



Plastic Landscape: Ecological Dystopia and the Disposability of Emotion in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to investigate environmental degradation, especially due to the prevalence of plastics and other toxins, and examine its psychological impact through an analysis of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985). Drawing upon Timothy Morton's approach in confronting and addressing the dark recklessness inherent in all anthropocene activities and Rob Nixon's focus on the power of literature and storytelling as powerful instruments to seek justice on environmental concerns, the paper seeks to depict consumer culture as symbolically represented by the usage of plastic. In academic discourse, the use of plastic is not only perceived as environmentally harmful but also as a marker of consumerism and commodification. Thus, drawing further upon Jean Baudrillard's idea of the postmodern condition, the objective of this paper is to closely read Don DeLillo's novel, *White Noise* (1985) and comment not only on the ecological degradation caused by plastic and toxic spills but also on how, similar to the disposability of plastic, human emotions have deteriorated into disposable commodities.

Keywords: Ecology, Dystopia, Plastic, Consumerism, Alienation, Postmodern Condition.

Introduction

In his essay, "The Morphology of Landscape," eminent geographer, Carl Sauer states that the objects in a landscape exist together in

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interrelation (321). He further contends that “a definition of landscape as singular, unorganized or unrelated has no scientific value” (323). Decades later, Tim Ingold in “The Temporality of the Landscape”, accentuates the argument by conceptualising that “in a landscape, each component enfolds within its essence the totality of its relations with each and every other” (154). Thus, the concepts of interconnectedness and relationality in landscape studies have always been central to the understanding of landscape as evolutionary, due to the intrinsic interdependence of the species that constitute it. However, contemporary landscapes, especially in the aftermath of the two devastating world wars, are alarmingly dominated by the extensive use of plastic and other toxins, as such, the relationality and balance are drastically disrupted by the prevalence of synthetic materials that do not integrate with the natural ecosystem. Such an ecological fracture precipitates the eventual creation of an ecological dystopia where plastic and other synthetic materials exceed their role as mere environmental pollutants, turning into a metaphorical symbol of modern consumer throwaway culture which values convenience over ecological harmony and outright disregards the need for environmental integrity and sustainability. These fragmented and fractured landscapes marred by plastic waste, have begun to epitomise environmental neglect, eroding the integrity and interconnectedness of the natural fabric of these landscapes, which have in turn, not only led to the disruption of ecological connection but have also perpetuated the severing of humane and emotional ties. The fragmentation has also led to the erosion of the culture of considering nature as an indispensable part of existence, creating a ‘brave new world’ where technological progress and mechanical stimuli have taken over shared human values, tradition and the emotional intelligence to weigh the impact of our ecological footprints.

Timothy Morton vehemently argues in his influential book *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (2016) that extensive utilisation of plastics and other synthetic toxins, pervasive consumer culture resulting out of capitalism and the striking human-nature dichotomy constitute the foundational catalysts of large-scale ecological destruction which have propelled humanity to sink into a state of ecological dystopia from which there is no return, if no

rigorous measures are taken. He coined the term “hyperobjects” in his book *The Ecological Thought* (2010) to refer to those factors which contribute towards the “end of the world” (2). In this regard Morton considers Climate change as a quintessential hyperobject due to its devastating impact. What we consider dystopia refers to the end of the world and to quote Morton again:

The end of the world has already occurred. We can be uncannily precise about the date on which the world ended . . . [it] was April 1784, when James Watt patented the steam engine, an act that commenced the depositing of carbon in Earth’s crust. (7)

The question then arises as to what role literature plays in countering and combating the issue of ecological dystopia and colossal consumer culture. Rob Nixon in his book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), considers environmental catastrophes and climate change as a “slow violence,” which manifest itself over a period of time. In this regard, imaginative literature plays a significant role in raising awareness among people about such potential harm inflicted on our ecosystem. In the introduction to the same book, he writes:

