives holding contemporary relevance in the context of identifying stereotypes of female presence in public spaces as well as examining the motivations behind the Capitalist enterprise. The novel has a total of 18 male characters and only 2 females. A largely articulated charge against cataloguing the annals of the past is that it is (His) story and not (Her) story and Ms Catton has attempted to belie this charge by making Anna Wetherell the cynosure of the town of Hokitika in spite of her dishonourable profession and scandalous lifestyle.

In an age and time when the by-word for depicting our civilization is decadence, the creation of a new world and settlement of a colony are large themes unexplored. It is at the periphery of human civilization, away from Big Brother's looming eye that savageness becomes rampant, but in the newly founded town of Hokitika preservers of the intangible social contract of civility and civilization are aplenty. The town is in fact a microcosmic replica of the old world with a cemetery, a church, and a jail to anchor prospectors who think that they have left civilization behind.

Away from familial ties and beckoned by the sheen of unprocessed yellow metal, 'antipodean estrangement' is a term which clearly depicts the struggle of all who have left their birthplaces to try their hand at 'Gold Prospecting'. Quick fixes to garnering fortunes were as aplenty then as they are today for all stragglers who hope to make it big overnight.

In spite of luck playing a pivotal role in gold prospecting, Ms Catton emphasizes that one of the main themes of *The Luminaries*, as she sees it is 'the paradoxical relationship [...] between fate and the will' (Eleanor Catton in Conversation with Robert Macfarlane 63 min 57).

"Throughout Catton's narrative, there is a continuous chain of different paradoxical relationships: between fate and the will, the bounded and the boundless, the past and the present, and the relationship of the self with the self." (Donovan 60)

Besides the thematic crux, the narrative style employed by Ms. Catton also requires close analysis and comparison. A critic C.K. Stead wrote in *The Financial Times* regarding Ms. Catton's dense imbroglia and bemoaned that the text "doesn't allow me to forget, even for a moment, that *this is fiction* - the novel as game." As against a style of fiction with high level of reader involvement, to quote James Boyd White's perception regarding reading Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice* which

"Is meant to teach the reader how to read his way into becoming a member of an audience it defines-into becoming one who understands each shift of tone, who shares the perceptions and judgments the text invites him to make, and who feels the sentiments proper to the circumstances. Both for its characters and readers, this novel is in a sense about reading and what reading means."

The omniscient narrative perspective in *The Luminaries* with multiple authorial voices doesn't permit the reader to envision himself as a part of the text's journey and always keeps him at arm's length as a spectator and never as a participant.

The shift from a single authorial voice in Victorian fiction to multiple narrators with multiple viewpoints unveiling varied stances towards the self-same event is a chief hallmark of Ms Catton's stylistic innovation.

"The narrative method is suggestive of a kind of re-working of what T. S. Eliot famously named, in an essay on James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the 'mythical method'. The action of Joyce's great, difficult novel takes place on a single Dublin day in June 1904 but its celebration of the quotidian is ironized and intensified by self-conscious structural similarities with Homer's *Odyssey*." (Tate)

Expanding upon her own authorial intention, Ms Catton said:

"I wanted to know whether I was up to the challenge of writing a story firmly located in time and space.... I started reading, beginning with gold-rush history, which led me to the nature of wealth, which led me to confidence tricks and scams, which led me to fortune-telling, which led me to the stars."

In expanding upon her own theoretical beliefs and intellectual framework through fiction, she said "It is in my view a much better vehicle for philosophy than syllogisms and logical constructs."

Astrology and the planetary phenomenon form an inseparable part of the framework of the novel and 12 characters are moulded around the zodiac Signs with seven others forming the planetary framework. This bold modern forage into what is largely regarded as a *primaeval*, superstitious instinct forms one of the most challenging aspects of the text for a critic or reviewer who might assent to the author's view or reject it as savage and backward.

In fact, Ms Catton's very act of writing an old-fashioned tome of 830 pages with the assistance of astrological computer programming and Google Maps, in the age of Artificial Intelligence and Live Streaming, is itself like taking 4 steps forward to take 8 steps back to retreat into an age where the primeval instincts of man were a puzzle and it was a necessity to decode it to make sense of our lives today. This notion of being unable to write the novel without computers is a paradox in itself viz. that she is using the benefits of the digital present to write about the past, using a computer programme to watch the past unfold in the skies.

The structure of the text was also evolved with mathematical precision with each progressive chapter-length being the half of the previous one with the result of a 350-page first chapter and just 2 pages in the concluding chapter. Each chapter introduced the astrological chart for that particular day or time and Ms Catton's passion for the layout of the text *mise-en-page* showed great concern and expertise applied in designing the actual feel of the book.

Catton's *The Luminaries* has been an iconoclastic novel having challenged and overturned many stereotypes—whether it be regarding historiographic metafiction or the content and format of women's writing; whether about the rejection of the environment as only an agent and not an actor or about the magnificent sky overhead which illumines also and lights up our way; whether women are handmaidens or guardians of

destiny; whether about uncharted territories being dystopian outposts or utopias; and whether historical understanding is static or fluid and can we alter our past?

Robert Macfarlane, Chair of judges for the 2013 Man Booker Prize said of *The Luminaries* that it is ‘a book you sometimes feel lost in, fearing it to be ‘a big baggy monster...but it turns out to be as tightly structured as an orrery’ so in spite of the text rousing so many contradictions, it stands majestically in the glow of its own *Luminosity*.

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