

Toxic Consciousness and Discourse in Don DeLillo's White NoiseBahman Jabar Mohammed ¹, Mohammed Dler Ameen ², Kawan Othman Arif ³^{1,3} English Department, College of Languages, University of Sulaimani, Sulaimani, Iraq² Department of Kurdish, College of Languages, University of Sulaimani, Sulaimani, IraqEmail: bahman.mohammed@univsul.edu.iq¹, hamadler_muhammed@univsul.edu.iq²,
kawan.arif@univsul.edu.iq³**Abstract:**

The study explores two themes in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. The first one is toxic consciousness suggested by Cynthia Deitering in her article "The Post natural Novel," the other one is toxic discourse theorized by Lawrence Buell in an article under the same title. The researchers argue that *White Noise* embodies both of these themes and offers a change in American identity. The researchers use analytical and ecocritical approaches to identify that both themes account for the concerns DeLillo expresses in the novel. It is important to note that both Deitering and Buell's ideas are influenced by Martin Heidegger's concept of "standing reserve," presented in his article in 1953. The study concludes that the novel is an important text in raising the awareness of American public and authority alike about the spread of toxicity in their society. In addition, it also works as a discourse for addressing the same question.

Keywords: *White Noise*, DeLillo, toxic consciousness, toxic discourse, standing reserve, environmental disaster(s), identity.

المخلص:

تستكشف الدراسة موضوعين في الرواية/الضوضاء البيضاء للكاتب الأمريكي دون ديليلو. الأول هو الوعي السام الذي اقترحه سينثيا ديتيرينج في مقالها "رواية ما بعد الطبيعة"، والآخر هو الخطاب السام الذي نظرته لورانس بويل في مقال تحت نفس العنوان. يجادل الباحثون بأن الضوضاء البيضاء تجسد كلا الموضوعين وتقدم تغييراً في الهوية الأمريكية. يستخدم الباحثون طريقة تحليلية والنهج النقد البيئي لتحديد أن كلا الموضوعين يمثلان المخاوف التي عبر عنها ديليلو في الرواية. من المهم أن نلاحظ أن أفكار ديتيرينج و بويل تأثرت بمفهوم مارتن هايدجر لـ "الاحتياط الدائم"، المقدم في مقالته في عام 1953. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن الرواية هي نص مهم في زيادة وعي الجمهور والسلطة الأمريكية على حد سواء حول انتشار السمية في مجتمعهم. بالإضافة إلى أنه يعمل أيضاً كخطاب لمعالجة نفس السؤال.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الضوضاء البيضاء، ديليلو، الوعي السام، الخطاب السام، الاحتياطي دائم، الكوارث البيئية، هوية.

پوخته:

نعم تويزينهويه له دوو نايديا له روماني (ژاومژاوى سپى) دۆن دهليلوڤا دهكۆلننهوه. يكمهيمان هوشيارى ژههراويه كه سينتيا ديتيرينگ له وتاريكيدا بهناوى "رومانى پاش سروشتى" پيشنيارى كردوه، ئهوى ديكهيمان گوتارى ژههراويه كه له لايهن لورينس بويلهوه له وتاريكيدا له ژير ههمان ناوينشاندا تيوريزه كراوه. تويزهران دهلين كه (ژاومژاوى سپى) همدوو نهم ئايديايه بهرجسته دهكات ودهبينته هوى گورانكارى له شوناسى نهمريكيڤا. تويزهران شينواى شيكارى و رينبازى ئيكوكريتيك بهكاردههينن بو ئهوى بزنان كه همدوو نهم ئايديايه هوكارن بو ئهوى نيكهرايانهيه كه دهليلو له رومانكهڤا دهریدهپریت. گرنگه ناماره بهوه بكمين كه همدوو بپروكهكهى ديتيرينگ و بويل له ژير كاريگهري چهكمى "يهمهگى وهستاو"ى مارتن هايدېگهردان، كه له وتاريكيدا هايدگههله سالى ۱۹۵۳ خستويهتهپروو. تويزينهويهكه بهو نهجامه دهگا كه رومانكه دهقيكى گرنگه له بهرزكردنهوهى همدوو

نأستی هۆشیاری گشتی و دهمه لاتدارانی ئەمەریکا سەبارەت بە بۆلوبوونەوهی ژەهر او ییوون لە کۆمەڵگاکەیاندا. جگە لەمۆش
رۆمانەکه وەک گوتاریک بۆ چارەسەرکردنی هەمان پرسیار کار دەکات.

کلیلە وشە: ژاوه ژاوی سپی، دەلیلی، هۆشیاری ژەهر او ی، گوتاری ژەهر او ی، یەدەگی وەستاو، کارمساتی ژینگەیی، شوناس.

I. Introduction

This study expounds two important themes seen in *White Noise*: toxic consciousness, and toxic discourse. Each of these themes relates to the other and they account for the concerns that Don DeLillo manifests through the novel. The setting of the novel is America during the 1980s. Through this DeLillo uncovers his major concern about environmental anxiety with a focus on American culture and society. DeLillo's aesthetic treatment of the environmental disaster that befalls on American society is satirical and comic, yet it involves a serious encouragement for rethinking and reconsideration.

DeLillo's *White Noise* is a reflection of the environmental disasters that occurred during the 1970s and 1980s such as the Love Canal disaster in 1978 in the US, and the Bhopal disaster in 1984 in India. These events exerted a huge impact on the novelist, and he narrates such events in America in a satirical and ironic language. The main character of the novel is Jack Gladney, a university professor of Hitler's study at College-on-the-Hill in the fictional town of Blacksmith in America. DeLillo does not name the place to suggest that such environmental disasters could happen anywhere in America.