In a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses. Writing can challenge perceptual habits that downplay the damage slow violence inflicts and bring into imaginative focus apprehensions that elude sensory corroboration. (15)

Similarly, Ranjan Gosh in his essay, “The Plastic Turn,” postulates that just as plastic, with its nature of ‘translocationality’ can transcend boundaries and contaminates the areas which are not directly affected by it, literature akin to plastic, has a spatial dimension through which it can transcend cultural boundaries and can permeate the human psyche (64–69). Thus, the inherent transcendentalism of literature makes it a powerful vehicle to address

the environmental catastrophes that have brought the world to the brink of its demise.

This paper thus aims to argue that Don DeLillo's *White Noise* serves as a scathing critique of the intertwined impacts of consumer culture and environmental degradation. Through an engagement with the idea of dystopia engendered by a threatening culture of commodification of not only the environment, but also the very essence of life itself, the paper contends how the pervasive use of plastics and toxins mirrors the disintegration of ecological integrity and human emotions, challenging readers to reconsider their relationship with the environment and each other.

The Projection of Dystopia in *White Noise*

Within the literary sphere, authors have taken upon themselves, the pivotal responsibility of projecting dystopia through their literary works where the characters find themselves amid an environmental havoc that they have wreaked upon nature. Hence, suffer from a feeling of alienation from their emotion as well as their sense of being which can be attributed to the pervasive consumer culture they are ensnared by. They find themselves in a dark abyss, grappling with environmental disasters as well as a profound existential crisis that compels them to reconsider the dystopian state that they have brought themselves into, due to their imprudence. Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, published in 1985, is looked upon as a postmodern tale of caution that throws light on the perils of a technological world, which is a culmination of the onslaught of the ecological balance. The narrative revolves around the Gladney family residing in the small town of Blacksmith which in the later part of the novel is seen to be engulfed in an ecological menace, that is termed in the novel as the "airborne toxic event" (DeLillo 107). DeLillo, like Thomas Pynchon adheres to a specific pattern of portraying a world characterised by interconnectedness, where thoughts, language, and actions are dictated by impersonal forces. This pattern is evident in his novels like *End Zone* (1972) and *The Names* (1982), besides *White Noise*. Although *White Noise* may not be considered by critics as a classic dystopian novel like Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) or Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), DeLillo weaves the narrative in a

way that blurs the delicate boundary between utopia and dystopia through the portrayal of his characters who have not only embraced the technologically advanced world wholly, but even feel superior and confident to conquer death-the ultimate truth of existence.

However, the contradictions of the characters are projected by the author in the novel, with subtle undertones, as modern beings who place unquestionable faith in the medical and technological progress of their times and yet grapple with the collective apprehensions of environmental disasters and a strong sense of loneliness and anxiety in their personal lives. This dawns on us the realisation that dystopia is not what awaits humanity in the future, as most modern and postmodern writers would have us believe, thus setting their dystopian novels in a far-away future. The world rather slips into a dystopian reality when a massive disruption occurs in the interconnectedness of the human and non-human elements in the universe, which once again reasserts Timothy Morton's idea that we have long ago set out on the journey towards the end of the world.

At the very outset of the novel, the readers witness the commencement of the academic year at the College-In-The-Hill with station wagons loaded with "birth control pills and devices; the junk food still in shopping bags—onion-and-garlic chips, nacho thins, peanut patties, Waffelos and Kabooms" (DeLillo 3). The consumer culture is vividly evident in the opening scene of the novel itself. We are a race of people highly influenced by the rapidly spreading consumer culture, which is intricately intertwined with the pervasive capitalism which was already beginning to spread its tentacles far and wide in the America of the 1980s. Borrowing J.H. Miller's idea of 'parasite' and 'host,' consumption initially appears to be the host, feeding and nourishing the humans who are metaphorical parasites who consume and exploit the finite resources of nature (Miller 273-280). As the consumption driven lifestyle continues to persist, the host then turns into the parasite it once sustained, annihilating the consumed things as well as the fundamental source of their production. Zygmunt Bauman in *Consuming Life* (2007), draws parallel between consumption and destruction. He argues there that excess consumption leads to the annihilation of the existence of the consumed commodity.

