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*T.GangaParameswari,
Part-time Research Scholar,
Manonmaniam Sundaranar University,
Tirunelveli, India.

**Dr. P.Vedamuthan,
Asst. Prof.of English,
Manonmaniam Sundaranar University,
Tirunelveli, India
profgp2017@outlook.com

Soulful sonoran desert: an ecocritical reading of

Delillo's *point omega*

The representation of the environment as a major subject of fiction has been the emerging trend of literature studies. By close analysis of the textual reading of the environment where man lives leads to better understanding of the relation between man and his nature. Nature finds its best expression in texts which transparently reflect human experience in natural surroundings.

Glottfelty in *The Ecocriticism Reader* refers the position of man amidst the environmental disasters in this world, as “We humans are at the center, surrounded by everything that is not us, the environment” (xx). Don DeLillo has discussed much about the environment that has altered the attitude and the focus of man in this technical world. There arises the need to talk about environment as it plays a major role in designing the future of mankind.

Keywords: Environment, Haiku-War, Omega Point, Self-Realization

Joseph Meeker is one of the founders of ecocriticism. Meeker, in his *Fields of Danger and the Wilderness of Wisdom*, related the development of ecocriticism to the interdisciplinary educational movement. He says that, “the interdisciplinary movement that is crawling through universities these days is not an academic fad, but a response to the growing need among people everywhere to find a sense of integrity for their own lives and for their understanding of the world around them” (71). DeLillo has made a bold attempt to voice out the importance of research and education related to ecocriticism as today’s world is amidst environmental crises.

Raymond Lindeman in his, “The Trophic-Dynamic Aspect of Ecology” in 1942 defines the term ‘ecosystem’, as “the system composed of physical-chemical-biological processes active within a space-time unit of any magnitude, i.e., the biotic community plus its abiotic environment” (qtd., in Dana Philips, *The Truth of Ecology*). Thereby the ecocritics urge the human race to understand the importance of environment and its maintenance.

Simon Estok has stated in 2001 that “ecocriticism has distinguished itself, debates notwithstanding, firstly by the ethical stand it takes, its commitment to the natural world as an important thing rather than simply as an object of thematic study, and, secondly, by its commitment to making connections” (220). Thus Ecocriticism in broad sense means commitment to various forms of engagement with the earth including environmental awareness, and ecological values. This article talks about the re-vision of the understanding of nature through the characters of the novella *Point Omega*.

DeLillo’s *Point Omega* circles with three characters Elster, an aged man, Finley, the director, and Jessie, Elster’s daughter. *Point Omega* deals with the life of Elster, aged seventy-three, who intricates himself in the secret planning of the Iraq war. He leaves to the

Sonaran desert to find solace. He is comfortable in that place. His living in that Sonaran desert appears to give a divine state to Elster. He questions, answers and philosophizes many things in his life. The other characters Finley and Jessie too encounter changes in their life during their stay in the desert.

Elster's self-realization occurs when he recollects the incidences that really happened at the pentagon. He conceptualizes his help at the Pentagon towards framing an intellectual effort of the Iraq War. He comments his work place, the third floor of the E ring at the pentagon as, bulk and swagger. He recollects his past with pain. Having been wounded heavily as a member of the war, he renounces everything, including his family. He never wants to recollect or miss anything so far he enjoyed in his city. He wishes to rest peacefully in that desert. His life has changed a lot. He finds time to see 'what' surrounds him. He wonders at the brightness of the sun. He is able to feel the warmth of the burning sun, which releases him from his routine nausea of news and traffic in the city.

In the morning, Elster braves the sun. He needs to enrich his supply of vitamin D and raises his arms sunward, and prays to God. He also wishes to see the big horn sheep, a rare species seen in that desert. He has a sentimental belief of getting a meaning in his life if he could see that sheep. The sheep seem to be a symbol denoting the completion of the process of self-realization. The life of Elster in the desert reminds the readers of city dwellers that these are also the components of life that has not been admired or noted.