Concerns about the prevalence of toxic waste in (post-)industrial societies, especially in the US during the 1980s, became literary themes touched upon by the novelists of the period (Deitering 1996, 196). Critics such as Cynthia Deitering and Lawrence Buell describe this anxiety as "toxic consciousness" and "toxic discourse" respectively, which are seen in the novels of the period such as Walker Percy's *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Paul Theroux's *O-Zone*, T. Coraghessan Boyle's *World's End*, and Richard Russo's *Mohawk* (Ibid.). Deitering argues that "various representations of pollution" in the novels of the period offer a shift in American cultural identity, "a shift from a culture defined by its production to a culture defined by its waste" (ibid.). Buell, however, defines toxic discourse "as expressed anxiety arising from perceived threat of environmental hazard due to chemical modification by human agency" (2001, 31). Toxic discourse, to Buell, demands "the interdependence of ecocentric and anthropocentric values" (1998, 639), that is, neither ecosystems nor human beings have intrinsic values and they both depend on one another. This interconnectedness calls for, in Buell's words, "rethinking certain standard expectations brought to the work of critical reading" (ibid., 670).

White Noise is often viewed by critics as DeLillo's "breakthrough" in his literary career (Lentricchia 1991, 6; Veggian 2015, 16; Giaimo 2011, 79) in which he gained a great reputation both materially and intellectually. Tom LeClair considers *White Noise*, and generally all DeLillo's fiction, within the context of "systems theory" and he called his novel a systems novel¹ because it is diverse

¹ A Systems novel is a category, a model, and a paradigm used by Tom LeClair in his book *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* to describe Don DeLillo's novels based on Systems Theory. For more understanding of this concept, see LeClair 1-32.

in character and content (1987, 2). The novel, for the most part, was praised by other critics as “an exemplar of postmodernist writing” (Maltby 2003, 214; Lentricchia 2003, 74). In this regard, Leonard Wilcox argues that the novel is an example of the postmodern condition of simulacra presented by Jean Baudrillard (1991, 346). On the other hand, Tim Engles focuses on the way in which the novel depicts the noise that the white people make in American society and how this particular race responds to the environment (2000, 171). Other critics focus on the theme of death and consumerism and on the way the narrative technique is used to reflect this theme in the novel (Boxall 2006, 109; Weekes 2007, 300). Paul Giaimo makes the language of the novel the focus of attention and he asserts that it is used to “provide a way out of catastrophe in [...] troubled times” (2011, 67).

Don DeLillo is often compared to George Orwell in his prediction of the future of the world, yet critics argue that DeLillo is more precise in his prediction because he anticipates Bhopal tragedy in the novel and immediately happens (Johnson 2000, 51). According to Bloom, DeLillo, as a novelist, is much like Penchon, Coover, and Gaddis in his treatment of American society and in *White Noise*, he “is a High Romantic in the age of virtual reality and related irrealisms” (2003, 1). However, John Frow associates *White Noise* with Norse mythology “Twilight of the Gods” (*Götterdämmerung*) as it depicts the falling of American society by means of (post)industrial disaster, and it predicts a series of catastrophes resulted from advancements in technology and postindustrial society (2003, 35). There are also critics who focus on the way DeLillo comically portrays Hitler (Cantor 2003, 51).

This novel is diverse in content and in its treatment of American culture, especially American consumerism. Critics reflect this diversity both in form and in themes, hailing it as DeLillo’s breakout novel. What critics miss, however, is the shift that the novel depicts in American orientations to their identity making which is slightly touched upon by two critics namely Buell and Deitering, who generally deal with this rupture when analyzing American fiction during the 1970s and 1980s. Hence, we argue in this study that everything presented in postindustrial society portrayed in DeLillo’s *White Noise* including both abstract and concrete things are gazed at by the technology and postindustrial mindset as “standing reserve”—a term Heidegger uses to reveal the essence of technology—which is also associated with what Buell notes as toxic discourse. In other words, we examine both Buell and Deitering’s understandings of *White Noise* as they highlighted the concern American society expresses due to the prevalence and danger of chemical waste in such a society. To do this, we first deal with “toxic consciousness” because it is this awareness that paves the way for the emergence of a discourse that addresses the environmental disasters caused by toxicity. So, the next section is dedicated to “toxic discourse.”

II. Toxic Consciousness

Cynthia Deitering points out that during the mid-1980s, concerns about environmental pollution through chemicals have become of great value to American novelists, and this has been especially evident in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1996, 197). This kind of awareness on the part of the American society, to Deitering, creates an “ontological rupture” in their understanding of the ‘*Real*’. That is, this consciousness brought about changes in American identity and culture. Waste, pollution, contamination, and toxicity have become things that define the postindustrial American society, and

they were reflected in American novels during the 1980s (ibid.). Deitering uses Heidegger's idea of "standing reserve" to describe this new perception.

According to Martin Heidegger, man "accomplishes the challenging setting-upon through which what is called the real is revealed as "a standing-reserve" (1977, 18). That is to say, the revealing (*aletheia*) that governs modern technology has a characteristic of "setting-upon" (that is, it is challenging). This challenging is done when it opens up the energy concealed in nature. So, what is open up is changed, and what is changed is reserved, and what is reserved is distributed and changed to something new. These are all ways of revealing and everything, everywhere, is ordered to stand by and immediately presents to be ordered again, and whatever is ordered in this way is standing, and this is called standing-reserve or *Bestand* in Germany.

Thus, according to Heidegger, nature, from the perspective of modern technology, is a standing-reserve, always available to be ordered and in Heidegger's words it has been "Enframed" to be present for use. Man, then is the prime mover in this endeavor; the one who achieves or completes this action. However, man does not have control over the unconcealment itself, i.e. over the truth (ibid.). Heidegger writes "Enframing means the gathering together of that setting-upon which sets upon man, i.e., challenges him forth, to reveal the real, in the mode of ordering, as standing-reserve" (ibid., 20). Hence, the essence of something is revealed through Enframing or in German word *Gestell*. Based on this outlook, the river is no longer a mere river, but it is "a water power supplier"; "the earth now reveals itself as a coal mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit" (ibid., 14).