The novel is rife with instances of consumption of synthetic items enclosed in plastic packaging. The Gladney family's refrigerator is always filled with packaged or canned food including glossy bags of potato chips, food substances wrapped in plastic and plastic-wrapped slices of cheese, which Jack's wife, Babette munches on all the time. The presence of the shopping mall filled with canned food and synthetic products is also all-pervasive throughout the novel, projecting an overwhelming influence of consumer culture, so much so that people have significantly lost the true essence of all objects and merely perceive everyday phenomena through a collective lens. Jean Baudrillard in his work, *The Consumer Society* (1998), argues that excessive consumerism culminates into a hyperreal environment where all the signifiers and signifieds lose their original meanings and are detached from their original essence and experience. In one of the instances in the novel, Jack Gladney's colleague Murray, while they are watching the most photographed barn in America, reasserts Baudrillard's idea as he contemplates on the loss of individual perception, surrendering of spiritual autonomy and the relinquishment of the ability to envision situations and events in their original form and essence. Murray comments:

We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We've agreed to be part of a collective perception . . . What was the barn like before it was photographed? . . . What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it similar to other barns? We can't answer these questions because we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura. We're here, we're now. (DeLillo 12)

This overwhelming consumerist desire alienates us from our own essence leading to commoditisation of every aspect of our lives. In this regard, the rampant use of synthetic products and plastic packaging within consumer-oriented economies not only holds literal implications but also assumes a symbolic significance such that, similar to the disposability associated with throwaway synthetic products, genuine human emotions have eroded and have lost their

essence. In the novel, Jack and Babette, the seemingly ideal couple gradually unveil the fragility of their marriage and the history of both Jack and Babette's unsuccessful marital unions. Even the validity of Jack and Babette's marriage stands questioned when Babette admits to sleeping with the mysterious Mr. Gray in order to obtain the experimental drug called Dylar, to evade her latent fear of death. Jack and Babette's need for each other arises less out of love and more out of their inherent loneliness and utmost anxiety of their mortal conditions, perpetuating their desperate need to hold on to each other. The disposability of human emotions becomes more evident in the novel, when we examine Jack's apathy and his reluctance to take responsibility in various situations throughout the novel. A prominent instance in the novel of Jack's indifference may be observed during the catastrophic toxic event, when instead of maintaining a composed approach to ensure safe evacuation of his family, Jack prefers to remain in a state of persistent denial that such harm can be inflicted upon a privileged professor's family like his, asserting that such misfortunes only befall the underprivileged, thereby displaying a sense of detachment towards human emotions and experiences. Such tone of apathy brings in Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "Liquid Modernity," which states that the modern as well as the postmodern societies value the temporal over the permanent, the immediate rather than long term and measure all aspects of life in terms of its utilitarian value.

In such a state as this, human relationships tend to be more fluid and traditional notions of marriage, family and community are met with cynicism so much so that they fall apart. This phenomenon manifests itself in the disposability of human emotions as the society prioritises short term gratification over long term emotional investment, much alike the gratification of immediate hunger with conveniently available canned and plastic wrapped food. The utilitarian mindset in liquid modernity has also led to measuring of human values and emotions in terms of practical usefulness with enduring human connections fading to oblivion. Moreover, the rapid exposure to multiple stimulations and an inexhaustible plethora of information impedes full engagement to process the impact, thereby rendering emotions, disposable and transient. In the novel, the Gladney family engages in watching the television together which

concurrently broadcasts incidents of environmental disasters across the globe as well as contemporary sitcoms, proving difficult for the viewers to process one sensation amid others, rendering them as mere passive consumers of commodities without probing into the intricate value or nature of events and emotions.

