

Death and Consumerism: A Study of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

Abstract: *Death, in every epoch of human history, has been an unsolved mystery for various saints, philosophers, thinkers, and scientists. Because it is all pervasive and omnipresent and its effect irrevocable, it instils fear in everyone. The fear of death is one of the primitive fears which humans have now learnt to repress by constructing culture of consumerism. In the essay "The Culture of Postmodernism" Ihab Hassan quotes Ernest Becker having said that "the human body represents the "curse of fate" and the culture stands on repression, not only of sexuality as Freud thought, but also of mortality, because man, according to Becker is primarily an avoider of death. In other words, humans have, over the years, raised a culture that has repressed the source (sex) as well as the end (death) of their existence. The pervasive prevalence of consumer culture of the 20th century that dovetailed with the boom of cyber capitalism of the 21st century has given rise to culture of fetishism in the realm of which humans have learnt to repress their primal fears. The paper endeavors to study how the fear of death, though repressed, governs the lives of the fictional characters of Don DeLillo's novel White Noise.*

Keywords: *Death, Postmodernism, culture, repression, fetishism, cyber-capitalism.*

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Many critics have focused on the theme of death in the novel and observed that white noise is the electric sound of death. David Cowart in *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* clearly observes that DeLillo has attempted to transcend the metaphorical status of death by juxtaposing it with electromagnetic white noise of the surroundings (73). In other words, the white noise is the electric sound of death, as mentioned in the novel in the conversation between Gladney and his wife:

"What if death is nothing but sound?"

"Electrical noise."

"You hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful."

"Uniform, white."

"Sometimes it sweeps over me," she said. "Sometimes it insinuates itself into my mind, little by little. I try to talk to it. Not now, Death." (228)

Another critic, Diane Johnson in the review, "Conspirators," infers, "*White Noise* is a mediation on themes of whiteness—the pallor of death, and white noise, the sound, so emblematic of modern life, that it is meant to soothe human beings by screening out the other, more irritating noises of their civilization" (web). While working on *White Noise*, DeLillo confirms that he came across Ernest Becker's 1974 Pulitzer Prize winning non fictional work, *The Denial of Death*. David Cowart notes that Becker's book "not only discusses a culture-wide failure to come to terms with death (since we no longer have the spiritual wherewithal to keep it at bay) but also argues that our dread is the powerful motivating force within modern culture" (Physics 78). DeLillo employs the same idea in his novel, as suggested by Becker, that at the bottom of everything man does there is a deep seated struggle of his to avoid facing death since man is an avoider of death. The fear of death keeps haunting the fictional characters of the novel constantly and they avoid it by getting completely engrossed in myriad noises around them. The fear of death underlines everything and permeates everywhere in the novel as a subtext.

Jack Gladney, the narrator of the novel who betrays his compulsive fear of death from the very beginning but he does not disclose his fear to his wife, Babette nor does she until the last part of the novel. "Who will die first?" (17, 35, 115, 118) is the question that keeps popping up in the narrative highlighting the significance of the issue in the novel. This fear has instilled in Gladney the feeling of incompetence and insecurity which leads him to feel that his life is superficial and insignificant. He attempts to camouflage such weakness in his personality by choosing a different avatar and building his personality on the aura of the historical figure of Hitler. He informs the readers that he was warned by his then-chancellor against the possibility of appearing as a weak personality and had suggested him to take up an extra initial "J. A. K Gladney" (19) which according to Gladney is like "a tag that I wore like a borrowed suit" (19). He wears a pair of glasses with "thick black heavy frames and dark lenses," (19) which starts affecting his sight badly as he keeps seeing colored spots at the corner of his eyes. Even at Babette's imploration he doesn't remove them. His fear pushes him to a space where he is no longer comfortable in revealing his true self. For Gladney, Hitler ceases to be a dangerous figure responsible for the merciless massacre of Jews, but becomes a protective shield to ward off death. Whereas the name of Hitler is closely connected to the massacre of numerous people, in this case he gets transformed into a figure that is not larger than life but larger than death, a figure with the capacity to absorb death. Gladney likes to watch documentaries on Hitler on television, which has transformed the tyrannical figure of Hitler into an image, a mere representation. The repetitive airing of Hitler's documentary has turned Hitler into a mere spectacle. Paul Cantor in "Adolf, We Hardly Knew You," writes, "In particular, this situation results in the distinctively postmodern attitude toward history as a kind of museum, or better yet, a supermarket of

human possibilities, where people are free to shop around for their values and identities” (41). Gladney’s attitude towards the figure of Hitler is noteworthy as he becomes more than a utility chosen from an antique shop with a pure end of meeting his needs. He shows these documentaries to his students in College on the Hill with the sole aim of being identified as somebody virtually akin to Hitler. In one such documentaries of Hitler, he perceives:

Many of those crowds were assembled in the name of the death. They were there to attend tributes to the dead. Processions, songs, speeches, dialogues with the dead, recitation in the name of the dead. They were there to see pyres and flaming wheels, thousands of flags dipped in salute, thousands of uniformed mourners. There were ranks and squadrons, elaborate backdrops, blood banners and black dress uniforms. Crowds came to form a shield against their own dying. To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break off from the crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone. Crowds came for this reason above all others. They were there to be a crowd. (87)

This excerpt from the text reveals Gladney’s need of hiding himself behind others, be it Hitler or any other brutal historical figure like Genghis Khan or Atta, the Hun. He, in fact, identifies himself with the crowd in the documentary, each individual of which is hidden as the unidentifiable part of the mass crowd. Since death is an inevitable phenomenon that happens to every individual an individual, becoming a part of the crowd becomes a natural choice to lose one’s individuality and thus avoid death. This excerpt also alludes to the contemporary mass society in which the individuals have lost their personal sense of being and become of an indiscriminate whole.

Gladney feeds upon the image of Hitler as he has no access to the real Hitler, the latter being a historical figure. This suggests the power of image that works upon the contemporary human beings and changes the entire perception about life. Adolf Hitler, a dead warmonger, has been metamorphosed into a demigod that wields immeasurable power, by the agency of media by filming documentaries related to his exploits in World War II on television repeatedly. It becomes mandatory to refer to French theorist Jean Baudrillard who in *Simulacra and Simulations* (1994), asserts that while modern societies are arranged around the production and consumption of commodities, postmodern societies, in addition to this, also revolve around “simulation” and the play of signs and images. He notes:

Thus perhaps at stake has always been the murderous capacity of images: murderers of the real; murderers of their own model as the Byzantine icons could murder the divine identity. To this murderous capacity is opposed the dialectical capacity of representations as a visible and intelligible mediation of the Real. All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange—God, of course . . . Then the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer itself anything but a gigantic simulacrum—not unreal, but a simulacrum, that is to say never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference. (170)

In such a state a new social order has emerged that is entirely governed by simulacra where identities are constructed by images and codes that dictate the perception of individuals about them as well as others. He claims that in the era of postmodernism, societies have undergone the process of simulation whereby images gain a kind of a “murderous capacity” (170). In the societies preceding postmodernism, “a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange” (170). But in the contemporary societies, the entire system of signification is absorbed by the matrix and what remains behind, is “gigantic simulacrum” (170). Entertainment, information and modes of communication provided by television, advertisements, magazines, and radio have paved a way to the creation of a world of hyperreality that appeals man more than his monotonous but real everyday life. DeLillo, through the character of Jack Gladney, highlights the power of media to transform the signified into just another image or representation. We are thrown into a world of images that have no value or meaning. The reason he is fascinated with Hitler is because of his association with death, which, for Gladney, is all commanding and powerful. Gladney makes an effort to maintain the status he has created for himself since 1965 when the department of Hitler Studies was inaugurated. He admits, “I am the false character that follows the name around” (20). He has interiorized the aura of a head of Hitler studies that he feels exposed and rather vulnerable when one of his colleagues from the college who comments on his personality outside college. Seeing him without his black robe and thick framed dark glasses his colleague blurts out, “You look so harmless, Gladney. A big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy” (98).

As observed by Cowart that DeLillo transcends the metaphorical stance of death (73), it is through the incident of ‘Airborne Toxic Event’ that the death explicitly manifests itself in the novel. The incident occurs when a tank car carrying a toxic chemical, identified as “Nyodene Derivative or Nyodene D” (129), gets derailed and the toxic smoke escapes the tank. While evacuating the town Gladney gets exposed to the toxic smoke which intensifies his previous anxiety of death. In the rehab where all the inhabitants of the town are taking shelter, he meets a SIMUVAC technician who shows him the computer readouts depicting the presence of toxic chemical in his system. The following conversation between the two reflects the power of hyperreality generated by the computer which tries to establish Gladney’s death:

“You’re generating big numbers,” he said, peering at the screen.

