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Don Delillo's *White Noise:* A Falling Man's Tale of Human Darkness

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Don Delillo's *White Noise:* A Falling Man's Tale of Human Darkness

Nabila Ahsan [α] & Md. Abdul Momen Sarker [σ]

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I. Introduction

In 1985 Don DeLillo published his ninth novel titled *White Noise*, a consumer-driven, fake-ecstatic and information-glittered inferno of postmodern ideals. At the heart of the novel it is the satire of 'coming of age' postmodern American society which exemplifies the idea, "I consume therefore I exist." One can broadly term this novel as a satire, thriller, pulp-fiction, dystopia, family sitcom, metaphysical dilemma, and a 'campus driven' tale. These identities claim this novel as a 'true' postmodern novel in nature. Despite so many terminologies sanctioned around it, this novel tells us the unnoticed and 'willingly-participatory' human darkness of self-obsession hovering around American society. It also highlights how this affects our life. As Ihab Hasan explains his concerns about the falling of structures and forms in his essay titled "A Re-Vision of Literature" that we are at the end of dealing with histories and "writing becomes plagiarism; speaking becomes quoting. Meanwhile, we do write we do speak" (128). The author simulates the same statement in the novel. He tries to show a man, who falls into the depths of the narrative or mostly his narrative of family, work and the changes of conscience of people around him that he himself could not but attend and partake the eventual play of real and unreal. *White Noise* is a novel foreshadowing of our contemporary reality and future of societies. It is a concise study into the depths of humanness, the lack of participation in 'humanness' and the essentially technologically driven role of 'make believe' in places like supermarkets, barns, and Hollywood versions of realities that do not explain what or which is harboring humanity for the sake of capitalistic estrangements and progressions.

Don DeLillo was born in Bronx, New York in 1936. He is the son of an Italian immigrant. DeLillo's farther came to America back in 1916. The life as he was growing in was "tough as hell" (William 55). The shadow of his life as an immigrant as well as an American can be found in most of his noteworthy earlier works like *Americana*, *Underworld* and also in *White Noise*. His maturity as a writer comes to light through his short stories. As he recollects those days,

When I first started writing I wrote short stories, short stories set mostly in Bronx. And when I finally got to work on my first novel, Americana—the title itself says something—this was a kind of journey into the broader culture. (William 56).

II. Background of The Novel

Jack Gladney, a middle-aged college professor at the College-on-the-Hill, tells us the story of the novel. He is the head of Hitler Studies, the subject which he invented one cold morning back in 1968. He lives with his wife Babette and brood of kids from both of their 'previous marriages' (DeLillo 4). Babette is also a teacher. The novel presents her as a selfless and compassionate woman with the unusual mania of dying lurking inside her personality. Wilder, Heinrich, Denise, and Steffie are the children of the Gladney family in the fictional town of Blacksmith. All the children in the house have different aspirations of life as Heinrich is noted as an anti-social teenager, and Denise is particularly concerned with the family's health.

From Jack's narrative, we acquaint with another fascinating character in the novel—Murray Jay Siskind. He is one of the major characters of this novel with sharp-witted academic insight into the depth of matters ranging from consumerism, Elvis Presley, car crashes, pseudo-intellectual ideals that shape societies with media and supermarkets. After leading a complicated city life, Murray has moved to the simple college town of Blacksmith. The readers always try to find out annoyance and confusions he has with cities and small towns; conversely, he attempts to handle his loneliness

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participating in the mass engagement. In contrast to the other characters of the novel, he serves as the 'weirdo' who happens to be cynical enough to be normal. Murray thinks that reality is about places and according to him, in most cases, people have two places to go; where they live and their television set which also reflects their ways of thinking as he says,

This is what comes from the wrong kind of attentiveness. People get brain fade. This is because they've forgotten how to listen and look as children. They've forgotten how to collect data. In the psychic sense a forest fire on TV is on a lower plane than a ten-second spot for Automatic Dishwasher All. The commercial has deeper waves, deeper emanations. But we have reversed the relative significance of these things. This is why people's eyes, ears, brains and nervous systems have grown weary. It's a simple case of misuse (DeLillo 79).

Murray always tries to converge the 'cultural mandate' of supermarket and television into his own 'mandates' as he always explains them. He is a character with equal intelligence and academic synergy. Jack seems to be affected by Murray's thoughts from time to time on several occasions in the novel.

One-night Jack and his wife Babette talk about their fears of death, which is one of the most engaging, romantic and contemplative moments in the novel. DeLillo satirizes the typical 'lovey-kissy' moments of traditional romance novels and soap operas. Death, being the serious topic of the novel, also nurtures the tenderness of the relationship between the couple. There is one troubling matter that haunts both of them as we hear Jack saying, "Who will die first?" Death plays a crucial role in the novel. It is the idea that keeps on stigmatizing Jack's life as he describes in one of the introductory remarks in a Hitler discussion,

All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers' plot, narrative plots, plots that are part of children's games. We edge nearer death every time we plot. It is like a contract we all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are the targets of the plot (DeLillo 30).