The serious malady of consumerism not only depletes the vigour of individuals reducing them into mere utilitarian automatons, but also fosters a marked sense of detachment from the natural world, birthing a fallacious notion of superiority within consumers leading them to perceive themselves as transcendental enough to even conquer mortality. This nuanced relationship between consumerism and the overarching desire to conquer death prompt us to explore the pervasive anxiety of death lurking throughout the novel, bringing us again to Baudrillard's notion of 'hyperreality' that the detachment of the signs from their original meaning creates a reality where consumption becomes the means of not only constructing identities but also evading death.

The motif of death is intricately woven into the plot of the novel. Jack and Babette's lives revolve around the anxiety of death to an extent that Jack at times even begins to count his number of days on earth by comparing it with the years written on the gravestones of the dead. In fact, the title of the novel itself has been critiqued as the electrical sound of death. David Cowart, in his *Don DeLillo: The Physics of Language* (2002), clearly observes that DeLillo attempts to juxtapose the metaphorical death with death as the pervasive presence of electromagnetic white noise in the surroundings. This idea is substantiated in the novel, through the conversation between Jack and Babette.

"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.” (DeLillo 198)

The couple, however, adopts different approaches to cope with, or perhaps to evade death. Jack, aware of his eventual demise, initially copes by largely ignoring the topic, declaring: “There is no death as we know it. Just documents changing hands” (DeLillo 6). He shuns the visits to his doctor, immerses himself in the company of children, finding solace in their youth, and derives comfort from studying Hitler. For Jack, Hitler transforms from a fascist responsible for the gruesome genocide of the Jews to a protective figure, someone larger than death itself, to ward off his fear of death. Babette’s fear of death has already been ingrained in her and has invaded her psyche to an extent that it has turned into a compulsive fear for her. This compulsive fear gets the better of her to allow her to succumb to the illusory promises of hope and help with which consumerism preys on the mind of the individual. In her desperate pursuit to conquer her fear of death, Babette comes across an advertisement in a tabloid which was looking for volunteers to participate in a secret research project for a trial of a drug named Dylar which claims to eradicate the fear of death from the human psyche. Her unwise decision to take part in the research project to consume the drug which manifests in the form of mild psychological issues over time, reflects not only Baudrillard’s idea of obsessive consumerist behaviour to evade death but also the demonic influence of consumer culture where even death is transformed into a product potential for generating profit.

The virulent consumer culture has invaded the human psyche in a manner that it engenders a deep-rooted anxiety and uncertainty, thereby compelling the individuals to not only deem superfluous products to be necessities but also to indulge in excessive overconsumption and resource exploitation. According to Roxane Cruceanu, “the postmodern consumer does not pursue the goods and services necessary for satisfying essential needs, but is rather motivated to acquire and access goods and services as concern to their particular significance in social relations” (82). The matrix of consumerism along with fabricating material goods, also creates an

illusion of power and comfort which renders the consumers with a sense of fallacious confidence to confront the bleak realities of existence. As Murray observes in the novel: “We feel the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products bring to some snug-home in our souls” (DeLillo 20). The adherence to instant gratification has driven postmodern society into a frightening dystopia where human emotions are easily disposable similar to throwaway plastic products and the ultimate truths of life and death are saleable communities manufactured with a profit motive such that the consumers are impervious to the plight of the environment that is at stake due to the exploitative practices of capitalism.