This kind of understanding can also be revealed in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* as the narrator tries in several instances to expose nature and materials as a "standing reserve." For example, when Jack Gladney and Murray Siskind set for a journey to "a tourist attraction known as the most photographed barn in America," where "there were meadows and apple orchards," they see that everyone in there have cameras, tripods, telephoto lenses, and filter kits, and "no one sees the barn" (WN, 12)². Murray notices that they are all taking pictures and cannot see the real beauty of this place. The place in itself is a natural beauty, that is why people come from different places to take pictures. Yet, the point is that the meadows, the green land and the beauty of the landscape surrounding the barn are no longer natural, but "a simulation of an 'authentic' barn, [and their] reality inaccessible to [their] viewers" (Ward 2019, 2). In other words, they become a consumptive service site for tourists to only take pictures. Murray describes the people there as "they are taking pictures of taking pictures" (WN, 13). That is, the agricultural barn becomes a postindustrial image of service consumption.

In another instance, Murray explains why he comes to the small town of Blacksmith to Jack Gladney, and he uses "heat" metaphor to describe the cities (WN, 10). This description of cities provided by Murray is intriguing as it suggests that industrialism brings forth the places into the sites of consumption and waste. Murray frames the meaning of the city from a concrete into an abstract one i.e. as a symbol of excitement. Using "heat" to describe an urban area which is the site of built environment interaction accounts for the orientation modern technology has to the natural world, and

² Don DeLillo, *White Noise: Text and Criticism*, 3. Edited by Mark Osteen, (New York: Penguin, 1998). Subsequent citations are from this edition and will be cited as (WN, Page number).

it also represents a kind of transformation in human being's orientation to the world as Deitering elucidates in her article "The Postnatural Novel".

The novel for the most part is about fear of death, fear of destruction of nature and life, fear of modern technology and its consequences which controls all aspects of modern human beings and becomes an alternative for all spiritual dimensions including religion, beliefs, meditation, poetry, arts, and nature. Looking into the novel, one can see that none of the characters speak of arts and other forms of spirituality, except for Murray Siskind, who is Jack's friend and head of Elvis Presley study at the same university as Jack. Even both of Hitler and Presley are framed in this postindustrial society to mean something other than themselves. They are seen as sources of profit in the education industry, in Heidegger's words, they are enframed to be used as standing-reserve. This also reminds us about Fredric Jameson's ideas about "commodification of objects and humans" stated by Olster (2008, 80), and also to the idea of "objectification of nature by culture" (1998, 30) presented by Eric Todd Smith, which identifies the task of ecocriticism as the relationship between human culture and the environment, and this in itself is the definition of ecocriticism presented by Glotfelty in *The Ecocriticism Reader*.

The world DeLillo reveals is a material world interwoven with the webs of technology and postindustrial society's consumerism. In such a society, information is gained through media; marketing, shopping, and consumption replace spiritual and social activities. Here, reference to "the most photographed barn in America" again, can be a good example when Murray describes the situation to Jack as spiritual:

"Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. 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. This literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism" (WN, 12).

Tourism industry changes the natural world into raw material, and a source of profit instead of being a source of poetic and philosophical inspiration. Murray's sense of nostalgia and his sense of the present are intertwined creating what he himself called a religious experience. Jack, from the very beginning of the novel, describes the return of the students to the university's camp each September as such:

This assembly of station wagons, as much as anything they might do in the course of the year, more than formal liturgies or laws, tells the parents they are a collection of the like-minded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation (WN, 4).

Jack has experienced this event for twenty-one years. Throughout all these years, the event has been a shining and bright one as if it illuminates his soul and transcends him. His wife, Babette, later on complains because she was not informed to see this event and missed it again (WN, 6). Attending the event, to Babette, is important because as she herself says "it's not the station wagons I wanted to see. What are the people like? Do the women wear plaid skirts, cable-knit sweaters? Are the men in hacking jackets? What's a hacking jacket?" (WN, 6). Here Jack replies by saying that this elegance is because of their money, and it gives them comfort and glowing (ibid.). Then Babette replies that

she cannot imagine death “at that income level” and that “Maybe there is no death as we know it. Just documents changing hands” (ibid.). Relating death to the levels of income and money to these characters is suggestive of the rapture in thinking and orientation towards life in general. Both Jack and Babette’s obsession with the haunting image of death throughout the novel and their attempts to get rid of their thinking about it are the results of their different orientations towards life and nature. An event of the station wagon becomes a source of spiritual thinking, reminding them about death and discussions about it. It is thus not a social and natural event; it becomes something abstract like love and beauty.

The title of the novel is a hint to the noise that modern industry, technology, and the media create and exert impact on all aspects of life including both human and non-human nature. As a result of these noises, human beings constantly face problems. These problems are either psychological or physical. For instance, Jack’s son, Heinrich, is only fourteen years old and his hairline begins to recede (WN, 22). This is clear evidence of the impact of pollution on him. Other examples are the “airborne toxic event”, using Dylar by Babette to relieve the fear of death, and the feeling of *Déjà vu* by those who were exposed to the toxic chemical after the airborne toxic event. All these examples suggest the intensity of the environmental pollution and its impact on human nature in the modern world depicted in *White Noise*.

All of the characters in the novel immerse in a materialistic world and, to them, being is defined by having materials. They are self-centered and careless to the people and their surroundings. Nothing has its own real image; images do not represent their reality but rather their simulacra. This idea is close to what Jean Baudrillard argues in his book *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981). Baudrillard argues that the western society can no longer be defined by its modes of production (as Karl Marx argues), but rather it is defined by its modes of simulation (Baudrillard 1994, 26). This shift in western cultural modes of representation is presented through various symbols in the novel. For both Heidegger and Baudrillard reality can no longer be defined by traditional modes of thought. If for Heidegger the real is enframed to mean something else, for Baudrillard the real is simulated to denote hyperreality, and both of them are related to what Deitering argues as a shift in American cultural identity defined by its waste.

