

The Aspects of Nostalgia in Don DeLillo's Novel

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Abstract: Don DeLillo is considered one of the great postmodern writers due to his fine depiction of various postmodern elements in his novels. His works have essence of the 'good old days', which reminds of the modern era in this postmodern world. His plot construction is such that his characters are not something new, but relatable who live in this image driven and commoditised world and look for reassurance from the previous generation. The various happenings that include moments of spiritualism, or sharing intimate thoughts with each other is an obvious sign of nostalgia, for the old world. There is a constant yearning to understand the meaning of life beyond the daily activities of consumption and white noise that keeps the person engaged in its sphere. Don DeLillo showcases very minutely through ordinary and regular source that are around us on regular basis. There are various postmodern features that are employed in his novels, like the major one is: influence of technology, on humans and daily life that has changed the present world fundamentally.

Keywords: white noise, spiritual, nostalgia, commodity.

INTRODUCTION

It has been noticed that the works of Don DeLillo explores the aspect of postmodernity in American society. Features of Postmodernity are constantly visible in the novels like signs without meaning, simulations and information technology that has radically changed the society. New discoveries and scientific technologies have changed nature in a radical way. The nature is removed from its original state and represented in the form of simulations on everyday of tv and magazine form. Don DeLillo finds himself constantly hanging between modernism and post modernism, his characters are constantly seen, "homesick for lost assurances"(DeLillo, Mao II 90). As he told an interviewer in 1998: "Post-modern seemsto mean different things in . . . different disciplines. In architecture and art it meansone or two different things. In fiction it seems to mean another". Even though DeLillo refuses to classify his works, he admits "an affinity to modernism," and indeed it is by seeking "the epic in the mundane" that DeLillo embraces a modernist sensibility. Similarly, Bloom notes that "DeLillo, who is so easily mistaken for a Post-Modernist End-Gamer, is rather clearly avisionary, a late Emersonian American Romantic" (3).

Speaking about Don DeLillo's close ties with postmodernism, it would be apt to discuss modernism. It is not easy to define postmodernism, as it began after WWII in 1960s and 1970s. Its main focus is on style and modes of representation and is often regarded as successor of modernism. Modernism, is defined as "a revolutionary artistic movement beginning at the turn of

the 20th century" which became "a dominant style in American fiction until around 1945" (Giaino 8). "The increasingly murderous and grotesque use of technology during warfare, alongwith the decline of traditional values" like monogamy, fidelity, and morality, "inspired a sense of loss, alienation, and despair portrayed in modernist literature.

The postmodern has been defined in a huge variety of different ways: as a new aesthetic formation (Hassan, 1982), a condition (Lyotard, 1984), a cultural dominant (Jameson, 1991), a set of artistic movements employing a parodic mode of self-conscious representation (Hutcheon, 1988), an ethical or political imperative (Bauman, 1993) . . . [and] a period in which we have reached the 'end of history' (Baudrillard, 1983). (6-7)

Postmodernism evokes ideas of disruption, irony, hyper-reality, simulation, parody, pastiche. A thorough comparative analysis of modernism and postmodernism falls outside the scope and range of this paper, but Hassan's schematic list of differences between the two terms can lead us to a short yet concise analysis. In modernist era readers were forced to move away from the text, but in contrast postmodernist involved readers in the process of creation. Modernism is marked by advent of technology, newness and anxiety on the contrary postmodernism is marked by saturation and fatigue.

Lyotard has in mind two kind of aesthetic sublime, the initial kind of sublime that is linked to the late twentieth century, second type of sublime is novation. The nostalgic modernism is linked to past as in what has passed. The pain of nostalgia causes a sublime feeling by intermingling of both pain and the pleasure. That is why

the nostalgic sublime bears the very longing for the mystery and solace of the past that reappears as obsolete and parodic in postmodernist fiction.

DeLillo endorses his characters belief in transcendental realities than to dismiss them. But however this does not mean there is a grand source of spirituality in his novels. His characters are not bound by religious ties they are separated from it and yearn for the spirituality. Kant believed sublimity cannot be contained in any sensuous form but in the mind of the beholder. According to the Kantian philosophy it is power of the mind and not any philosophy that produces feeling of sublimity. In the novels of DeLillo the characters find higher level of solace and meaning in the insignificant moments. Munk has given this concept of 'trivial sublime', a concept that means when grand sublime is located in trivial and seemingly common moments. In the current scenario it is difficult to attain spiritual sense the same is visible in Don DeLillo's novel the characters are more attached to things rather than the spiritual and higher powers. The same is visible in the real situations that there is no spiritual relation with man. DeLillo depicts the current reality through his novels the characters are portrayal of the real people and how they are dealing with the current situation.

The nostalgic sublime is "anxious for meaning" and there is an eagerness for mystery. Don DeLillo reflects this with hidden spirituality. DeLillo believes that his works are open ended and open to explanation, the works are mystery in general.