“I was out there only two and a half minutes. That’s how many seconds?”

“It’s not just you were out there so many seconds. It’s your whole data profile. I tapped into your history. I’m getting bracketed numbers with pulsing stars. . . . I didn’t say it. The computer did. The whole system says it. It’s what we call a massive data-base tally. Gladney, J. A. K. I punch in the name, the substance, the exposure time and then I tap into your computer history. Your genetics, your personals, your medicals, your psychological, your police-and-hospitals. It comes back pulsing stars. This doesn’t mean anything is going to happen to you as such, at least not today or tomorrow. It just means you are the sum total of your data. No man escapes that. (163-165)

The technician feels no need to refer to the physical phenomenon as he totally relies on the abstract threat of data given out by the computer. As a result of too much reliance computers and abstract data Gladney feels the loss of control of his body. After witnessing this, Gladney feels that the network of symbols and zero-oneness are breaching his corporeality.

Babette, on the other hand, believes that no one would completely understand her fear and, therefore, she plays sly on her family. Her fear, unlike Gladney’s, manifests slowly but strongly over the time. She confesses, “I’m afraid to die . . . I think about it all the time” (225). Like Gladney too she finds it difficult to face the reality. She instead creates an alternate identity by changing her lifestyle so that she can ward off death because she believes, “We seem to believe it is possible to ward off death by following rules of good grooming” (31). She buys yogurt and wheat germ in order to improve her health but she never consumes them and as a result it often goes bad. She likes to teach old folks correct posture, benefits of eating healthy etc, as she believes that this can cure her of the fear. Babette is looking for solutions all the time to get rid of her fear. She finally comes across a solution in an advertisement on a tabloid, *National Examiner*, in which a company wanted volunteers for a secret research on eliminating a fundamental condition of human brain—the fear of death. Since, Babette suffers

from compulsive fear of death she participates in the trial of this new drug, Dylar. The project, however, is stopped in the middle as the scientists working on the drug realize its inefficiency in curbing the fear. To continue its consumption she approaches the project manager, Willie Mink, who offers her the supply only if she complies with his carnal desires. The drug, however, proves unproductive to cure her anxiety. Dylar, as a cure to curb the fear of death, represents the absolute commodification of the contemporary society where even death is made a product by which profits can be generated. Like any other commodity it makes false promises and proves unproductive. When Gladney learns about the drug, he wants to try it as well despite knowing how it has disappointed his wife and has reverse effects. When his daughter suggests against it, he replies, “We are talking about death . . . In a very real sense it doesn’t matter what is in those tablets. It could be sugar, it could be spice. I am eager to be humored, to be fooled . . . This is what happens . . . to desperate people” (288-89). Through this conversation the novel depicts that in a society which is absolutely saturated with consumerism, the people are ready to give up the banal realities for consumer ecstasy. The contemporary human gladly gives up the ‘desert of the real’ for the ecstasies of hyper reality, a theory on which French critic and philosopher Jean Baudrillard elaborates in his *Simulacra and Simulations*. He writes:

When the simulation wins a new kind of autonomy, the territory disappears behind the map: “The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it.” Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. The desert of the real itself. (166)

He maintains that we believe that our secondary simulated reality is more real than the first degree reality. The media with advertisements have created a map for the contemporary humans superseding their reality. It is the iniquitous union of the two which plays upon the insecurities and fear of the people and simultaneously promises them a better life.

The obsession with the fear of death creates a deep sense of insecurity in the characters, which subtly yet solidly gets consolidated in their psyche. Babette and Gladney dwell in a world where supermarket tabloids, advertisements and commercials and the media have fabricated a matrix of consumer culture that compels them to consume not only what is needed by them but also what is made to sell them regardless of their requirements. They believe in instant gratification and consumption. Consumerism not only manufactures products but illusive power and comfort to the people. The people start believing that consumer products can give them identity and help them in their hopeless situation. Instead of accepting the inevitability of death, the consumer culture is trying to cash on it by manufacturing drugs like Dylar that claims to suppress the fear of death. This culture of consumerism has rendered the denizens of cosmopolitan cities insensitive and impervious to the exploitative designs of the multinational companies that have created an artificial environment of insecurity and fear, something which they promise to cure if the products launched by them are purchased and used.

References:

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