There are many symbols in the novel which represent pollution, and they change the American cultural identity that is criticized satirically by Don DeLillo. Each chapter presents something new regarding this shift. The novel falls into three parts. Part one and three are long, and they consist of almost equal chapters; part one is twenty and part three is nineteen chapters while part two is only a lengthy chapter connecting the other two. The first part, “Waves and Radiation”, as the name suggests, is a reference to all the waves and radiations modern technologies (such as the media, malls, supermarkets, universities, etc.) create and affect both human and non-human agencies. Part two is entitled “Airborne Toxic Event”, in which the life routine of the characters is disrupted and the town is evacuated as a result of the event. Part three, “Dylarama”, is a return to the routine of life, yet the characters live in the aftermath of the toxic event presented in part two. The events of the novel take place in one academic year starting from the return of the students in the station wagons and ending with the final examinations.

Chapter one introduces the arrival of the station wagons and the narrator introduces a catalog of students' possessions as such

[. . .] the stereo sets, radios, personal computers; small refrigerators and table ranges; the cartons of phonograph records and cassettes; the hairdryers and styling irons; the tennis rackets, soccer balls, hockey and lacrosse sticks, bows and arrows; the controlled substances, the birth control pills and devices; the jurik food still in shopping bags—onion-and garlic chips, nacho thins, peanut creme patties, Waffelos and Kabooms, fruit chews and toffee popcorn; the Dum-Dum pops, the Mystic mints (WN, 3).

This long list of the students' possessions suggests that the objects are more important than the students and at the same time they equate them to the consumer products. Both objects and human beings alike are seen as resources damaging the natural world. People are no longer naturally human beings, but sources of income. The narrator in the second chapter views his children as objects, he comments

Babette and I do our talking in the kitchen. The kitchen and the bedroom are the major chambers around here, the power haunts, the sources. She and I are alike in this, that we regard the rest of the house as storage space for furniture, toys, all the unused objects of earlier marriages and different sets of children, the gifts of lost in-laws, the hand-me-downs and rummages (WN, 6).

The objectification of children by Jack and Babette calls their nature into question and they become "standing reserve" as well. Humans lose their natural value and are treated as things. It is as if the family is a factory for producing offspring.

Babette is blamed by the children as she buys things but does not eat them. Steffie says "She feels guilty if she doesn't buy it, she feels guilty if she buys it and doesn't eat it, she feels guilty when she sees it in the fridge, she feels guilty when she throws it away" (WN, 7). Babette feels guilty because without shopping and eating life is meaningless. It is not just eating, it is overeating. The narrator explains

When times are bad, people feel compelled to overeat. Blacksmith is full of obese adults and children, baggy-pantsed, short-legged, waddling. They struggle to emerge from compact cars; they don sweatsuits and run in families across the landscape; they walk down the street with food in their faces; they eat in stores, cars, parking lots, on bus lines and movie lines, under the stately trees (WN, 14).

American society is defined by consumption and eating which substitute all spiritual activities. People no longer pay heed to their surroundings and nature, instead they produce waste and garbage. Using this hyperbole is for mocking so that the Americans can feel the negative aspects of this style of living. They should be guilty, like Babette, because they do not have concern for their environment.

All the chapters in part one are suggestive of the various forms of pollution spread over American society—the pollution of the environment and the mind of human beings alike. Looking into the

structure of this part, one can notice how the novelist focuses on objects and/or ideas that are related to the question of environmental pollution. This can be summarized as follows:

First chapter introduces a list of students' possessions; the second one presents Babette reading to a blind man, Mr. Treadwell, from supermarket tabloids. Third one is about the visit to "the most photographed barn in America". Fourth one introduces the scene of the family watching television together. The fifth one shows the family shopping in a supermarket. The sixth chapter starts with describing Heinrich that his hairline begins to recede. The seven depicts Babette and Jack's bedroom talks plus their concern about death. The eight one shows the using of the radio and the image of Denise compacting the garbage. Ninth one starts with the news of toxic substances being found in the children's school and the supermarket scene. The tenth chapter describes how the students at the College-on-the-Hill sit in the library and there is a connection between their price of their tuition fees and the sprawling of the students in the college's library, and also this chapter introduces Denise's warning about a gum Babette chews that causes cancer, and whether a brain chemistry causes the murderer in a prison to kill many people. Chapter eleven deals with characters' discussions about death, medication, and television. Chapter twelve is about the family's dinner and chapter thirteen is about dragging the river looking for the missing two elderly. Chapter fourteen starts with the family watching the sunset from Steffie's room. Fifteen is about university lectures on both Hitler and Presley. In chapter sixteen Wilder begins to cry for long hours. In chapter seventeen, the family are in the mall listening to live Muzak as they eat. Eighteen is about the possibility of airplane disaster as Jack meets his daughter Bee in the airport. In chapter nineteen, Jack in the town's graveyard thinks about death. In chapter twenty, Babette's class is on TV alive and the family is all excited except for Wilder.

Looking into each chapter in part one, as summarized above, one can see how the American society reflects the noise and pollution through modern institutions (education, media, tourism), technological tools (students' possessions), and postindustrial services (malls, supermarkets), and how these aspects of modern life have power over the perception of the characters and in turn have bad impacts over nature and lead to disasters. The culture created by these aspects of modern life is at conflict with the real nature of people and the environment. There is a paradoxical relationship between man and nature. Eating is not life but death; overeating and consumption leads one to death instead of life, information is not knowledge but ignorance; sunsets after the airborne toxic event are more beautiful than they were before, the narrator notes "Ever since the airborne toxic event, the sunsets had become almost unbearably beautiful" (WN, 170). Nuns do not believe in heaven and they believe that "There is no truth without fools" (WN, 317).