Elster relates his realization of self through the philosophical concept of time and space. Time, Space and Man links the story. In the desert, he thinks he can rediscover his space and time. The desert has both extensions of space and elongation of time. The grandeur of the landscape arrests and inspires him. He learns life in a different dimension what he has not been exposed. Finley comments on Elster's stay in the desert in the following lines,

This was desert, out beyond cities and scattered towns. He was here to eat, sleep and sweat, here to do nothing, sit and think. There was the house and then nothing but distances, not vistas or sweeping sightlines but only distances. He was here, he said, to stop talking. (PO 22)

Distance relieves Elster from all the burdens of this world at his late age. He further compliments nature and time as, “Time slows down when I’m here. Time becomes blind. I feel the landscape more than see it. I never know what day it is. I never know what day it is. I never know if a minute has passed or an hour. I don’t get old here.” (PO 30). The desert is a distancing landscape that changes Elster’s altitude and attitude of life.

The revolution of the day and night and the passing of time strengthen Elster’s concept of living. He is determined not to go to the city again as he is comfortable with the timeless moments of the Sonoran desert. Finley inquires Elster, about his further move to his city, “You have a life back there” (PO 30). Finley wonders at his reply, “A Life. That may be too strong a word” (PO 30).

The life Elster leads in the desert seem to be a true life packed with emotions and feelings. He compares his earlier life in the city to his life now in the desert. He analyses and realizes the mistakes, he committed in the city. His recollection and ruminations reveal his true life as expressed by him, “The true life is not reducible to words spoken or written. Not by anyone, and ever. The true life takes place when we’re alone, thinking and feeling, lost in memory, dreamingly self-aware, the submicroscopic moments” (PO 21). He enjoys the independence, the treasure of the desert, and his union with the different forms of nature. Elster’s assessment of the structure of the city is:

Cities were built to measure time, to remove time from nature... all embedded, the hours and minutes, words and numbers... train stations, bus routes, taxi meters, surveillance cameras ... people checking watches and other devices, other reminders. This is time draining out of our lives. (PO 57).

Through Elster, DeLillo makes a sharp contrast between cityscape and desert landscape. He expresses his liking of the desert with a reason that follows the quote:

Look at all this,” he said, not looking at it, the landscape and sky, which he’d indicated with a backwards sweep of the arm.

We don’t look at it either.

Day turns to night eventually, but it’s a matter of light and darkness, it’s not time passing, mortal time. There’s none of the usual terror. It’s different here, time is enormous, that’s what I feel here, palpably. Time that precedes us and survives us.” (PO 56)

Elster parallels his stay in the Sonoran desert to a spiritual retreat. Elster finds the French philosopher Tedhard de Chardin’s concept of *Omega Point* as relevant to his thinking and imagination in the desert, which means beyond consciousness and human evolution. Elster’s conception of life has been changed. The vastness of the desert, the variety of species in the desert and the comfort of the warm sun throughout the day measure his attitude of life. Finley observes Elster’s attitude of life in the following lines,

Elster retires in the desert to do nothing. He also wishes to stop talking. Deep time, To see what’s here, finally to look and know you are looking, to feel time passing, to be alive to what is happening in the small registers of motion. (PO 6 – 7)

Elster and Finley frequently discuss, drink and think philosophically. His daughter Jessie surprises them and spends some days with them. Jessie, a peculiar character twists the mind of Elster and Finley. Jessie compares city life to the desert. Elster discusses with Jessie about the 24 Hour Psycho of Hitchcock. 24 Hour psycho, a slowed down documentary that Elster and Finley had watched, was highly appealing to Elster.

Elster recollects the forgotten and neglected moments about the universe and comments about the film as he is watching the universe die over a period of about seven billion years. Everyone finds the film appealing, but at the same time, it is beyond

understanding. It is again the omega point, where man ends up finding, what is, further, and at a still point, simply accepts something when he could not change or fight further and calls it as fate or philosophy of life.

