

## ENVIRONMENTAL REAWAKENING IN DON DELILLO'S WHITE NOISE

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### Abstract

*New advancements in technology and science claim to have made the lives of the humans easier and much efficient, but seldom does our rationality pay attention to the fact that our environment has got affected by such developments, that too adversely. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean Francois Lyotard identifies the postmodern as an era in which it is no longer possible to call development progress. "It seems to proceed on its own accord, with a force, an autonomous motoricity that is independent of us" (77-78). Don DeLillo in *White Noise* puts forward his ecocentric vision by exploring the devastating changes suffered by a small town of Blacksmith in the past few years. The media, consumerism, and technology saturated culture portrayed by DeLillo in *White Noise* presents environmental crisis suffered by the town of Blacksmith. The fictional characters show repressed, thus implicit awareness of the environment which is overshadowed by image dominated simulated world. This repressed awareness gives rise to a desire in the psyche of the characters to connect to their material world instead of the receding natural landscape that illuminates the environmental concerns of the writer and challenges the conditions of our post industrial society. The technological concerns advanced by DeLillo puts across his readers the fact that how in the garb of catering basic needs the so called development takes a devastating turn, creating poisonous waste as its by product.*

**Keywords:** *Environment, environmental concern, ecocentric, postmodern era, postindustrial age, simulacra.*

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**H**arrowing historical events like the Holocaust, the two World Wars, and the Vietnam War unleashed colossal violence on humanity and nature collectively and its repercussions continue to mark its presence even in the twenty-first century. Unfortunately, it took the notorious children of Mother Nature so many tormenting years to perceive the destructive capacities of advanced weapons and chemicals. The reaction towards the atrocities done on nature and humanity is voiced in literature which primarily focuses on the epidemic destruction done on humans and nature, and the separation of people from their natural surroundings. Such literature provides its readers with the knowledge of recognizing the adverse effects of their apathetic withdrawal from and exploitation of their natural surroundings. There are various narratives which focus on the eco-collapse-earth's total destruction that highlights economical concerns of the writers in contemporary culture. Cheryll Glotfelty, the first American professor of Literature and Environment in *The Ecocriticism Reader* shows her apprehension regarding the environmental problems, which she maintains, are largely of our own making. She evaluates:

We have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems. We are there. Either we change our ways or we face global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in our headlong race to apocalypse. Many of us in colleges and universities worldwide find ourselves in a dilemma. Our temperaments and talents have deposited us in literature departments, but, as environmental problems compound, work as usual seems unconscionably frivolous. If we're not part of the solution, we're part of the problem. (xxi)

Ecocritic Cynthia Deitering in *The Post Natural Novel: Toxic Consciousness in Fiction of 1980s* describes an "ontological transformation" America went through in the 1980s. As the

Americans grew capable of perceiving themselves in relation to pollution and its by-product, they realized their own persistent participation in the postindustrial environment. She defines this transformation as a “toxic consciousness.” She writes, “My premise is that during the 1980s we began to perceive ourselves as inhabitants of a culture defined by its waste, and that a number of American novels written during this period reflect this ontological transformation” (197). This transformation brought home to Americans the fact that their relationship with their natural surroundings has been completely broken by newly emerging technological and scientific advancements and given rise to many toxic wastes.

Don DeLillo’s novel, *White Noise*, published in 1985, investigates the repercussions of eco-collapse in the US during 1970s and 1980s. But the problems explored in relation to the environment remain neither confined to the US nor to 1980s. Through the portrayal of a fictional town called, Blacksmith, DeLillo voices out his environmental concern for the whole world which eventually caught the attention from ecocritics. By illuminating environmental crises due to the harmful effects of technology and simulacra dominated culture the fictitious characters live in, DeLillo wants to convey the problem of eco-collapse not only in America but across the global. *White Noise* turned out to be a breakthrough novel for DeLillo as it earned him a reputation of a serious critic of contemporary society. The novel aims to offer a critique on the postmodern American society by analyzing the reality of a society preoccupied with the rise of technology and scientific advancements, man’s slavish dependency on the machines and the media, and power of images.

The novel traces the life of Jack Gladney, his wife, Babette and their children from previous marriages, living harmoniously in a house at a quiet street of the town, Blacksmith. The town has many old fashioned houses, a number of supermarkets and shopping malls and an insane asylum. Jack Gladney is a professor of Hitler Studies at the College-on-the-Hill. It seems that everything is going fairly well for them until a chemical spill from a derailed tank car releases an “Airborne Toxic Event” which brings their suppressed fears to the surface. After reviewing *White Noise* many critics maintained that the novel prophesized the Bhopal disaster, which had engulfed the Indian town on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December, 1984. DeLillo’s *White Noise* proposes that a chemical catastrophe can hit anywhere in the world where toxic plants have

embedded their roots quite far and deep. In such places potential for danger is enormous-whether the USA or India. DeLillo's environmental concern is universal.

