

Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: A Postmodern Techno-Scientific Novel

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Abstract: Don DeLillo's *White Noise* has been a post-modernist work and as such it reveals the hectic life of the commercialized America. The mechanism has entered the social life so deeply that no one is free from its effect which is leading life towards nothing. The novel *White Noise* is based on the use of modern technology and the novelist has pointed out a very important aspect in this regard that it is both useful and dangerous. This modern mechanism has been employed in three ways -the television as the source of information and entertainment; the toxic event; and the Dylar episode and its disastrous consequences. Not only in America but even in other countries of the world, television is being used very widely. This has been presented through the atmosphere in Jack's family and its influence on the life and thought of the elders and the society. The present paper highlights the novelist's attempt in revealing the dangerous influence of the careless use of the scientific inventions and technology.

Key Words: Technology, Media, Scientific Invention, Television, Dylar, Toxic Event.

Don DeLillo's dense, lyrical, precise novels have come to be considered as classics of American postmodern literature. Don DeLillo was not on the lists of major contemporary American authors until his novel *White Noise*, which received the National Book Award, appeared in 1985. *White Noise* was his funniest accessible book, less complexly structured, www.ijellh.com

more tradition and realistic in its portrayal of American life than his other works. Dealing with many different issues from technology to ecological disaster, satirizing institutions and modish University to the contemporary family (with multiple marriages, divorces, fractional siblings and parents), *White Noise* immediately became a popular text. In this novel, Don DeLillo is pre-occupied with the rise of technology, the power of images and the pervasiveness of the media. Like many postmodernists, Don DeLillo finds popular culture highly compelling where celebrities, cult figures, and pop icons appear frequently throughout his novels. In *White Noise*, the postmodern condition is manifested as a kind of information overload, as the protagonist, Jack Gladney moves through a world increasingly submerged in marketing imagery and media stimuli. Don DeLillo's novels are also characteristically postmodern in the anxious skeptical way they treat the question of knowledge. Philosophically, postmodernism contends that real and definitive knowledge is impossible as the truth is forever shifting and relative. Complex and intricately woven, Don DeLillo's novels string together a never-ending web of connections that ultimately frustrate any attempt to draw definite conclusions.

Throughout *White Noise*, Jack Gladney, the narrator, constantly connects seemingly random events, dates, and facts in an attempt to form a cohesive understanding of his world. Behind that attempt lies a deep-seated need to find meaning in a media-obsessed age driven by images, appearances, and rampant material consumption. Although Don DeLillo's novels are always violating formal and generic expectations, they return repeatedly to a group of themes, patterns, and images. But *White Noise* is a traditional, realistic and domestic novel focussed on a single middle-class family in a typical American town. In *White Noise*, all characters are common human beings without specific heroic or villainous characteristics. Their habits and tastes represent urban multi-cultural and multi-racial modern liberal democratic culture. The characters are not three-dimensional because Don DeLillo believes that people, in the novel, must play a role that is subservient to pattern and form. The characters are post-modern and, in emotions or cultural beliefs, are influenced by consumerism and technology. They are agnostic in beliefs and exposed to violence, individual and also to technology. They lack

directions as in traditional novels. The air-borne toxic event is a chemical disaster which is ecological and shows bad impact of technology. The other event which introduced traditional elements in the novel is toxic, mysterious, unlicensed medicine to cure psycho-abnormality i.e. fear of death. The novel presents a modern American complex family of common people with no heroic or villainous tendencies. According to Mark Conroy, author of "From Tombstone to Tabloid: Authority Figured in *White Noise*", this illustrates "what one could call DeLillo's Law of Consumption: that people expend money in direct proportion to their fear of death or dishonor" (Conroy 102).