He never desires to end up his life dying like others, he also craves for a longer life.

Jack reports his "reluctant-willingness" towards changing his persona under the advice of the chancellor of the college. He wants Jack to appear as presentable in the college as he is the head of the department. He also tells Jack to change his name into J.A.K. Gladney to add more weight to his persona. Babette does not approve the idea. She thinks that there is certain obliqueness to the idea which makes it "attention-getting in a cheap sense" (DeLillo 20). But Jack keeps on changing himself into something that 'suits the job'. He starts wearing thick glasses to "grow more" into Hitler.

The other day the Gladney family met Murray in the supermarket. He seems to like Babette and also expresses that he is interested in her. He also talks about why he buys the generic labeled products despite the colorful appealing once. Jack also sees that Murray has a specific persona to attract women. He finds it amusing rather than getting annoyed by the exchange.

Jack's attempt to building his persona continues to grow as he keeps on shining his armor due to impress the audience of an international Hitler conference at the College-on-the-Hill. Being the head of the department of Hitler Studies, it would be shameful if he does not know any German tongue. He starts taking lessons under Howard Dunlop, one of Murray's neighbors. After the first lesson, Jack takes Murray to his house for dinner and sees that all the members of the family are engaged in different kinds of works except for toddler Wilder who is sitting alone. The complete house is in cacophony and Jack finds it difficult to separate his life from the noises of the family, and all noises in unison have turned into 'white noises'.

III. White Noise: an Allegory of Human Darkness

White Noise is about the unison of noises in reality. The diversity of noises is what makes American society solely antipathetic. Jack heartily wants to understand his relationship with death and falls in the realm of white noises. DeLillo presents his narrator as a noise amid other noises. At the outset, we see that Jack Gladney, a middle-aged American professor, is concerned about his family and life. The novelist tries to say that he is one of the noises in the ecosystem of a collective white noise but distinct enough to recognize himself as a brain fad. In this regard, Wilcox says at the end of heroic narrative:

…DeLillo sees a new form of subjectivity emerging as the modernist order is eclipsed by the postmodern world. Indeed, an older modernist subjectivity is in a state of siege in the information society. Jack, the narrator of *White Noise*, is a modernist displaced in a postmodern world. He exhibits a Kierkegaardian "fear and trembling" regarding death and attempts to preserve earlier notions of an authentic and coherent identity by observing the tribalistic rituals of family life. Jack attempts to "shore up the ruins" of an older order, ironically by chanting advertising slogans as if they were sacred formulas. Yet he often succumbs to the Baudrillardian condition, floating "ecstatically" in a delirium of networks, hyperreal surfaces, and fetishized consumer objects. Jack's narrative is interspersed the entropic chatter and snippets of talk shows that emerge from a television that "migrates "around the Jack household, moving from room to room (347-348).

Jack's perspective makes us think what bars these white noises go complete dark as he grows wary

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from Denise's account on Babette's health. She informs Jack that Babette has memory lapses and she tends to forget things that she should not and also buy things that she later throws away. Denise also tells Jack that she has found a drug called Dylar that Babette has been supposedly taking in secret. Denise cannot find any information about Dylar. Jack tries to comfort Denise assuring that he will discover the mystery of Dylar, but at last, he does not become successful. He is also worried but his worry never gets too far. Like other 'waves and radiation' they are lost in some other waves and noises.

One day Jack finds Heinrich sitting on the roof and watching some black clouds with his binocular. Heinrich tells Jack that a train carrying toxic waste gets derailed. Toxic gets leaked causing black smoke. The toxic waste of progress is a postmodern symbol of progress and horror of spatiotemporal displacement. This toxic spill tells us the culture of disaster presented with apocalyptic fear imagined in Western popular culture (Ekström and Kverndokk 359). DeLillo never explains the reason why the train derailed. He takes an objective tour de force that cleverly affects the key characters in the novel. As Wilcox reports, the idea of the toxic event hinders the subjectivity of the event, rather it creates the playground for objective panic as he says,

Even the natural world -the ultimate ground of the "real"-succumbs to a hyperreal condition of multiple regresses without origin. Spectacular sunsets (which Gladney refers to as "postmodern sunsets") appear after the release of toxins into the atmosphere, but it is never certain whether the sunsets are caused by toxic chemicals or by the residue of microorganisms subsequently discharged by scientists into the atmosphere to "eat" the airborne chemicals. Exposure to the toxic materials released by the "event" causes deja vu in the Gladney children (deja vu itself being a "recollection" without origin), but it is unclear whether this is a "real" symptom or a psychosomatic one resulting from suggestion, since they get the symptoms only after they hear them reported on the radio (351).

