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Commodity: Triggering Uncertainty and Dilemma in Delillo's White Noise

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ABSTRACT

Postmodern conditions and experiences, specifically, uncertainties and contradictions, multiple interpretations or perspectives, rejection of universal, the loss of individual in the face of plurality, precede some kind of inherent predicament and dilemma as a residue or by-product of the constant commodification of life. Don Delillo's *White Noise*, as a product of the postmodern era by a postmodern thinker, incorporates these traits, and predominantly, the underlying dilemma. In Delillo's *White Noise* the concept and the use of commodity in this consumerist postmodern world triggers ultimate uncertainty in human life and plunges human being into an ocean of dilemma and confusion. One of the issues of this research is to trace in this novel these postmodern contradictions and dilemmas, and subsequent bathos of consumer society, under the burden of intensified productivism. This research also aims at scrutinizing these socio-personal postmodern dilemmas in the characters of the novel and ends up analyzing some psychosomatic predicaments in their deeds and thoughts relating to the personal experiences and contexts of the readers of this novel.

Keywords: Commodity, dilemma, media, postmodernism, products, simulation, uncertainty, white noise.

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Postmodern experiences entail some distinctively atypical feelings towards life, giving human race a discrete perception of 'being and nothingness' (Sartre 1943). As Human beings lack the choice of living, they exist compulsorily and repeatedly without having any apparently existent worth of living. Therefore, a meaningful and worthy life is one that by definition has achieved choice-worthy purposes (Nielsen 1964) or involves satisfaction upon having done so. (Hepburn 1965; Wohlgennant 1981) A postmodern man is much aware of this existence (for-itself) which is ultimately doomed to nothingness and void. Following the trail of these weird experiences under postmodern verve, Don Delillo's novels uphold a number of peculiar experiences concerning postmodern life and humanity in general. Specifically, Delillo's *White Noise* traces some of the postmodern contradictions and predicaments as a by-product of consumerism. These post-modern contradictory "experiences are those that emphasize

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the consumption of signs and images rather than products, the surface appearance of things not their depth, the mediated process of communication not the content of communication.” (Morris 2001) In this incongruous consumer society, the worth of human being and human issues are weighed with the value of commodity which subscribes to the notion of *intensified productivism*. Under this notion, the abundance of enthusiastically forged products and human beings’ ability to possess them decides the real worth of a man in this postmodern consumer society where people are nothing but consumers. Baudrillard, in this regard, claims that “commodities are bought and displayed as much for their sign-value as their use-value, and that the phenomenon of sign-value has become an essential constituent of the commodity and consumption in the consumer society.” (Kellner, 2015) Therefore, every event in making the plot of the novel *White Noise* springs out of or is connected to some products including brands of cars and chewing gum, a symbolic and simulated food product to keep human being busy with inexhaustible consumption; and most of the story takes place in supermarkets (chapters 9, 10, 22 etc.), a perfect place to plunge consumers into an ocean of confusion and dilemma of choice. Consumers, even ‘elderly people... look lost’, bedazzled and puzzled among endless ‘dazzling hedgerows’ (*White Noise*, chapter 22). With these endless options the characters of this novel are just pawns that are chased by fear of being caught up in a tangle of infinity and uncertainty. However, the purpose of this article is, first, to delineate the tripartite relationships among (1) commodity and commodification of life, (2) uncertainty of life, living and things, and (3) dilemma of choice; and then to demonstrate how commodity creates uncertainty and dilemma, reciprocating with each other to shape the postmodern life of the characters of *White Noise*. The idea of this research is grounded on the theory of commodity fetishism by Karl Marx presented in *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* (1867) where Marx propounded that social relationships involve in production, not as relationships among people, but as economic relationships among the money and commodities exchanged in market trade. A qualitative evaluation is utilized for this research, exploiting objective methods such as consulting primary and secondary sources. The research methodology for this paper required gathering relevant data from the specified text and research articles and accumulating information in order to analyze the material and have a further comprehensive understanding of the lives of postmodern protagonists and their subsequent crises and dilemmas. To reach the goal of this research, in-depth character analysis is done, and comparison among commodity, uncertainty and dilemma to show their combined and concentrated effects on the major representative characters of the novel are made. This paper starts with the discussion on postmodern experience of uncertain human life then gradually moves to talking about the relationship between postmodern experience and dilemma, and then it proceeds with discussion showing how commodity, uncertainty and dilemma collides with each other. The whole discussion is carried out keeping in the background the characters and the events of the novel *White Noise*.