Analysing the Aspects of Nostalgia

The aspects of nostalgia are found in trivial, small, ordinary circumstances it is the situation in which Jack Gladney wished for grander things. DeLillo's novel *White Noise* is about "the postmodern way we live now," in a thoroughly globalized America (Olster 79). It follows a year in the life of Jack Gladney, a college professor of Hitler studies, and his current wife Babette, who live with their stepchildren from previous marriages: Heinrich, Denise, Steffie, and Wilder. Living amidst the white noise of information technology, they struggle to root out any awareness of death, not knowing that they are eliminating the very element that may help them live an authentic and meaningful life.

White Noise makes a complete effort to search transcendental meaning. Jack still seeks understanding and listen to smallest meaningful things in spite of the

white noise that has bombarded our surroundings. According to Wilcox, Jack is like DeLillo who is a modernist but is placed in postmodern era. Jack looks for meaning in his surroundings.

Barret in her work focuses consumerism & digital reality, she believes that the only unadulterated realm in novel is all the characters are driven by fear, they are in control of the death. The world where religion has become hollow it becomes important to find the meaning.

A "false character that follows the name around" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 17), Jack sifts through the layers of white noise—electronic media, printed information, traffic sounds, computer read-outs—listening for significance, for a grasp of essence in the flux. In modernist fashion, he struggles in an almost Sisyphean way to glean meaning from the surrounding noise of culture and is drawn toward occasions of existential self-fashioning, heroic moments of vision in a commodified world. (Wilcox 349)

Living in such a commodified world with its simulations and uncertainties, people have lost their spiritual ground. The modernist quest for meaning and mystery in the novel is especially evident in the frequent use of the phrase "waves and radiation" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 310). In "The Romantic Metaphysics of Don DeLillo," Maltby notes that DeLillo's use of the phrase "waves and radiation" suggests that "within the mix of frequencies there is a low wave length that carries a flow of spiritually charged meaning" (11). For Jack, however, these spiritually charged meanings appear in the most quotidian events that surround him as he finds unexpected connections between the commonplace and magical. "The world is full of abandoned meanings," he says. "In the commonplace I find unexpected themes and intensities" (DeLillo, *White Noise* 175).

The protagonist of *Cosmopolis* is far more alienated as the society in which he lives is technology dominated. DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* represents the connection between humans and technology very well. On one hand there is story of Eric's one-day journey in New York to get a haircut, *Cosmopolis* takes us into a world where the "interaction between technology and capital" is the "only thing in the world worth pursuing intellectually and professionally" (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 23) and where technologies are so advanced that they have reached an endpoint, the "last techno-rave, the end of whatever it was the end of" (127)

Eric may seem like a successful capitalist but from inside there is hollowness. He is similar to Jack Gladney who is

also looking for some meaning in this world. At the funeral of a rapper named Fez who “mixed languages, tempos and themes” (135), Eric is bewildered and overwhelmed by the eccentric yet mystical procession of mourners. He feels a rapture in this, a “fierce elation, and something else that was inexpressible, dropping off the edge” (136). Like the other mourners who “were shaking and drained” (136), Eric feels as if “he’d been emptied of everything but a sense of surpassing stillness.” This self-emptying and this surpassing of stillness, both characteristics of the traditional sublime, call to mind what Lyotard identifies as “ontological dislocation” (Inhuman 206), a “rhythm of death and resurrection, as we suffer a radical loss of identity only to have that selfhood more richly restored to us” (Eagleton 45). It is also reminiscent of Kant’s formulation of the sublime, where the feeling of a “momentary check to the vital forces” is “followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful” (Kant 76).

The shared moment gives a sense of collective spirituality and psychic wholeness to Eric:

The street grew quiet in time. Voices died, the sense of outlying motion faded. He felt the presence of the bodies, all of them, the body breath, the heat and running blood, people unlike each other who were now alike, amassed, heaped in a way, alive and dead together. They were only extras in a crowd scene, told to be immobile, but the experience was a strong one, so total and open he could barely think outside it. (174)

Here the common moment of interaction between people is the moment of sublimity and it becomes a kind of religious experience. There are moments when Eric is faced with urgent need of spirituality through the humanly touch and he looks for it in most unexpected places at times he would feel to rub himself against doors to feel sympathetic touch. It is a longing for humanely touch that is nostalgia for one and whole. It drives the characters in DeLillo’s novel to sublime moments that force them to find moments of comfort in mundane life and smallest ordinary moments. The moment when Eric stumbles into a film set in which the city street has been taken over by naked bodies posed in the attitudes of mass death, he sleeps among them, trying to absorb some of the power and energy that emanates from them. Despite the seeming ordinariness of the event, Eric feels the presence of a power just by lying among those people, and it seems to be “independent of whatever circumstance attended the event” (DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* 173). Eric is forced to such things that any ordinary human would refuse to do but at

the same time we see human long for other human being no matter what.

Conclusion:

DeLillo being a postmodernist often reflects or yearns for modernism. His characters in one way or the other show the aspects of nostalgia by looking for assurances or spirituality in this technology driven world. DeLillo prefers modernism over the postmodernism the nostalgic theme is prevalent in the works of Don DeLillo. DeLillo can also be called a modernist who is placed in this world of technology and insecurity that is the postmodern world. After living in this world the writer looks back to the age that gives him some kind of reassurance and comfort in this world. DeLillo’s character feels more authentic feeling that is attained by being with people that are family, sharing grief with humans.

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