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* focuses on a toxic event, which is also the name of the second part of the novel. However, before this part, there are many previous hints that the city environment is somehow affected by pollution as it is shown above. Lack of awareness on the part of the characters in the novel about the seriousness of dump matters and environmental degradation is suggestive of the indifference and apathy they have due to their indulgence with societies' consumerism and media coverage. Both consumption and media work to deviate the characters' attention to something less vital than the real danger created by pollution. Nevertheless, they seem happy and unaware of the reality of the situation because they are affected by the services postindustrial American society

provides. The narrator at the beginning of chapter nine remarks “they had to evacuate the grade school on Tuesday. Kids were getting headaches and eye irritations, tasting metal in their mouths” (WN, 35). Pollution is ubiquitous, yet no one seems to care much about it. Although the environment is in danger, Gladney is more obsessed with the idea of death as part of his existential fear of the reality of being. His apathy to his surroundings makes him feel alienated and not see the real beauty of nature. The disregard for nature and the focus instead on the self in a postindustrial society, that is immersed in shopping, culture, and media, have an impact on the psyche of the individual. Gladney’s continuous thinking of death is partly unjustifiable because normal human beings know that death is natural and normal. This thinking appears to be the result of environmental degradation and pollution, though not mentioned by the narrator. The fact that even the narrator does not know much about all environmental incidents and their effects in the novel may support the claim that even his obsession with the idea of death is the effect of the same environmental crises. When the toxic event occurs, neither the characters, nor the media, and the authorities have any knowledge of the chemical spill named in the novel as Nyodene D., which suggests that this, on the one hand, can be criticism and mockery on the US authorities regarding this crisis, and on the other, it means that the American public is not aware of the dangers of this situation. Hence, one can point out that *White Noise* is a novel that aims to awaken American consciousness about the seriousness of the environmental crisis and its impact on all living things.

In part two, when the airborne toxic event happens, the reaction of both the government and the people to the event is trivial and flippant. No one cares much about it and instead SIMUVAC men come to the town and collect data to simulate next disasters to come. They are mercenaries coming to collect money rather than helping affected people. Jack later realizes this point when he is exposed to the chemical and goes to the SIMUVAC men to give his account about his condition. Jack, at first, does not understand the meaning of SIMUVAC and asks one of the men about it, and he gets the answer that it is “short for simulated evacuation” (WN, 139), “but this evacuation isn’t simulated. It’s real,” Jack replies. Although the disaster is real, the governmental response to it is sarcastic and unreal, hence Jack later on comments that “terrifying data is now an industry in itself. Different firms compete to see how badly they can scare us” (WN, 175). Even data in this sense becomes a standing reserve used to make money rather than a healing matter, or research questions.

Death is one of the things that Jack and his wife Babette think of. Fear of death is constantly haunting them and they discuss with each other who would die first. In an instance, Jack compares himself with the other animals concerning this matter and says “we are the highest form of life on earth and yet ineffably sad because we know what no other animal knows, that we must die” (WN, 99). Eventually death because of “the airborne toxic event” which contaminates the environment of the town and Jack is exposed to it, becomes his own main concern, although he does not know the actual effects of the chemical, which as a cloud, spreads over the sky of the town. In order to avoid thinking about death stealthily Babette joins a head researcher named Willie Mink (Mr. Gray) who works on a drug called in the novel as Dylar to eliminate the fear of death in humans. Mink accepts Babette for trial treatment and gives her Dylar in exchange for her body. Mink is not successful in his research as the Dylar has many serious side effects such as not distinguishing between actions and

words. This suggests that death is no longer a natural phenomenon and it is exploited by medical institutions to obtain profit and money i.e. as a standing reserve.

When the “airborne toxic event” happens, different accounts and reports of the event and the effects of the chemical are heard by the characters in which no one is sure about its real effects. Immediately after the event, Jack thinks that “these things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas. Society is set up in such a way that it’s the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters” (WN, 21). This orientation on the part of the main character of the novel depicts the low level of consciousness the American people, especially the educated, have on ecological disasters. Since the poor are oppressed and this oppression is seen as natural from the viewpoint of natural sciences (Hartmut Rosa et al 2021, 4), the ecological disaster should only befall on them rather than the rich and educated because they live in areas far from the effects of industrial activities. It is only when the rich and educated are affected, the problem becomes a concern for people like Jack. This suggests that modern consciousness falsely perceives that even disasters can be seen in terms of money, as a standing reserve. However, in reality this contamination would not only bring death to Jack, it also, by extension, brings death to all of humanity, as Giaimo notes “J.A.K. and friends give nary a thought to Mother Earth prior to the train wreck. . . [and] the level of denial that the Gladneys display represents how ignorant we are of the ecological damage we can cause” (2011, 86). DeLillo here shows how modern industry and technology will bring death to all humanity and nature more than anything else. At the end, as Stacey Olster notes Jack is “forced to realize that he is just every man in any city” (2008, 79).

III. Toxic Discourse

Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* reflects environmental fears and concerns of American society during the 1970s and 1980s. Lawrence Buell dubs these fears and anxieties “toxic discourse” because the pervasive widespread of chemical waste produced by human actions creates a real threat to the environment, and it needs to be addressed (2001, 31). DeLillo addresses this issue with great concern and wants to raise awareness of both the public and the decision makers alike to think about the consequences of their actions, and their damaging results to the environment that they live in. DeLillo published the novel in 1985, at a time when many environmental disasters (such as Bhopal, Love Canal, Three Mile Island) had occurred both in America and in the world posing a serious threat to humans. It is as Buell notes “a common denominator” (Ibid., 34) both in terms of language and ideas i.e. toxicity becomes a concern for people and it is widely on writing and conversational agendas of people at large.