To start, the most important issue this novel traces is the postmodern experience of being in ‘a condition of permanent impermanence’; or more precisely, it maps out the continual and painful feelings of uncertainty and fluidity of life, which is very much engrained in the complex life of postmodern man under capitalism. There is ‘no sense of the irony of human experience, that 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.’ (*White Noise* 45) But, we do not know ‘when’ we shall die. This paradox of certain uncertainty adds further predicament to the complexity of postmodern life. Even so-called most secured life which emerged as an emblem for security and certainty on this earth, surrenders to this uncertainty and impasse. DeLillo, further, after the 9/11 catastrophe, expresses his opinions about the instability and impermanence of life and says, ‘For the first time in American history we have a much greater sense of our own peril, of our own mortality, a sense that the future is not secure.’ (David, *The Los Angeles Times*, Apr. 15, 2003) This insecurity of future life emerges from the sense of fear of death. ‘The power of the dead is that we think they see us all the time. The dead have a presence. ... They are also in the ground, of course, asleep and crumbling. Perhaps we are what they dream.’ (*White Noise* 44) So, the fear of death breaks the notion of ‘death’ of the ‘deads’. Here, the nature of reality is uncertain and runs on the reverse wheel of confusion and dilemma.

Since this fear causes sufferings similar to a disease, it requires treatment. But here again, the dilemma and contradiction invalidate the drive. In this case, one of the crucial dilemmas in *White Noise* is between the serious issue of thanatophobia and its humorous treatment through sheer mechanism; hence attributing a subsidiary entity to human existence and its feelings. Humane emotions are hopelessly tied to technology and science as if some miraculous medicine would substitute all doubts and fear. Both Jack, the central character, and Babette, his wife, are reduced to mere contradictions of living and dying since they both relentlessly try to avoid death either with the help of Dylar, a psychopharmaceutical drug, or through the attempt to cast control over death by killing someone else, as Jack, out of jealous anger, attempts to kill Willie Mink, the provider of Dylar; the logic being, since you can cause death to someone, you have the power to control death. However, since the characters feel the sense of fear extremely deeply, in their constant struggle to avoid it, there is an intense conflict at work. The conflict leads to the dilemma whether to surrender to or fight against death. Should we vainly strive to live a life sliding towards ultimate death where 'all plots tend to move deathward?' since 'this is the nature of plots' (*White Noise*, Chapter 6, 10). The narrator further remarks 'I've got death inside me. It's just a question of whether or not I can outlive it.' But Jack Gladney fails to find a solution which will protect him from moving 'death-ward'. This enigmatic tension and confusion of outliving death dominates life. But, Murray, Jack's colleague, euphemistically terms 'dying (as) an art in Tibet' (*White Noise*, Chaps. 9, 16) and devalues death by substituting it with the value of commodity. He remarked appropriately 'we do not die, we shop' (*White Noise*, Chapter 9) to escape the fear of death which merges with dilemma and commodity.

However, DeLillo delineates some tentative, though paradoxically impossible, solutions to people's natural fear of death. People can use the essence of consumerism either to deny or to accept or to challenge death; by either using some magical boon of science, in this case Dylar, as mentioned earlier, or by ignoring the concrete existence of death. So, consumerism emerged, from the need of profit maximization, as an important tool used as a defense against death where consumers consume abundantly to save themselves from being consumed by death itself. So Delillo comments: 'Consume or die.' You succumb to consumerism or you will find it difficult to survive then again, time and place of death itself is uncertain. Thus, will you surrender to an endless vicious circle of consumerism or you will choose to die? This is the ultimate dilemma of postmodern life where products define life and its directions. The narrator continues by DeLillo, 'Through products and advertising people attain impersonal identity. . . . It's as if fantasies and dreams could become realized with the help of the entire consumer imagination that surrounds us, a form of self-realization through products'. (Nadotti, 93)

In this novel, exceptionally serious issues, such as, the extinction of human race, supreme control of consumerism and technology, and crisis of postmodern identity are treated sarcastically with a renewed significance and impetus blurring the distinction between seriousness and triviality. So, expected human attitude towards these issues are bound to be paradoxical since they suffer from the dilemma of choice. Therefore, the fear of death is supposed to be balanced through farcically paradoxical engagement with supermarket activities. The very contradiction of postmodern life is that the fear, more specifically the fear of death, is originated from the unachievable hope of beating death for good. Concerning the 'airborne toxic event' or Dylar it can also be debated that the creator (modern man, to say, the scientists) is afraid of his own creation (e.g. scientific inventions such as toxic gas-Nyodene D). So, 'the greater the scientific advance, the more primitive the fear.' (*White Noise*, Chap. 21) Hence the only solution remains in bringing balance by reducing the weight of gravity down from fear and making it lighter. For this, Delillo uses dark humour contrasting the harsh reality of life with the sarcastic triviality of buying products in the supermarkets.