Jack Gladney falls under fear, but he pretends he does no care it. As the Nyodene D dark cloud has been spread throughout the town, he tends not to run away with fear. He tries to keep himself out of the "billowing black cloud" (DeLillo 134). The toxic accident brings the family to an uncomfortable stage where they try to keep themselves calm and not to play the "hyperreal" game of panic while ignoring the sirens. The family also shows the attitude to not get affected by "episodic-decorous" hysteria. It is not only Jack but Babette also sounds optimistic as she says, "nothing is going to happen" (DeLillo 133). They try to evade the possible outcome of the fear of death as it hovers around them like a pop culture meta-narrative of apocalypse.

The relational or personal archetype as Jung explains in his book *Four Archetypes* as the notion that there are four basic types of psychic traits that move us away from the idea of "tebula rasa" or blank consciousness. These four archetypes are: the anima, the self, the shadow and the persona (41). In Galadey's active mind, there is the idea that, there is nothing that can cause disturbance in their family as they are preoccupied with the fear of death from the beginning, which also reflects Jung's idea as well,

Consciousness constitutes the momentary process of adaptation, whereas the unconscious contains not only all the forgotten material of the individual's own past, but all the inherited behaviour traces constituting the structure of the mind (97).

But the terror of the cloud gets to them as both Jack and Heinrich talk about it:

"What does it cause?"
"Heart palpitation and a sense of Déjà vu."
"Déjà vu?"
"It affects the false part of the human memory or whatever. That's not all. They're not calling it the black billowing cloud anymore."
"What are they calling it?"
He looked at me carefully.
"The airborne toxic event"(DeLillo 136).

The idea of fear usually haunts Jack Gladney, but in the time of real fear he tries to clutch the sanctuary of inactivity by saying "The important thing is location. It's there, we're here" (*ibid*). They eventually follow the others on the road. The convoy of "mainstream" people finds a safer place. Gladney considers them as insane. The people are overwhelmed by the extent of the atmosphere of collective unconscious leading to exodus. In this regard, Jack says, "What people in an exodus fear most immediately is that those in positions of authority will long since have fled, leaving us in charge of our own chaos" (DeLillo 140).

Jack finds out that Babette sneakily puts something in her mouth. This is the first time we get a glimpse of the medicine "Dylar"—it alludes to a "déjà vu" to the premonition that we see in the first part of the novel. The idea of déjà vu keeps coming back once more when Steffie declares that she has seen all of these before. Jack becomes conscious that this déjà vu has nothing to do with the toxic.

At the Boy Scout camp where all the refugees try to take shelter, SIMUVAC (Simulated Evacuation) guy tells Jack that the toxic situation has been helpful to them. He also tells that Jack is exposed to the Nyodene D, and as he is not dead, the effects will likely to stay inside him for at least thirty years more.

Jack Gladney plunges into deep fear after hearing the news of his contamination. After that when he finds Murray, he tells him that "It is now official,

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according to the computer. I have got death inside me" (DeLillo 175). He finds himself as a derelict man in charge of a family dealing with worst of crises alone and in "marine oblivion, a deep-dwelling crablike consciousness, silent and dreamless" (DeLillo 181).

Jack gets serious about the death planted in his body while they run through the fields and the whole family seems unaffected by the fact he is dying. The technically dead man tries to grasp the obvious as he knows he is falling from everywhere into a consciousness that is more than real, more profoundly contradicting reality. As a falling person he catches everything that comes his way; he then chooses the obvious: the crab-like dreamy relaxation without the fear of death lurking.

After the toxic incident and all the fleeing, the family returns to the town and takes refuge in the karate studio. The conversation between them explains the difference between 'simulated' fear and the 'real' sense of death. DeLillo finally creates an opportunity to see Jack's real face to us in the following extract when a man one day walks into the studio and tells Jack that,

…he was face to face with me, no more than ten inches away. A change came over his wind-beaten face, alight befuddlement, the shock of some fact jarred loose.

"I saw this before", he finally said to me.
"Saw what before?"
"…That identical look on your face."
"What look?" I said.
"Hunted, ashen, lost" (DeLillo 189-190).

The toxic event seems to have left most of the characters adrift from their common nature. They seem distant as Jack sees each other after a long time and both share their thoughts. Later, Jack and Babette look at the sunset which is radiant with color and lasts longer than usual. It was back in Jack's mind that the toxic has everything to do with the sunset, and everything that is to come in future.