Faceless and beyond the grasp of the individual, technology makes everyone anonymous. Murray remarks: "This is the whole point of technology. It creates an appetite for immortality on the one hand. It threatens universal extinction on the other. Technology is lust removed from nature" (DeLillo 285). The television is being used as the most common and the easily used medium among the families. The members of the Jack family use it regularly and the children are particularly interested in it. Like many other family in American Society, the mother, Babette, has made it a tradition for the family. When all of them gather in the evening on a certain day, they enjoy it together but their reaction to the programmes displayed are quite different. In the family of Jack, they hear different voices and sometimes there are inscrutable sounds which nobody understands. So, for them, they are meaningless and this is why, they have been termed as white noises. But there are some in distant lands, away from America, who have never seen anything like television, as Wilder's half brother Eugene living in South East Asia. The Jack family enjoys various programmes like music, sports as well as some very important news. Babette has declared that they will view the television on every Friday night as it has become a system because she thinks that this attitude will make the viewing of television a healthy entertainment. It is a source of the information of great disaster and invites his parents to see and know about it, in detail, on the television footing. As a source of courage for the important news, they get the detailed information of the toxic event on television, though not quite accurately. This news spreads everywhere only through television. But then, we also come to know that in Blacksmith, it is not very popular. It being a small town, the information for evacuation spreads quickly. Jack states: "I began to grow in

value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I forgotten existed. . . . Our images appeared on mirrored columns, in glassware and chrome, on T.V. monitors in security rooms” (DeLillo84)

In American life, media plays a very important role in society. People are angry that no report is being broadcast on radio about the present condition in the area regarding the toxic event and they can know nothing about it from any other means. There are supermarkets where peculiar types of things are sold and the choice of Murray is quite different and he considers that the supermarket is full of mysteries. People visit there in large numbers for the purchase of new things.

Television had captured the mind of the people so strongly that the disembodied voices from television spoke through them. Even Mata Devi, living in ashram, is using these technological technologies which indicate their powerful effect on the mind and heart of the American society.

The most powerful reference to this technology is given in the incident of invention of Dylar tablets. These scientists are aware of the fact that if they try it on human beings, it can be dangerous to their lives and can affect the working of the brain. But it is invented to remove the fear of death and some other such maladies. This is why; Babette is attracted to them and works there. She is so eager to get them that she offers even her body and secures two packs with thirty tablets which can be used once in seventy two hours. It is because of its reaction that forgetfulness has developed in her behaviour and everybody in the family notices it. They see that Willie Mink is regularly using them and, as a result, is actually loses his sense of propriety. When we find him in his room, he is in a completely disordered state. The very name Dylar, given to this tablet, is indicative of death. They, indirectly, suggest that such technology is taking humanity not to safety but to death. Later, even Babette realises that it was her mistake and she should not have taken them. Even Winnie Richards fails to know much about them though she makes every effort. Doctors have heard nothing about it and Denise had been consulting the medical books but finds no reference to any such medicine. It is this tablet that creates differences between Jack and Babette. Denise is always suspicious but Babette does not tell them anything about the laboratory and the man engaged in

preparing Dylar. Jack is also out to seek comfort from the fear of death and so wishes to try them at least once but his search remains futile. Once, he suddenly comes to know through Winnie that the real name of the inventor of Dylar is Mr. Gray who lives at German town. He reaches the hotel and finds Mr. Gray lying naked on a bed in the motel. Willie Mink has not only lost his mind but is also unable to differentiate between words and the real acts. He begins doing and talking anything that someone tells him without any fear of death. At the mention of 'falling plane', he takes the position as if the plane is actually falling: "He hit the floor, began crawling toward the bathroom . . . showing real terror. . . . He tried to wriggle behind the bowl, both arms over his head, his legs tight together" (DeLillo311). The same effect is created by 'hail of bullets'. Jack shoots him but Mink speaks that he has killed himself. Though he aims at Jack and wounds his wrist. Thus, we notice that he has lost more than half of his mind and is ruined. Mink's inability, to differentiate between words and the things they represent, reflects that the real and the artificial have lost the separating line. Murray's advice to kill someone to overpower the fear of death is also the use of such technology. Thus, the wounding and mental loss of Mink shows the evils of the modern technology.