Further, *White Noise* upholds the human dilemma which relates to the confusion and questioning of common societal beliefs; it also questions the existence of stereotypically generalized human feelings and emotions as it is claimed that 'it is possible to be homesick for a place even when you are there.' (Delillo, *White Noise*) Even the existence of geographical location is put into question: 'Tibet is not Tibet anymore.' (ibid, chapter 9) Besides, the uncertainty, cluelessness, dullness and mystification of modern life encourage the dilemma incomprehending the identity of things and persons. Confusion

of ideas and meanings also leads to the dilemma to choose the desired one. When Jack asked 'Do you want to go?' the confused and perplexed son Heinrich responds:

Who knows what I want to do? Who knows what anyone wants to do? How can you be sure about something like that? Isn't it all a question of brain chemistry, signals going back and forth, electrical energy in the cortex? How do you know whether something is really what you want to do or just some kind of nerve impulse in the brain? Some minor little activity takes place somewhere in this unimportant place in one of the brain hemispheres and suddenly I want to go to Montana or I don't want to go to Montana. How do I know I really want to go and it isn't just some neurons firing or something? Maybe it's just an accidental flash in the medulla and suddenly there I am in Montana and I find out I really didn't want to go there in the first place. (ibid, 20)

These questions are the outcome of confusion, uncertainty and dilemma in human life deconstructing the nature of truth, logic and understanding. DeLillo attempted in this novel to answer this catalogue of representative questions of every postmodern man. In fact, there exist the dilemma and confusion in everyday activities which appear as white noise of life. As DeLillo explains in his interview 'In *White Noise*, in particular, I tried to find a kind of radiance in dailiness. Sometimes this radiance can be almost frightening. Other times it can be almost holy or sacred' (DeCurtis, 63). Through these 'dailiness', and 'white noise' DeLillo puts forward the ultimate confusion of choice distinguishing necessity from redundancy. The conversation between Jack and Babbette exposes that particular dilemma of either to reject or accept this dailiness:

"Either I'm taking something and I don't remember or I'm not taking something and I don't remember. My life is either/or. Either I chew regular gum or I chew sugarless gum. Either I chew gum or I smoke. Either I smoke or I gain weight. Either I gain weight or I run up the stadium steps."

"Sounds like a boring life."

"I hope it lasts forever," (*White Noise* 24)

Another dilemma the postmodern characters of this novel face is the contradiction between the choice of real and the make-believe which formulates the world of simulacra (Baudrillard 1988) as substantiated in this novel in people's attempt at "taking pictures of taking pictures" (*White Noise* 12) in a tourist spot. So, the life that Jack Gladney chooses to live as a professor of Hitler Studies at the College-on-the-Hill becomes more real a life for him than the real one. On the contrary, he is alert about the fact that he is taking help of deception to create his make-believe personality and, simultaneously, is anxious because he is afraid of being exposed in public, which propels him to take German lessons in secret. Here the dilemma is laid in the struggle to shed the attire of his inherent identity and construct a conscious one rejecting the notion of truth, and by extension of identity. Furthermore, introducing and teaching Hitler Studies to establish his own distinctiveness as well as to prove himself popular and proficient; that is, to indirectly offer himself as a saleable product symptomatic of *global capitalism* and consumerism. In fact, every individual is compelled to do so and fight for sustenance in this capitalist society. His attempt to search a distinctive and sustainable vocation and to work for life alienates him from self and puts him into a dilemma of choice between his real 'self' and the simulated 'self'. Karl Marx comments:

The fact that labour is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. ("Estranged Labour," 1844)

In the same way, Jack seems unhappy as he does not know German and pretends to know the language denying his real 'self'. Therefore, he feels himself outside of his work as a professor of Hitler Studies. And, by doing this he commodifies himself. Not only Jack but Murry, his colleague, also wants

to use an opposing figure, Elvis Presley, to brand his own identity. So, the fragmentation of human nature into bits and reconstruction of the bits into a 'product' or 'commodity' is the final dilemma of postmodernism as well as of the characters of this novel.