Later in the novel, we see that Jack finally finds the drug 'Dylar' which Babette admires and hides behind the carburetor. He later tries to find the nature of the drug, but almost nobody knows the exact location to find the drug out. He later takes this drug to one of his colleagues at the college and asks for reverse engineering of the drug and to find out the nature of it. It turns out that Dylar is a psychopathic drug that lasts in the brain and creates psychological problems.

Afterwards, Jack confronts Babette about Dylar. She reluctantly tells him that about one and a half year ago she started going through a phase that she thought would pass, but it eventually developed into a severe condition. Back then she saw a tabloid advertisement that addressed her issue by calling for volunteers to partake in secret research, and she eagerly answered. She refers to the company, Gray Research in order to protect the people she met. She calls her contact Mr. Gray—who, she tells Jack, is actually a composite of the many different people she was in touch with—and she says that she was interviewed as a part of research into the field of psychobiology. Then she took a battery of psychological and physiological tests and was told she was a finalist to be a test subject in the development of Dylar. Babette's Dylar addiction casts more problem affront as we come to know that she used to have sex with the composite of "Mr. Gray" personas in order to get the drug. Jack finally tells Babette about his contamination of Nyodene D.

We find Jack Gladney enraged asking for the whereabouts of Mr. Gray from Babette. As the novel progresses, he becomes more homicidal to find out a violent solution to this "Dylarama" that causes him to be deceived by his wife. More or less, all plots lead to death-wards. Jack finally gets a gun from his father in law and keeps it in his pocket as he feels that the,

…gun created a second reality for me to inhabit. The air was bright, swirling around my head. Nameless feelings passed thrillingly on my chest. It was a reality I could control; secretly dominate (DeLillo 341).

Jack's homicidal rage gets into him when he finally receives the information from Winnie Richards whom Jack asks for a favor to reverse engineer Dylar. She tells him that she has found an article in a scientific journal that outlines the details of Dylar's production. The brain behind the entire operation is named Willie Mink. The article goes into detail about every aspect of Mink's story, including when he went off the rails not getting any support from his research company but continued to work with a test subject who visited him in secret. Jack asks what Mink is doing now and Winnie tells him that a reporter tracked the man down, finding him in a motel in the German section of Iron City, behind a foundry.

Towards the end of the novel, we get to see Jack Gladney's homicidal rage gets the better judgment of him as he plans to murder Willie Mink and sets the whole matter as a suicide. Upon arrival to the motel, Jack plots to shoot Mink, fakes a suicide note, and steals a supply of Dylar. He finds Mink in a dazed state under the influence of Dylar.

Willie Mink is a reflection of our white noises, as he reflects himself, "I was doing important work. I envied myself. I was literally embarked. Death without fear is an everyday thing. You can live with it. I learned English watching American TV. I had American sex the first time in Port-O-San, Texus. Everything they said was true. I wish I could remember" (DeLillo 353-354). We can easily see the truth about white noises. The bitter experience of life and death are part of concurrent realities. No drug can sooth none of that.

Jack slowly shoots Mink twice, and prepares to stage the suicide. After placing the gun in Willie's hand to hint towards a suicide, Mink suddenly shoots Jack in

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the wrist. The pain shocks Jack back to rationality. His all beliefs evaporate instantly. Finally, he saves Willie's life when he performs CPR on Willie and takes them both to a hospital. Jack realizes that Willie will survive, and pacifies himself before going home. We find Jack as one of the forces of the noise. He tries to temper with the game but the game assures him to go back to the masquerade of noises resided in his house, along with the relaxation that death comes naturally to all of us.

IV. Conclusion

The novel tells us about the life story of an academic, Jack Gladney who suffers from the idea of displacement in the midst of technology, consumerism and fear of death. *White Noise* unfolds the idea of contradicting reality that postmodernist culture offers. The Gladney family broadly appears as an anti-social to some extent but DeLillo puts them in such a situation that they become the contrasting notions of typical family ideology. The author challenges the idea of Americanization through his storytelling. The 'airborne toxic event', the accidental toxic clouds, the natural disaster, and the arbitrary act of violence altogether decipher the idea of 'counter reality' apart from the hyperreal singularity of consumerism. Raj explains that the discourse of consumerism fails when it matters, in significant times of life and death because as an enterprise Gladney family also works with the fallacy of 'brain fad'. Jack is not able to buy his way out of his exposure to the toxic cloud; hence he falls into the language of the white noise—the languages of ATM machines, bar code readers, teller machines and television. In dealing with his exposure, Jack must leave himself to another discourse of science. Jack's temptation to the Hitlarial discourse of power haunts the course of the novel as he gets 'saturated' by the notion that the fire arm he conceals, is, indeed, the tipping point of insanity that he fails to understand. He prefers to kill Willie Mink due to the Dylar consequence that has happened in his family. Overall, the conscience of power, mass consumerism, and toxicity tell us the story of the darkness of humanity through the vision of noises around us.

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