As America entered the Age of Capitalism myriad technological, cultural, electrical, industrial sounds began to seep through the social matrix of American society, making their presence ubiquitous and effect unavoidable. DeLillo's *White Noise* is an analysis of myriad electronic impulses that contemporary Americans are surrounded with. The blend of sounds—fragments of TV shows, radios, commercials, traffic noise, super market buzz etc seep through the narrative of the novel. These sounds played in the background of the narrative entwine together forming white noise. This noise becomes an integral part of the narrative of the novel. “The smoke alarm went off in the hallway upstairs, either to let us know the battery had died or because the house was on fire. We finished our lunch in silence”(9). The fact that smoke alarm does not bother them reflects that noise has, without the resistance from the characters, made a place in their lives. This shows the indifference of the characters to the myriad sounds running in the background.

DeLillo chooses the name ‘Blacksmith’ for the town where Jack Gladney resides with his family, “We live in a neat and pleasant town near a college with a quaint name” (133). The small town of Blacksmith, as Jack tells his readers, was once a forest where ravines used to flow. Jack informs his readers:

Babette and I and our children by previous marriages live at the end of a quiet street in what was once a wooded area with deep ravines. There is an expressway beyond the backyard now, well below us, and at night as we settle into our brass bed the sparse traffic washes past, a remote and steady murmur around our sleep, as of dead souls babbling at the edge of a dream. (4)

Jack, the narrator, apathetically informs us, that beyond their backyard now there runs no more “deep ravines” (4) but traffic on the expressway. The sense of safety Jack hints at is only imagined by him. He fails to perceive that it is the sound of bellowing horns, though remote yet steady, and not “deep ravines” (4) that falls him to sleep. New advancements in technology and scientific world in postindustrial age claim to have made the lives of the humans easier and much efficient, but seldom does our rationality pay attention to the fact that our environment has also

got affected by such developments, that too adversely. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-Francois Lyotard identifies the postmodern as an era in which, It is no longer possible to call development progress. It seems to proceed of its own accord, with a force, an autonomous motoricity that is independent of us. It does not answer to demands issuing from human needs. On the contrary, human entities - weather social or individual - always seem destabilized by the result and implications of development. (77-8)

It is time and again projected in the novel that Blacksmith, a small town, is quite unlike the city. Murray Siskind, who is a collogue of Jack's in the college, often voices out his immense liking for the town of Blacksmith, as it offers him to think clearly on important issues like "death, disease, afterlife, outer space" (42). Murray's experience of living in the city is not a pleasant one. According to him, the city emits huge amount of heat from everywhere that makes it hotter than the rest of the places. The city inhabits cunning and crafty people. While living in the city, Murray once encounters a woman who needs his semen in a divorce suit. Blacksmith, on the contrary, offers protection to its inhabitants. It is a place that has an insane asylum and a barn. Conversely, behind this soothing façade of bucolic and relaxed life resides the ugly truth of rising consumer and simulacra dominated culture. The town resonates with the postmodern elements like supermarket, shopping malls etc. Elise Martucci in the book, *The Environmental Unconsciousness in the Fiction of Don DeLillo* writes, "It is obvious that the town's name, not its physical environment is what offers Murray Siskind pleasure. Blacksmith despite its removal from the city, is not rural and seem to project very little of the natural" (78). The town is in no manner rural or rustic but simply pretence of such ideas. "That chirping sound was just the radiator" (112), informs Jack to his readers. The presence of artificial things and materialistic surroundings highlight the absence of natural things. *White Noise* has the potential of conveying the importance of the natural environment to the reader's consciousness, if not the characters. DeLillo is certainly not the first writer to raise issues of technological encroachments on nature but the way he contests such issues makes the readers rethink who otherwise have lost the capacity to get surprised and shocked by such content.

DeLillo's fictional characters suffer from environmental unconsciousness. Ecocritic Lawrence Buell's in *Writing for an Engendered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* coined the concept of environmental unconsciousness. Buell's

environmental unconsciousness suggests that there is suppressed awareness in the humans regarding their physical environment. The characters of the novel have a feeling of impending doom around them all the time. Fear and uncertainty haunt them. They rely on drugs as a means to escape from their natural feelings. The days of finding peace and serenity amidst nature are much behind them now. The characters scurry to shopping malls, restaurants whenever want to seek peace. They watch disaster footage on TV and feel secure in their cozy living rooms. Life insurance gives them an illusion that they have power over their future. This, according to Buell, is the damaging aspect of environmental unconsciousness; the inability of individuals to become fully aware of their natural environment through thought and expression. Jack's thirteen year old son, Heinrich's receding hairline is a matter of concern for Jack. He keeps pondering over the source of this problem more than the solution and feels guilty at times thinking if he is the man responsible for his son's condition by raising him in the "vicinity of a chemical dump site" (25). Jack is not unaware of the repercussions of living in such an environment but he feels helpless in the face of technology advancing at ever increasing rates. He knows that the toxic from the factories not only affects the health of the living beings but is the sole reason behind the "glorious sunsets"(25) of the town. Methane that emits from the toxic garbage of the town towards the sky gives out multiple colors during the sunset: "there is something ominous in the modern sunsets"(72). After the "airborne toxic event" sunsets become more beautiful and spectacular and they last for an hour in Blacksmith. Natural sunsets gradually become artificial.