The predicament for contradictions is also prominent in the characters' conjugal life when we find the protagonists declaring their fidelity as Jack says, 'Babette and I tell each other everything.' (*White Noise*, Chap. 7: 09), whereas we, as readers, know the naked truth that they both hide from each other about the issues related to the 'medicine Dylar' or 'the poisoning of Nyodene D' or 'the continuous fear of death'. The penetration into the secret self of each other is classified and restricted. So Jack's life partner Babette's face suddenly appearing on the TV screen confuses him as "was this her spirit, her secret self" so far unknown to him, and now epiphanically revealing itself through the power of media. Since 'we live in an age of rapid mass media, television, Internet,' they 'determine our tempo, not books' (Delillo, 2007, interview). So, mass media also stimulates the devouring hunger for products or at least excites, among frenzied consumers, the voyeuristic pleasures of watching tempting products, which creates an unsatisfied human nature tempted towards more and more spectacular, tantalizing things, products or issues on media; even the social or natural 'disasters' become a product for consumption. Hence, dilemma remains for half-awakened or semi-conscious human beings who struggle to choose either to go for nonviolent humanity or respond to the temptation of wild media attractions as it is seen in the novel "Heinrich came running down the hall, burst into the room. 'Come on, hurry up, plane crash footage.' Then he was out the door, the girls were off the bed, all three of them running along the hall to the TV set ... Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander, more sweeping." (*White Noise*, chapter 14. 34) Media determines even our codes of humanity since Eugene is 'a savage' without the knowledge of the unique codes of humanity because he is grown in the suburb without television which means the lack of modernity and updatedness. So, in order to weaken the ominous authority of television and technology in creating human personality and identity Babette induces a fixed television session on Fridays for the family. She resolves to 'deglamorize' in their eyes 'the medium' or the concept of watching television and decrease its 'narcotic undertow and eerie diseased brain-sucking power'. The final predicament is a pull from media or technology to convert psychosomatic issues into digits and pixels:

The face on the screen (TV) was Babette's. Out of our mouths came a silence as wary and deep as an animal growl. Confusion, fear, astonishment spilled from our faces. What did it mean? What was she doing there in black and white, framed in formal borders? Was she dead, missing, disembodied? Was this her spirit, her secret self, some two-dimensional facsimile released by the power of technology, set free to glide through wavebands, through energy levels, pausing to say goodbye to us from the fluorescent screen?... Babette of electrons and photons, of whatever forces produced that gray light we took to be her face.... Then Denise crawled up to the set and turned the volume dial. Nothing happened. There was no sound, no voice, no nothing. (*White Noise*, Chapter 20, 50)

It is the media rather than novels which change the world. (Delillo, 2007) The emergence of 'black and white' 'two-dimensional' image of Babette in the form of 'electrons and photons' through 'wavebands' from behind 'fluorescent screen' of 'formal borders' under 'power of technology' throws the family members under the confusion of whether Babette used to be a human of 'flesh and blood'. The feelings resemble the side effect of Dylar which destroys the ability to "distinguish words from things, so that if someone said 'speeding bullet,' I would fall to the floor to take cover" (*White Noise*, chapter 26, 86)

Conflict and dilemma works in their religious beliefs and practices as well, the example of which is found in a hospital run by German nuns who do not believe in God or the afterlife which contradicts their vocation. In some instances of the novel the distinction between God in religion and doctors in science become blurred. Doctors turn out to be a prophet, the only member of society capable of deciphering the "network of symbols,...an entire awesome technology wrested from the gods. It

makes you feel a stranger in your own dying” (*White Noise*, Chapter 21, 66) Dilemma can be traced in the protagonist Jack as he rejects technology and also rejects the idea of an afterlife.

It can be concluded with Frank Lentricchia who states, ‘*White Noise* appears to be motivated by a double purpose: to write social criticism ..., while showing its readers the difficulty of doing so with a clean conscience and an un-self-deluded mind. This sort of doubly motivated writing... gives no comfort because while it trades upon the desire to fix what seems most dreadful in our culture it insists on showing us that what especially needs fixing is the intelligent and sensitive fixers themselves’ (*Tales* 93). Postmodern men’s entanglement in this vicious circle emerges from the persistent predicament of existence, identity and choice. The displacement of reality and replacement of it by uncertainly multiple *simulations* leaves human life under the dilemma of choice. So they take ‘pictures of taking pictures’, a symptom of an infinite cycles of reproduction creating a confused existence of originality; in turn, the *real* has given way to what is called the *hyper real* (Baudrillard 1988: 166). This transformation of reality happens as a consequence of abundant commodities which might be considered both a boon and curse for humanity. This also affects human life deferring the simple reality leading towards several versions of itself, created by addition through accumulation in several stages of it. Confusing and complex web of relationships among step-siblings and parents breaks the certainty making it difficult to identify the parental lineage of children in Jack’s family, which creates a complete dylaramic aura in this novel where products are the most vital binding factor. ‘It is consumerism not the natural bloodline that keeps this family together’. (Ferraro 1991) Therefore, *White Noise* demarcates the corrosive effect of the availability of plentiful commodity in the postmodern consumerist world, and the uncertainty of choice that leaves the confused humanity under dilemma and contradiction.

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