Media is an important character in *White Noise*. Besides television; radio, supermarket and tabloid play important roles. Jack ponders, "The tabloid future, with its mechanism of a hopeful twist to apocalyptic events, was perhaps not so very remote from our own immediate experience. . . . Out of some persistent sense of large-scale ruin, we kept inventing hope" (DeLillo146-47). Babette reads various tabloids to inform blind old Treadwell. Jack paid little attention to the readings earlier in the novel. After the Nyodene incident, he starts taking deep interest. Babette discovers Dylar from the tabloids. Murray considers supermarket as a storehouse of mysteries. Tabloids publish stories of miraculous savings, of mankind, sights of celebrities long dead as mass-icon Elvis Presley, alien cultures, proofs of after life, the belief systems advertisements, Dylar addicts and so on. Paul Maltby, a postmodern critic, implies this perception in his article *The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo*:

In *White Noise*, the tabloids are seen to function as a concealed form of religious expression, where extraterrestrials are substituted for messiahs and

freakish happenings for miracles. In short, on a wavelength of which we are virtually unconscious, the tabloids gratify our impulses toward the transcendental; they ask profoundly important questions about death, the afterlife, God, worlds and space, yet they exist in an almost Pop Art atmosphere (Maltby 268).

The modern technology and its consequences have best been reflected in the toxic effect. One of the major themes in *White Noise* is the effect of modern technology on human life. Its most important example is the toxic event. One day Heinrich, the son of Jack, notices the smoke rising at some distance and tells his father that perhaps it is the result of some derailment. There are engines and police vans but they maintain distance. In the beginning, these smoke clouds are moving in another direction and it seems that they are not dangerous to the township of Blacksmith but suddenly their direction changes. The neighbour tells that the spill from the tank car was thirty five thousand gallons. Initially, they consider it harmless but slowly it grows bigger. Suddenly, there are air-raid sirens which warn the people. People are afraid and look at the clouds through the glasses again and again. This toxin may cause nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath and palpitations. The family of Jack, like those of many others, eats peacefully without any annoyance. But suddenly there was great noise and Heinrich informed them that the authorities had issued the orders for evacuation. As this warning out-nerved them, they made quick preparations and started moving in cars. The Scene of the road was of great confusion and hurry. The absence of media attention stops the immediate terror from the citizens, making the whole event seem less important, and "because the evacuees are attuned to the forms, genres, and in fact the larger aesthetics of television, they experience a lack, a sense of emptiness" (Duvall 130). There was nothing but the light of the headlights of cars. The traffic was jammed so much that it was practically crawling. The air-raid sirens were sounding everywhere. The smoke contained Nyodene D consequently increasing the rain, snow and confusion. The dogs and the Mylex men were called to deal with the situation. There were volunteers to help and guide the people. At last, they reached the camp where there was already a great crowd. The people gathered everywhere for news. Heinrich was telling the people the scientific aspect of this happening. The technicians check

the people if they have been affected by the poison of the toxic cloud. Jack was also interrogated and they asked him many questions if he had gone out of car even for a moment. The people belonged to SIMUVAC group who had been specially trained for such calamities. Jack was tired of the suffocation and came out where he saw Murray talking to the prostitutes. After sometimes, he sleeps but is awakened by another announcement that the direction of the toxic cloud had turned towards the camp and they must get into their cars. There is confusion again and in spite of rain and snow, all the people start running. On their way to the Iron city, they notice that the toxic clouds have been surrounded by the helicopters which are giving out organisms that will consume these clouds. They reach the Iron city at dawn. Babette fears that the modern technology is creating difficulty in their lives. Some people complain that the authorities are not doing anything to help them. They have to stay there for more than a week and the toxic clouds are fully removed after nine days when they are allowed to go back to their homes. Jack's doctor sends him for detailed examination and tests because some symptoms of the poisonous effect are detected in him. However, this increases in him the fear of death all the more and he feels that he is already a dead man. As Jack states, "There's something artificial about my death. It's shallow, unfulfilling. I don't belong to the earth or sky" (DeLillo 283).

Though technology is an important element in *White Noise*, there is no account of computer and internet, the present craze of information technology. Worldwide web came into being in 1990. In Gladney's home, television, radio and phone-calls from all over the world only present a hint of the coming of information innovations. Communication is global, Jack notices when he talks to his ex-wife, Mata Devi from her ashram. Generally, technology is viewed as benevolent as illustrated in Jack's visit to ATM.

So, in *White Noise*, the pervasive presence of technology proves both menacing and comforting. Throughout the novel, in counterpoint to the human babble of Jack's friends, family, and neighbours, modem technology asserts itself through the humming of machines and the constant stream of media sounds and images. Technology has become as much a part of the texture of daily life as humans are themselves. In fact, the two seem inextricable, as DeLillo's narrative weaves seamlessly between human and mechanical voices.

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