White Noise extensively explores the ecological dystopia that we have created out of the postmodern world by disrupting the natural world to satiate our need as well as greed. The characters in the novel specifically consume television images and advertisements as entertainment and validate their existential purpose by frequenting the shopping mall which, to borrow Baudrillard’s idea again, has become a simulacrum of their real world, such that DeLillo himself asserts in an interview that we have replaced nature with supermarkets or shopping malls (Chen and DeLillo 1). The classification of the supermarket as the natural environment for the characters of *White Noise* highlights the shift in relationship between man and nature as well as the shift in concern and empathy of the postmodern society. The novel disturbingly projects how the late capitalist society is pleasingly surprised by the images of environmental disasters on the television or by the glorious sunset which is actually an outcome of adverse climate change, “Ever since the Airborne Toxic event the sunset has become almost unbearably beautiful” (DeLillo 170), but turns unsettled and agitated when the order of the items is shuffled inside the supermarket. The regular shoppers “walk in a fragmented trance . . . trying to figure out the pattern, discern the underlying logic, trying to remember where they’d seen the Cream of Wheat” (DeLillo 325). In the dystopia that DeLillo depicts in his novel, consumer empathy has taken over genuine human empathy. Regardless of the adverse natural calamities and environmental catastrophes destroying lives and homes, consumerism conditions the society to place individual worth and need over community and environmental well-being. The perturbing

remark by Jack who is so educated and privileged, further reasserts the idea of dystopia: “Everything was fine, would continue to be fine, would eventually get even better as long as the supermarket did not slip” (DeLillo 170).

As already established earlier, the hyperreal world of postmodernism is divorced from the original meaning and essence of the signifier and signified. In this regard, nature too relegates to a state of hyperreality losing its essence and being reduced to an object of mere aestheticism. In this context, Jack in the novel, purchases meticulously presentable oranges from the supermarket, their colour as vivid as a fruit found in photography guides and their organic quality and origin overshadowed by an aesthetic appeal (170). In the same way, we observe from the outset of the narrative till the end, a recurrent occurrence of the prevalence of plastic in all spheres of the characters’ lives. From consuming packaged products and frequenting the supermarket to the consumption of the drug named Dylar which is made of polymers, the element which is chiefly used in plastic and are stored in lightweight plastic bottles, there is an unwavering acceptance of plastic without being concerned about the harmful environmental impacts of plastic pollution, such as its contribution to the degradation of ecosystems, wildlife endangerment, and climate changes. The detrimental environmental impacts are consistently disregarded in favour of immediate gratification and conspicuous consumption.

The alienation and detached state of Nature is explicitly reflected all throughout the novel whose most discernible outcome is the airborne toxic event. The airborne toxic event is the central environmental catastrophe in the novel, which causes a turning point in the narrative, evoking an even stronger sense of ecological dystopia. The occurrence of the toxic event is sudden and unexpected such that the sky gets filled with clouds of smoke. It seems to have been caused by the derailment of a train car which leads to the release of a toxin called Nyodene D, presented in the novel as a lethal toxin. The evacuation of the people including children in the aftermath of the toxic event is presented as the most perturbing situation. The toxic event bore drastic results for people and deprived them of their homes. It notes:

They had to evacuate the grade school on Tuesday. Kids were getting headaches and eye irritations, tasting metal in their mouths. A teacher rolled on the floor and spoke foreign languages. No one knew what was wrong. Investigators said it could be the ventilating system, the paint or varnish . . . the cafeteria food, the rays emitted by microcomputers . . . or perhaps something deeper, finer-grained, more closely woven into the basic state of things. (DeLillo 35)

The airborne toxic event can rightly be considered a hyperobject as in the words of Timothy Morton, hyperobjects are the things,

. . . that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans. A hyperobject could be a black hole. A hyperobject could be the LagoAgrio oil field in Ecuador, or the Florida Everglades. A hyperobject could be the biosphere, or the Solar System. A hyperobject could be the sum total of all the nuclear materials on Earth; or just the plutonium, or the uranium. . . . Hyperobjects, then, are “hyper” in relation to some other entity, whether they are directly manufactured by humans or not. (Morton 1)

The ominous cloud of toxic gas destined to hover over the town of Blacksmith along with its profound psychological impact on the inhabitants of the town, constitutes visible concrete manifestations of the dystopian state that has already encroached upon the town. The airborne toxic event is also a hyperobject in the sense that it encompasses and entangles not only the multiple dimensions of life like science, technology and capitalist interests, but also operates on a personal and psychological level as a source of existential anxiety causing the characters to confront their inevitable state of mortality.