Frank Lentricchia characterizes DeLillo's novels as "montages of tones, styles, and voices that have the effect of yoking together terror and wild humour as the essential tone of contemporary America" (2). Elster and Finley observe Antony Perkin to have shown more philosophical thoughts. They comment on the slow motion of the killer in the film as follows, In the time it took for Antony to turn his head, there seemed to flow an array of ideas involving science and philosophy and nameless other things or maybe he was seeing too much. The less there was to see, the harder he looked, the more he saw. This was the point. (PO 6)

Jessie interprets the film as, "the heat death of the Universe" (PO 60). Jessie's admiration of the nature also has been brought out when her father promised her to show a bighorn sheep. She wanders around the desert with the expectation of the child as expressed in the text as, "She went slack-jawed and held her hands out, palms up, like where did this come from, like what did I do to this, eyes wide, a dumbfounded cartoon child" (PO 84). Unlike Finley, Jessie's visit to the desert is for a temporary relief. Suddenly the novel witnesses Jessie's missing. Elster is disturbed at the news of his daughter's missing. As an aged father, he struggles to find his daughter but fails instead.

Elster is a less expressive person; he could have sent thousands of soldiers to war and made them die willingly. The missing of her daughter haunts him heavily when he gets a loss or a threat of death in the form of his daughter, Jessie's disappearance with no hint. Like an ordinary father, Elster wanted to stay alive and conscious to protect his child from a scary, collapsing world. This incident moves Elster towards a human longing that he had never experienced before. Though Elster headed a mission of destruction he confesses, "I hate

violence. I fear the thought of it, won't watch violent movies, turn away from news reports on television that show dead or wounded people... Violence freezes my blood". He continues, Look at us today. We keep inventing folk tales of the end. Animal diseases spreading, transmittable cancers. What else?"

"The climate," I said.

"The climate."

"The asteroid," I said.

"The asteroid, the meteorite. What else?"

"Famine, worldwide."

"Famine," he said. "What else?"... (PO 64)

DeLillo proves himself to be an anti-war writer, as it is evident in his urge for a 'Haiku war' represented in his *Point Omega*. Elster at one point opines his idea regarding war:

War creates a closed world and not only for those in combat, but for the plotters, the strategists.... They became paralyzed by the systems at their disposal. Their war is abstract. They think they're sending an army into a place on a map. (PO 35)

He discusses with Finley about the blur of technology, the army and the philosophy of war, We're a crowd, a swarm. We think in groups, travel in armies. Armies carry the gene for destruction. One bomb is never enough. The blur of technology, this is where the oracles plot their wars. Because now comes the introversion. Father Teilhard knew this, the omega point. A leap out of our biology. Ask yourself this question. Do we have to be human forever? Consciousness is exhausted. Back now to inorganic matter. This is what we want. We want to be stones in a field. (PO 66-67)

The concept of Haiku War is insisted by Elster, who intends to put an end to war forever. His realization sometimes makes him prophesize that America needs a great power

to act and to retake the future. He talks about 'Haiku War' which means 'nothing beyond what it is'. He also warns that this is "the time to close everything. This is what drives us now" (PO 37). He further exclaims, "Haiku means nothing beyond what it is. A pond in summer, a leaf in the wind. It's human consciousness located in nature. It's the answer to everything in a set number of lines, a prescribed syllable count. I wanted a haiku war" (PO 37). Indeed, he seems to be the mouthpiece of DeLillo in that he gets the understanding of meaningful life which the author aims. Elster derives a philosophical understanding of condensing life to time.

Elster questions the threatening facts about man's existence and comments sarcastically on the doomed life which subjects individuals to live beneath the running thoughts and dim images created by the constructed world. He expects individuals to wander idly and face death honestly. This is how people live and think whether they know it or not. He further explains,

I looked at kinescope of the early years, every distant minute, it was another civilization, midcentury America, the footage resembling some deviant technological life form struggling out of the irradiated dust of the atomic age. (PO 32)

On par with Elster, Finley also spends time to analyse his surroundings and the world. His self-realization gets deeper and goes beyond to transcend the thinking of an ordinary human being. His realization enables him to include the species other than human in his living space. He ruminates his thoughts, and utters, "I tried to think of further workable prospects for the end of human life on earth" (PO 65). He even talks about extinct animals, "There was a North American camel. Where is it now?" (PO 65). He foretells the end of man's evolution and the state of man in the following lines, "We'll be here the way flies and mice are here, localized, seeing and knowing nothing but whatever our scant nature allows.