Ecocritic, Dana Phillips, in his article, Don DeLillo's *Postmodern Pastoral* maintains that the role of nature is overshadowed by the strong cultural signals present in the novel, *White Noise*; "even as awareness of it [nature] is echoed in certain moments of the novel, tends to get lost in the haze of cultural signals, or 'white noise' that Jack Gladney struggles and largely fails to decipher" (241). The characters are surrounded by the simulacra all the time which restrain them from fully realizing the importance and role of nature. DeLillo reveals that the encroachment of technology on nature generates a sense of insecurity, unhappiness, and uncertainty in the residents of the town, because of environmental unconsciousness in them. The episode of "The Most Photographed Barn" is quite evident in revealing to the readers the extent of the environmental consciousness repressed in the characters. The barn which is the symbol of rural bliss, peace and simplicity is shown usurped by simulacra dominated society. The natural beauty of the barn is interrupted by the billboards, tour busses, a photo booth, and number of

cameras carried by the visitors. The focus of the tourists is on the barn created by the images rather on the natural barn itself. Siskind cannot be more right when he tells Jack that “no one sees the barn. We’re not here to capture an image, we’re here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura”(14).

Part II of the novel titled, *The Airborne Toxic Event*, reflects an example of man-made apocalypse. *The Airborne Toxic Event* is the name given to the accident that takes place in Blacksmith when a car tank carrying toxic chemicals derails. Jack is in awe when he sees the cloud before him closely the first time, “It was a terrible thing to see, so close, so low, packed with chlorides, benzines, phenols, hydrocarbons, or whatever the precise toxic content” (148). This toxic spill takes the shape of a colossal cloud and hovers over the town like a death curse. The appearance of this deadly cloud is only a tip of the iceberg. It is soon made clear that even a two minute exposure in the cloud can prove fatal to the inhabitants. The toxic cloud permeates into Jack’s body and as it is revealed later, it may have reduced his life expectancy.

Jack’s intellectual son, Heinrich, is well acquainted with the constituent chemicals involved in the toxic cloud—Nyodene Derivative or Nyodene D. “Nyodene D. is a whole bunch of things thrown together that are byproducts of the manufacture of insecticide. The original stuff kills roaches, the byproduct kill everything left over”(153). Jack is informed of the detrimental effects of Nyodene D. on biotic and abiotic bodies. “This death would penetrate, seep into the genes, show itself in bodies not yet borne”(135). The administration finds it hard to control the disaster which is persistently growing in size and its capacity for destruction; from “feathery plume” (129) to “black billowing cloud”(132) to “the airborne toxic event (136).” The toxic cloud is disintegrated by blowing micro-organisms into it. Jack and Babette can’t help wondering about the fate of the micro organisms. “No one seemed to know how a group of microorganisms could consume enough toxic material to rid the sky of such a dense and enormous cloud. No one knew what would happen to the toxic waste once it was eaten or to the microorganisms once they were finished eating” (187). These microorganisms become the potential toxic bearers, a byproduct of the airborne toxic cloud. Such inventions that claim to work for the sake of the humanity destroy the very substance of life on the earth. Lawrence Buell, in his 1995 work, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature writing, and the Formation of American Culture* asserts the relationship humans share with their natural environment has changed a great deal

owing to technological and scientific advances in the society they live in. This has caused disconnection between the humans and the environment and they consequently have begun to face “environmental apocalypse.” America’s nuclear strikes on Japan in 1945 initiated environmental holocaust which, Buell Laments, “seems not only a potential by-product of nuclear attack but also imminent peril in its own right” (21). Unfortunately the *The Airborne Toxic Event* fails to bring any kind of environmental consciousness in the characters.

DeLillo’s portrayal of the town of Blacksmith and its inhabitants manifest his grave concern for the deteriorating environment and the incapacity of the humans to realize the growing dissociation from their natural environment. The novel demonstrates the dangers lurking in the postindustrial society and the power of the media to disguise the ugly face of the postindustrial age behind its gleaming consumer culture. The inhabitants of the blacksmith might not comprehend the role and importance natural world but an eco-critical study of the novel, undoubtedly, brings out the environmental concerns of the writer to forefront.

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