In the anthropocentric framework, nature is considered not as an integral and inalienable part of existence, but as a gift bestowed upon human beings to serve their needs. This human-nature dichotomy as affirmed by Timothy Morton in the *Dark Ecology*, is the inevitable

reason for man-made ecological disasters whose adverse impact on the environment is cataclysmic. The novel drives the readers to the argument that no attempt to ameliorate the detrimental impact of human-induced disaster is effective to a significant measure, as material agencies have the potential to unleash unforeseen circumstances. The state of uncertainty and anxiety even among the medical experts in the novel on the after-effects of Nyodene D reasserts this argument. Moreover, the novel mentions the existence of a “nuclear readiness foundation” to mitigate the consequences of the toxic event but nowhere in the novel do we witness the effectiveness of such institutions, which furthermore strengthens the argument that material agencies are indeed independent and beyond mortal control.

Such man-made ecological disasters as the airborne toxic event are indeed “massively distributed in time and space” (Morton 1), emerging from the coalescence of ecological degradation and human apathy and serving as a catalyst for ecological dystopia. The toxic cloud is an outcome of industrial advancement and reckless use of synthetic non-biodegradable products which the novel provides ample evidence of. The dystopian aspect of the airborne toxic event also becomes evident as it outright bursts the bubble of illusion of security and superfluous contentment, exposing the vulnerability of humanity in the face of “Nature red in tooth and claw” (Tennyson, *In Memoriam* 56.15). The interconnectedness of ecology and capitalist institutions in a society driven by profit-motive over the well-being of human beings and ecology, culminates into such a calamitous toxic event and massively contributes to the state of ecological dystopia.

Conclusion

The state of ecological dystopia is no longer an apprehension of the future but a reality of the present, one which has already ushered in as a result of uncontrolled human activities such as deforestation, pollution, overconsumption, climate change, loss of biodiversity, and resource depletion. In this dystopian state, human emotions are plasticised such that they can be conveniently discarded as and when their utility value diminishes. The relentless pursuit of material possessions and the anthropocentric view of the world that perceives

nature as a mere commodity to be exploited to derive profit, have led to widespread commodification of all aspects of society. Such commodification further leads to the permeation of a keen sense of alienation into the society, thereby waning its empathy towards both human and nature, disregarding the intrinsic value of the latter.

DeLillo's dystopian narrative set in his contemporary time, advocates Timothy Morton's idea of 'hyperobjects' projecting a viscous reality in which the fatal airborne toxic event emerges as a hyperobject, traversing time and space to inflict long term ecological damage due to humanity's reckless pursuit of technological progress and consumerism. The preoccupation with the fear of death creates a deep sense of insecurity in the characters, which subtly yet firmly gets ingrained into their psyche. Babette and Jack dwell in a capitalist world which renders high value to the intricacies of technology, media and images that serve to escalate their anxiety of death which they desperately attempt to evade by the aid of the colossal consumer culture. Thus, the two ideas of disposable human emotions and the notion of environmental dystopia are intrinsically interconnected in *White Noise* such that one leads to the other, culminating into the creation of a dreadful projection of the modern world. The novel, by functioning as a literary vehicle, prompts readers to reflect on the consequences of our actions and the potential future that we aim to create for ourselves, by raising concerns about our relationship with the environment and the value we place on genuine human experiences and emotions. DeLillo, through his telling cautionary narrative, brilliantly echoes Rob Nixon to exemplify how literature can illuminate and challenge the insidious impacts of "slow violence," encouraging a more profound understanding and urgency to address these pressing ecological crises.

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