



Examining the Landscape of Postmodern Subjectivity in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

Agrita Chhibber

Ph.D. Research Scholar
Lovely Professional University
Phagwara (Punjab), India.
agrita.chhibber@gmail.com

Dr. Muzafar Ahmed Bhat

Associate Professor
Lovely Professional University
Phagwara (Punjab), India.
muzafar.25623@lpu.co.in

Abstract

The research paper observes the play of subjectivity that the novel *White Noise* by Don DeLillo entails. It depicts the juxtaposition of different identities by the characters to lead a life they desire. In this book, DeLillo explores the dynamics of identity that underpin postmodern civilization. The modern man who believed in wholeness and unity has been replaced by a postmodern man who is in complete contrast, owns a constructed identity and lacks uniqueness. This paper points toward the fragmented self, and search for the true self.

Keywords: fragmented, whole, postmodern, modern man, White Noise, subjectivity

Introduction

In the contemporary era identity is “the burning issue on everybody’s mind and tongue” (Bauman 17). Today, many institutions and authority figures frequently challenge an individual to reconsider, articulate, and justify his identity, the ‘I’. The most common term ‘I’ is pondered upon by everyone at various points. In the current era subject believes he/she has free will to create or recreate ‘selves’ at will, at the same time they have harrow range of options to choose from. Legal theorist Lawrence M. Friedman (1999) quotes:

choice is often an illusion. People are firm believers in free will. But they choose their politics, their dress, their manners, their very identity, from a menu they had no hand in writing. They are constrained by forces they do not understand and are not even conscious of. But even the illusion of choice is of enormous social significance. (240)

In *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway*, subjectivity is defined as an, “abstract or general principle that defies our separation into distinct selves and that encourages us to imagine that, or simply helps us to understand why, our interior lives inevitably seem to involve other people, either as objects of need, desire, and interest or as necessary sharers of common experience” (Mansfield 3). The term ‘subject’ focuses on ‘linking’ together various aspects that give him a purpose or aim. The subject is always linked to some outer aspects like an idea, thought, or other subjects. Regenia Gagnier (1991) describes the term ‘subjectivity’ as stated:

First, the subject is a subject to itself, an I, however difficult or even impossible it may be for others to understand this I from its own viewpoint, within its own experience. Simultaneously, the subject is a subject to, and of, others; in fact, it is often an Other to others, which also affects its sense of its own subjectivity... Third, the subject is also a subject of knowledge, most familiarly perhaps of the discourse of social institutions that circumscribe its terms of being. Fourth, the subject is a body that is separate (except in the case of pregnant women) from other human bodies; and the body, and therefore the subject, is closely dependent upon its physical environment. (Gagnier 8)

The concept of subjectivity studied by Gagnier is concerned with 17th century philosopher Rene Descartes. The term ‘I’ is used in daily routine and has become the focus of our activities. It is used in various ways depending on different scenarios. It is better to understand the term ‘subject’ and its meaning as it is the prime focus of contemporary times. Vincent Descombes, in his book *Who Comes After the Subject?* (1991) mentions the ideology of Rene Descartes, “I think, therefore I am” (Descombes 126-7); the concept of ‘I’ explained by Descartes was not limited to himself. This concept of Descartes ‘I think, therefore I am’ explains an idea that connects all human consciousness in one thread. Before Descartes’s views of subjectivity were conceived as the product of divine forces. Descartes in his book *Meditation on the First Philosophy* mentioned it as an internal element of human desire that defines subjectivity rather than external forces and rejected modernist beliefs.

Beginning, with Descartes’s concept, *Cogito ergo sum*, meaning ‘I think, therefore I am’ (1637), it is this theory from which modernists gained the understanding of singular and unified consciousness that a subject holds. Descartes puts forward a subject that is self-reflexive, singular and that learns about self through inquiry. Additionally, modernists also looked up to Kant’s ideology for his ideology of transcendence which believes man’s mind can access all the universal truth that lies beyond itself. In *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant mentions the ‘transcendental deduction’. This method is proof that objectivity lies beyond human thoughts but can be accessed by him.

Modernists truly believed in the concept of the 'soul' that resides in the human body, which is also a sign of singularity, wholeness, totality, and unified self. In the modern era, people yearned for completeness and a unified set of cultures and lifestyles. These are the ideas that form the ground of modernist subjectivity. But these ideas were not followed by postmodernist thinkers like Fredric Jameson, Christopher Butler, and Madan Sarup instead, they defied the beliefs of modernists. Madan Sarup, in *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* (1996), described identity as "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings blend and clash...[and], not an object which stands by itself and which offers the same face to each observer in each period" (Sarup 25-26).