The central theme of *White Noise* revolves around the environmental disaster named in the novel as “the airborne toxic event”. The event is the background to the story, and every other event serves to prepare the reader to move toward that end. Right from the start, the narrator captures the reader’s attention to the way people live and how this style of living has enormous effects on the environment in which they live and also prepares the ground for disasters. The narrator, for example, highlights the nature of American consumer society and its attachment to matter as if it were more valuable than their presence in the first chapter of the novel when he describes the feelings of parents coming with their children as they return to their colleges by station wagon:

This assembly of station wagons, as much as anything they might do in the course of the year, more than formal liturgies or laws, tells the parents they are a collection of the like-minded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation (WN, 3).

American identity is characterized by collecting materials. This is reflected in Babette's comment on the gathering; what makes them attend the station wagon is to see the students' clothing and materials (WN, 6).

Blacksmith people eat a lot, meet each other in big malls and department stores, regularly watch TV and listen to radios. Cultural icons like Hitler and Presley become money-making objects, and supermarket tabloids are "favorite as [a] reading matter" (WN, 57), people conduct disaster preparedness simulation activities in schools and on the roads. Televisions broadcast disasters such as "floods [*sic*], earthquakes, mud slides, erupting volcanoes" and people are excited to watch these disasters as the narrator says "every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping" (WN, 64). In this regard, Giaimo suggests that this implies a political statement: "the American social priority is to capitalize on tragedies almost as a reaction formation" (2011, 87). Every now and then the characters encounter physical difficulties especially children, for example Heinrich's hairline receding and Wilder's crying (WN, 75). These examples, on the one hand, depict the effectiveness of man's action on the environment, and on the other, show man's ignorance of the seriousness of the consequences of these actions. In other words, DeLillo criticizes the lifestyle of American people because they are oblivious to the damage they cause to the environment in general.

Environmental pollution is everywhere due to human actions, but people and authorities do not care much about it. The problem is their lack of awareness and orientation towards these disasters. The narrator comments on these as follows:

Every day on the news there's another toxic spill. Cancerous solvents from storage tanks, arsenic from smokestacks, radioactive water from power plants. How serious can it be if it happens all the time? Isn't the definition of a serious event based on the fact that it's not an everyday occurrence? (WN, 174).

Since these environmental cataclysms are not everyday occurrences, they cannot be taken seriously. This perception reveals the level of the Americans' consciousness of their being and their surroundings. DeLillo brings to the fore this apathy to illustrate the severity of these man-made catastrophes in which not only the existence of man but the entire biosphere is at risk. There is a lack of self-consciousness on the part of the individuals and this leads to a kind of foolishness. Jack does not realize his foolishness until he is exposed to the chemical spill.

Jack's ignorance of German despite being head of Hitler Studies equates his folly to the damage that the airborne toxic event inflicts on both human and non-human nature. To fill this gap, he resorts to semblance. He adds an extra initial, J.A.K., to his name "to be taken seriously" (WN, 16) and wears "glasses with thick black heavy frames and dark lenses" (*ibid.*) because to him and his wife it implies "dignity, significance and prestige". While Jack lacks something in content, he wants to bridge that gap by adding something to his look. This is how he solves the problem of lack of knowledge of the German language. This is also true of the government's handling of the airborne toxic event. While

the government lacks the capacity and capabilities to deal with the disaster, it uses SIMUVAC, simulation, to fill this gap.

As stated in the previous section, Babette, Murray and Jack, in particular, constantly think of death. The concept of death dominates their observations of and comments on everything around. Conversing with his wife at the beginning of the novel, Jack mentions death to explain his opinion about students' return to the college-on-the-Hill in station wagons (WN, 6). Murray Siskind speaks of "heat death of the universe" when talking about big cities (WN, 10). Jack compares death to "a swan dive, graceful, white-winged and smooth, leaving the surface undisturbed" (WN, 18). When he talks about plots, he thinks "all plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers' plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children's games" (WN, 26). When talking about Babette's teaching of the elderly "to improve their gesture", he wonders whether it is "possible to ward off death by following rules of good grooming" (WN, 27). However, both Jack and his wife live with the constant fear of death and they resort to medication to eschew their fears. Murray thinks that in the town of Blacksmith the important thing he learns every day is "death, disease, afterlife, outer space" (WN, 36). Jack claims that Tibetans see death differently (WN, 38) and he asks if death odd-numbered (WN, 47). Murray thinks that "television is the death throes of human consciousness" (WN, 51) and he claims that "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" (WN, 73). When the toxic event occurs Jack thinks "This death would penetrate, seep into the genes, show itself in bodies not yet born" (WN, 116), and he compares the chemical cloud mass in the sky as "some death ship in a Norse legend, escorted across the night by armored creatures with spiral wings. We weren't sure how to react (WN, 127). Later on he comments saying:

This was a death made in the laboratory, defined and measurable, but we thought of it at the time in a simple and primitive way, as some seasonal perversity of the earth like a flood or tornado, something not subject to control. Our helplessness did not seem compatible with the idea of a man-made event (WN, 127).

Murray after the airborne toxic event thinks

Every advance in knowledge and technique is matched by a new kind of death, a new strain. Death adapts, like a viral agent. Is it a law of nature? Or some private superstition of mine? I sense that the dead are closer to us than ever. I sense that we inhabit the same air as the dead (WN, 150).

Jack says that "the cloud resembled a national promotion for death" (WN, 157). In many instances in the novel, "death" is mentioned with disease and sex (WN, 217), fear of death is everywhere and 200 times "death", 100 times "dead", 100 times "die" and "dying" are mentioned in the novel.