A dim idyll in the summer flatlands” (PO 90). He even says about the rule of extinction in such a way as,

Time falling away. That’s what I feel here, Time becoming slowly older. Enormously old. Not day by day. This is deep time, epocal time. Our lives, redeeming into the long past. That’s what’s out there. The Pleistocene desert, the rule of extinction. (PO 91)

Finley learns a different thing out of his experience as a director. He understands the current mode of living by observing the lonely life led by Elster in the desert and states, He knew where he was, in his chair, alive to the proto-world. I thought, the seas and reefs of ten million years ago. He closed his eyes, silently diving the nature of later extinctions, grassy plains in picture books for children, a region swarming with happy camels and giant zebras, mastodons, saber tooth tigers. Extinction was a current theme of his. (PO 25)

Finley alarms the human community about the extinction of man in the coming ages. Like Elster, the concept of distance distances Finley from all the hectic nuisance of his busy city life. Finley confirms his liking of the desert in the coming lines, “I didn’t miss movies. The landscape began to seem normal, distance was normal, heat was weather and weather was heat” (PO 81). Elster and Finley really enjoy their simplified living in the desert. The text extracts their unbound joy in the following lines;

We drove in silence behind a motorboat being towed by a black pickup. I thought of his remarks about the matter and being, those long nights on the deck, half smashed, he and I, transcendence, paroxysm, the end of human consciousness. It seemed so much dead eco now. Point Omega. A million years away. The omega point has narrowed, here and now, to the point of a knife as kit centers a body. All the man’s grand themes funneled down to local grief, one body, out there somewhere or not. (124)

Similar to the experiences of Elster and Finley, Jessie does encounter differences and is entertained by the vastness of the desert. Though Jessie’s missing is untraceable, it is clear

that Jessie encounters some problem in the family and in the city. Like Elster, Jessie could not think beyond and proceed further, but finds comfort in the desert. Even after all types of efforts taken by Elster, including the emergency camps to find Jessie, no clue assures her missing to be a suicide or an elopement. Jessie finds secured in the hands of the desert than the parental comfort. It seems the Sonoran desert extends its hands towards Jessie, who lost herself physically and mentally in the desert without letting any trace so that her union with nature could never be disturbed.

In short, *Point Omega* reflects what DeLillo captures as meaningful life and its realities in the uncertain postmodern society. Here in this novel, desert symbolizes order, peace, controlled time and action to regulate man's endeavours. The desert is an imagery where one examines, realizes and repairs to simplify and purify oneself. Michael Oriard, a critic comments on seeking comfort in the desert as, "DeLillo's characters... seek release from their lives of quiet desperation in modes of asceticism" (5).

DeLillo has made desert asceticism as a spiritual reconciliation as a mark of purification and simplification, that is directly related to the mind's process. It is really a hectic task to overcome the depressed and strained mind. Only something beyond consciousness could mend the struggling mind. The realization of self is a very important process in the enrichment of one's personality. Only Nature, with its raw and rough face could tamper the process of realization. The words of Bateson best suits the power of 'Nature' expressed by DeLillo in his fiction;

we should not deconstruct out of existence the difference between human artifices such as class and city and the non-human given of nature – as Cultural Materialism in particular is apt to do- because Whatever our class, nature can do something for us. Nature is calling to us in a voice like that of our primal mother' (67)

As per the views of the ecocritics, DeLillo has analysed the super power of nature. Nature has the power to coordinate all the disordered and collapsed state of human community. Nature deserves the priority, and it is needed for the betterment of all individuals. The author has explicitly provoked one's search for peace, health, solitude and spiritual transcendence through the process of self-realization of the characters of his novel. All citizens, especially Americans at the millennial crossroads, find DeLillo's novels as a compliment, a synthesis of the moment since they explain the art of living in an artistic way amidst the techno-world.

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