Foucault argues that this new idea of the constructed 'subject' the *Cogito* operates with the subject using 'proof' to juxtapose with his existence. Foucault talks about the growth of modernist subjects in the context of epistemes: the historical discourse that creates its area of knowledge in a particular time frame. Foucault, in his book *The Order of Things* (1970), states:

When natural history becomes biology, when the analysis of wealth becomes economics, when, above all, reflection upon language becomes philosophy, and Classical discourse, in which being a representation found their common locus, is eclipsed, then, in the profound upheaval of such an archaeological mutation, a man appears in his ambiguous position as an object of knowledge and as a subject that knows: enslaved sovereign, observed spectator, he appears in the place belonging to the king, which was assigned to him in advance by Las Meninas, but from which his real presence has for so long been excluded (Foucault 340).

Foucault says when man becomes the 'subject that knows' and simultaneously is also the 'object of knowledge', is a point of intersection where an individual is both *subject* and *object* displaying a sign of upcoming chaos that will eventually change the outlook of the 'subject'. Deleuze in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) refers to Foucault's work in this context as "*proces de subjectivation*": the process of becoming a subject (Deleuze xvii). A person is considered self-creating, self-constituting, and who operates through his inner will that is present in each subject which is challenged by the ideology that the subject's true subjectivity is in absolute control of external forces.

Foucault, in May 1969 interview, quotes "The death of man is nothing to get particularly excited about. It's one of the visible forms of a much more general decease, if you like. I don't mean by it the death of God but the death of the subject, of the Subject in capital letters, of the subject as origin and foundation of knowledge, of Liberty, of Language and History" (Shaffer, *The Irrelevance of the Subject*). Foucault talks about *death of the subject*; it is related to subject who is not independent nor has the freedom to act as per his knowledge in the historical and social spheres

in which he is placed. Fredric Jameson, in *Postmodernism and Consumer Society* (1998), specifically talks about the ‘death of the subject’ which in simple terms means “the end of individualism as such” (Jameson 5). The modernist elements are terminated by postmodernism, which is associated with the idea of an individual self and self-awareness, a distinct identity. He further states:

Yet today [...] that kind of individualism and personal identity is a thing of the past; that the old individual a individualist subject is ‘dead’: and that one might even describe the concept of the unique individual and the theoretical basis of individualism as ideological. (Jameson 3-4)

Many postmodern thinkers have questioned the aspects of modern subjectivity fully or partially. Postmodern thinkers and critics have questioned the representation of the world since the Renaissance. According to Fredric Jameson, the major concept in postmodern discourse is the subject’s death. It points towards a society that has rejected unique individuals, or subjectivity that has prevailed in the modern era.

Analysis of Postmodern Subjectivity in *White Noise*

No other writer in the contemporary era has questioned the role and impact of technology in affecting subjectivity as Don DeLillo has done. The works of Don DeLillo very finely depict the impact of technology in shaping not only the subjectivity of his characters but also of the contemporary American society that forms the structure of his works. His works completely reflect upon various concerns of contemporary culture that is dominated by hyperreality, mass consumption, and fragmented subjectivity. Furthermore, it has been studied that in DeLillo’s oeuvre, his characters are often lonely, confused, and decentred whose relation to survival and self is studied. His characters adopt a variety of strategies to achieve their authentic self, something they fail to achieve. Most of his works like *Libra*, *Mao II*, *Underworld*, and *Falling Man*, reveal the concept of constructed self, but for this paper, his famous work *White Noise* will be analyzed in detail.

The self is not as unified as it used to be, but today it is a fragmented or constructed phenomenon that is greatly affected by the impact of media. The postmodern self is not tied to fixed relationships anymore. In the contemporary era, freedom is not found in a unified identity but in the interplay of multiple roles. In DeLillo’s novel characters are seen taking up multiple identities to pursue different roles. According to Jameson in *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), the end of the coherent or unified self means the end of both personal style as well as emotions:

The end of the bourgeois ego, or monad, no doubt brings with it the end of the psychopathologies of that ego -- what I have been calling the waning of affect. But it means the end of much more -- the end, for example, of style, in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the distinctive individual brush stroke (as symbolized by the emergent primacy of mechanical reproduction). As for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older anomie of the centered subject may also mean not merely a liberation from anxiety but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self-present to do the feeling. (Jameson 15)