All these examples of the way death is perceived in the novel are evocative and insinuating. It is ominous and menacing. Technology and postindustrial society produce death not only to humans but also to nature as well. Whatever man does is deathward. If humanity continues to follow this path, it will soon bring death to all. Instead of paying attention to life, the characters indulge in death-thinking. They only think of death because they live in a society in which life, and by extension nature, becomes a commodity. They immerse in eating, shopping, and consumption; their thinking

and mindset are framed by the media. To forget death, they do not turn to nature, but search for technological medication. Nature and the natural world are ignored in a way that none of the characters think about. Jack's two-and-a-half-year-old son's name is Wilder. He is as innocent as nature, and he is always crying without ever being considered by his parents. Both his name and cry can be metaphorically the cry of nature. This orientation is indeed the result of the culture that is formed by industrial and consumer society.

Throughout *White Noise*, reality comes to us through the media. Since both language and story are at the hands of the authorities through its media and other institutions, the consciousness it creates on nature and environment is false. The characters' experience of the toxic event is different from what the media tells them. For instance, immediately after the chemical spill, Jack watches it with binoculars and sees it as "a heavy black mass hanging in the air" (WN, 110), after a while he sees it as "a slightly larger accumulation, a towering mass in fact, maybe a little blacker now" (WN, 111). The children, then, tell him how the radio describes it: first as "a feathery plume", second as "a black billowing cloud" (WN, 111), and finally as "the airborne toxic event" (WN, 117). The event is much narrated by people rather than by the authorities. Reality and simulation are so mixed by technology and industry that it becomes impossible to separate them. People have "false consciousness" as they cannot recognize what is real and what is imitation. According to Marxists, capitalism prevents people, especially the working class, from recognizing the injustice that exists in society. People thus are dominated by the misconception that class stratification is natural. Hence, the capitalist mindset in *White Noise* also encourages people to think that what is happening is natural and no one can do anything about it. By mixing reality with simulation, the officials in the novel provide a false consciousness on the ecological disaster. Although the disaster is man-made, the officials try to present it as something natural so that it will be bereft of its evilness. Capitalism aims at enslaving nature for its own benefit just as it wants to enslave the working class for its own use. In other words, the conception that the society has on itself and towards nature is wrong, and is predicated on the culture that is generated by capitalism.

In fact, simulation is used to prepare for a future catastrophe, but the problem is that when the catastrophe occurs in the novel, it is treated as a simulation. This implies that there is a mix of reality and imitation; reality and simulation in capitalist society are inseparable. The same is true of the characters in the novel, they cannot interpret the information about the incident themselves, the media, instead, does that for them. Whenever children talk about something scientific, they say factoids instead of facts. The point is that human beings, like everything else in this society, have fallen victim to a deceptive system that aims only to make money and profit. After the toxic event, Jack realizes that the treatment of the city officials is industrial, and they deal with the data collection as a source of obtaining more money.

After the airborne toxic event, nothing remains the same: the sky, the sunset, the supermarket, and even the people. Babette says "But look at the blazing sky. It's so beautiful and dramatic. Sunsets used to last five minutes. Now they last an hour" (WN, 170). This kind of change is the result of the toxic spill though not mentioned by the narrator. Technology, industrialism, and their efficacy on the environment as toxic spills, contamination and pollution alter the perception of reality. The sunset

becomes the sublime of aesthetic pleasure and awe; it is, as later on the narrator says, “a postmodern sunset.”

Before the airborne toxic event Jack and his children

crowded before the window in Steffie’s small room, watching the spectacular sunset. Only Heinrich stayed away, either because he distrusted wholesome communal pleasures or because he believed there was something ominous in the modern sunset (WN, 61).

Yet after the event the sunset becomes different; it changes from a modern sunset into a postmodern sunset, as the narrator explains

Upon [the hill] lay the sun, going down like a ship in a burning sea. Another postmodern sunset, rich in romantic imagery. Why try to describe it? It’s enough to say that everything in our field of vision seemed to exist in order to gather the light of this event. Not that this was one of the stronger sunsets. There had been more dynamic colors, a deeper sense of narrative sweep (WN, 227).

Before the toxic event the sunset is modern, which implies the objectivity of the situation. Indeed, the Gladney family accepts all of the things as they were before the ecological disaster without projecting their fears, yet after the event the sunset becomes postmodern, which suggests the subjectivity of the situation. Jack is no longer content with his situation and tries to extend outward and extrapolate. The prospect of the future is “ominous” and disastrous because modernity under the rubric of change brought about many calamities to humanity. Whereas after the event, Jack lives in a state of awe and the postmodern sunset is a reflection of this awe experienced by him. Though unreal, the awe is both fear and wonder. Thus, the sunset is postmodern because, on the one hand, it is the result of the toxic event, and on the other hand, the *mise en abyme* of images infinitely ranged that can be reoccurred for good (Knight 2008, 28). The ecological disaster caused by modernity can reoccur without ending if man does not rethink his situation and his treatment of the natural world. It is a copy that can be recurred timelessly if one contents with the status quo without trying to change it.

Symptoms and signs of exposure to air pollution continue to change. At first, the symptoms are said to be “skin irritation and sweaty palms. But now they say nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath” (WN, 111), later they say that it causes “heart palpitations and a sense of *Déjà vu* (WN, 116). Lack of knowledge on the part of the characters about this ecological catastrophe relates to the noise that the post-industrial society produces through its various means of communication, and this ignorance in itself produces anxiety on the one hand, and awe on the other. Jack realizes this as he talks about what people in the town impart, “these pieces of unverified information . . . with a certain respectful dread” (WN, 153). He also continues to say that “the toxic event had released a spirit of imagination,” and finally they “began to marvel at [their] own ability to manufacture awe” (ibid.).