In *White Noise* Jack Gladney does not have a unified personality but a fragmented one which is the ruling feature of the postmodern novel. Gladney embodies a quintessential postmodern persona, juggling multiple facets of his identity as a father, college instructor, department head, husband, ex-husband, American, associate, customer, etc. Gladney lacks identity due to being burdened with multiple identities and feeling distant from his true self. Jack owns a double character; on campus, he is a different persona from what he is in real life, and there are layers of textures that he adapts, "I am a false character that follows the name around" (*White Noise* 17). This single statement describes the identity of Jack, it confirms that people in the postmodern era create their own identity by choosing from the alternatives. Jack was advised by his chancellor to alter his name and personality so that he is taken seriously as a Hitler innovator, this advice made Jack add the initials J.A.K Gladney "a tag [he] wore like a borrowed suit" (*White Noise* 16). Because of Gladney's "tendency to make a feeble presentation of self," the chancellor asks him to put on weight, to "grow out" into Hitler (*White Noise* 16-7). As a professor, he puts on a different character that suits his professional look. He is further changing his look by adding:

So, Hitler gave me something to grow into and develop toward, tentative as I have sometimes been in the effort. The glasses with thick black heavy frames and dark lenses were my own idea, an alternative to the bushy beard that my wife of the period didn't want me to grow. Babette said she liked the series J. A. K. and didn't think it was attention-getting in a cheap sense. To her it intimated dignity, significance and prestige. I am the false character that follows the name around. (*White Noise* 17)

Eventually, he admits, that he is not being honest with his identity, he performs various roles that suit society. He is aware of his false persona that follows his true self, "Here, identity is neither liberating nor expressive of our selfhood, as much as a trap, something to be frustrated and deconstructed if we still believe in any possibility of freedom" (Mansfield 172). Hence it is clear that by curating a false identity, Jack Gladney loses the essence of his true self. The entire novel is dependent on the academic outlook as well as Hitler. In the research paper "White Noise and the American Novel" Theron Britt studies that death of true self rises from the traditional ideology of

modernist loss of authentic self, as postmodern or contemporary identity, “retains a remnant of [...] modernism’s inward turn, in the form of a posited basic human desire or need for a stable autonomous identity” (Britt 114). In terms of modernism the loss of the true self is based on “the conception of the individual as an autonomous moral agent and source of value struggling against a corruptive culture” (Britt 103-4). But loss of self is depicted in novels of DeLillo as:

the very nature of the individual is in question and can no longer be assumed as a source of value; the individual is better conceived in the postmodern period as a subject who is a site of contestation for various social codes (Britt 108).

DeLillo’s search for self directly contradicts modernism which cannot be attained by ignoring the society. The characters of DeLillo fail to find their true self. Osteen’s article “The Nature of the Diminishing Self” states:

an origin that is also an end: each narrows himself to discover either a life governed by rules that obviate the need for thought or an end to life itself. Each narrator strives to reduce competing impulses and discourses into a single-line story that moves inexorably toward perfect, violent closure. But none of them find the solution to their malaise [...] (Osteen 32).

DeLillo’s character Jack Gladney is filled with postmodern characteristics that keep him away from discovering themselves. Today self-identity is a hijacked one, as there is no true self that determines or justifies the subject’s actions. Authenticity and wholeness of identity do not exist in this fragmented world. A sort of symmetry among the postmodern characters is noticed when they face the loss of their true self and reconstitute themselves as others. The false identities followed by false names are a prominent feature of postmodern society. Joseph M Conte says this feature of name changing in the postmodern novel is “metonomasia: each has been changed to suit some purpose of the characters in the narrative” (Conte 90).

Conclusion

Subjectivity is a major concern of contemporary times. With the discovery of the subconscious by modernism, the Cartesian subject—which was once seen to be an independent source of wisdom and knowledge—was abandoned. Rather subject emerged as something uncontrollable, broken, unreliable, and fragmented. The urge to restore back the wholeness or unity of the subject resulted in an identity crisis. Postmodernism which emerged in the other half of the 20th century, did not see the subject as an important factor, ‘other’ was considered more important than ‘I’. Today, identities are constructed about ‘other’. In the postmodern era due to cultural and social changes identities have become more destabilized, fractured, and fragmented which is further impacted by fear and technological dependence. This means that a character assumes different roles or identities

at different times that are not coherent or unified. For postmodern subject identity is a choice he makes.

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