The Gladney family lives in a modern condition, in a domestic life like that given by novelists of the late Romantic period. Much of the talks and conversations take place in the bedrooms and kitchens of the middle-class American family. Family members sit together regularly watching television and exchange ideas from radio, TV, and supermarket tabloids. This domestic life has been shattered by

an ecological disaster caused by man's excessive dependence on scientism, industry, and modern technology. When the airborne toxic event occurs, they realize that modern technology and science cannot do anything about it and their complacency is also shattered because science has proven shallow and ineffective. Babette's attempt to take Dylar, for example, so that she forgets the fear of death has proven inactive as the researchers are unable to prove the drug is effective. Babette gives both her mind and body to Mr. Gray (Willie Mink) because as she herself confessed it was her last hope and resort (WN, 194). Yet, she is corrupted rather than being cured. The same thing occurs to all as the narrator at the last and ending image of the supermarket explains that everything is reorganized and people find no meaning in this change; they are now anxious and in a post-modern condition, "The cults of the famous and the dead" (WN, 326).

Fear of death in *White Noise* is the same fear human beings feel at the end of history. It is a fear that comes as a result of man trying to control his nature and his surroundings. It is a fear that limits subjective reason when we see it as an objective fear. Resorting to the same mechanism through technology and industry to control this fear leads to disaster. The mind is corrupted by the media and the body by sex as happens with Babette. When Jack sits in a restaurant with his son Heinrich and his friend, Orest Mercator, who wants to sit in a cage with poisonous snakes to set a world record, and they are talking about whether Orest fears death, the latter says that he has read a book recently saying "There are more people dead today than in the rest of world history put together. What's one extra? I'd just as soon die while I'm trying to put Orest Mercator's name in the record book." (WN, 266). Janet Savory, Heinrich's biological mother, calls Jack and asks him to send Heinrich to Montana where she lives with Swamis in an ashram, and she says "Swami wants to know if our son is coming to the ashram this summer" (WN, 272), Jack mockingly says "Is he one of those whimsical swamis with a snow-white beard? Sort of fun to look at?" in return Janet says "We're serious people here. The cycle of history has but four ages. We happen to be in the last of these. There is little time for whimsy." (ibid.). Later on, she says "the last age is the Age of Darkness." (ibid.). This apocalyptic vision is reiterated several times in the novel by other characters as well. However, it is also related to the field that Jack studies at the University, Hitler Studies. The highlighting of Hitler by DeLillo in *White Noise* is for the same apocalyptic purpose as the former tried to change history albeit by adding more destruction to it. Under the name of change, man, and by extension, modernity, moves towards the complete ruination of the world. Jack soon mentioned that in the novel. When he talks about Heinrich's hairline receding, he says "Man's guilt in history and in the tides of his own blood has been complicated by technology, the daily seeping falsehearted death" (WN, 22). The path that human beings take is towards death; technology and industry are to be blamed for being used both intentionally (in the case of Hitler), and unintentionally (in the case of industrialization) to destroy the world. Hence, the fear of death in the novel can be seen as the same death that human beings would counter at the end of history. Jack, just like the modern man, is complacent and optimistic in the first part of the novel. Talking about Blacksmith and their condition, he says

But Blacksmith is nowhere near a large city. We don't feel threatened and aggrieved in quite the same way other towns do. We're not smack in the path of history and its contaminations. If our complaints have a focal point, it would have to be the TV set, where the outer torment lurks, causing fears and secret desires (WN, 85).

Yet, when the airborne toxic event occurs, his view is changed. Jack describes the townspeople who have been evacuated because of the event as such

they seemed to be part of some ancient destiny, connected in doom and ruin to a whole history of people trekking across wasted landscapes. There was an epic quality about them that made me wonder for the first time at the scope of our predicament (WN, 148).

After the airborne toxic event, Jack is confused and in a state of shock. His shock is because of his revelations: he exposed to the poison and now death is inside him as he himself says (WN, 174), and he reveals that his wife, Babette uses a medication called Dylar in exchange for her body to a man called Mr. Gray to avoid the fear of death. Before that, Jack thinks he is the only one that fears death, but now he discovers that his wife sacrifices her body to do something about it. Instead of Jack, his ex-wife, Janet, who entered an ashram and changed her name to Mother Devi, and devoted her life for spirituality, expresses the apocalyptic vision that Jack is not aware of.

When Jack knows that the poison is inside his body after he is examined, Murray Siskind, Jack's friend and much portrayed in the novel as an observer advising Jack and explaining the events to Jack, says that “this is the nature of modern death” (WN, 150). And he also says “We’ve never been so close to it ... Every advance in knowledge and technique is matched by a new kind of death, a new strain” (ibid.). Murray’s ideas insinuate the historicity of the end of the world. Human beings’ work and act lead to his own destruction. In this age, death is coming in the form of pollution and contamination because of the advancements in technology and industry. Technology is suicidal as Murray says (WN, 217), yet Babette and Jack want to use technology to ward off death. This is ironic and invites us to think of the absurdity of human beings’ situation under the control of technology. It is also a man’s destiny in a postmodern world.

IV. Conclusion

Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* is a realistic text addressing an ecological issue in American Society. It is an important text showing the prevalence of toxicity and the ignorance of people about the risk and danger of such ubiquity of toxic waste. As both critics, Deitering and Buell, point out, this text reveals new consciousness, new orientation, and new discourse. Furthering these contentions, the study points out that the novel is a prime example of awareness on the part of American society to deal with the problem of environmental degradation. It also shows that the novel is a warning to people that if one—on both individual level and public—does not do something serious to change people’s orientation and lifestyle, the end will be catastrophic for all including human and non-human entities. Thus, the novel becomes a salient and landmark text in raising environmental consciousness and also producing a discourse that needs to be discussed and considered. Showing that all people alike including both educated and uneducated are unaware of their real being and the dangers of their actions reinforces the notion that change in such a society is necessary.

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