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Critique of Consumer Culture in Don Delillo's *White Noise*

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By

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**Letter of Recommendation**

Dipak Sapkota has completed dissertation entitled “Critique of Consumer Culture in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*” under my supervision. He carried out his research from October 2014 to January 2016 and completed successfully. I hereby recommend his dissertation for the final examination.

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**Letter of Approval**

This dissertation entitled “Critique of Consumer Culture in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University by Dipak Sapkota has been approved by the undersigned members of Research Committee.

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## **Critique of Consumer Culture in Don Delillo's *White Noise***

*Despite having the exposition of consumer culture, Don Delillo's novel White Noise successfully makes the critique of post industrial sense of consumerism in American society. The consumerism does not only force its people to buy the materials but to identify themselves with the objects they buy. The new technologies and their positive impacts are highlighted where as the negative effects of consumerism are masked in the veil of capitalist ideologies. The novel has been able to unmask those flashy and spellbinding ideologies of consumerism. The capitalism motivates the people to buy the productions, which are directly related with the security of their lives. The people within the consumer culture feel secured for having the power to purchase the commodities despite having their less use values but sign-exchange values. The consumerism has been failed to motivate the people in all sphere as they have been comparing their lives with relatively less commodified cultures. So Don Delillo's novel White Noise successfully presents the dilemmas of the people living in the consumer culture while making its critique. This research project tries to unravel the positive and negative impacts of consumerism and commodification along with its relationship between capitalism and superrational post-industrial technologies*

This research project tries to excavate the American consumer culture and its impacts upon the society in the novel *White Noise* by Don Delillo. The writer tries to depict the post war American educated society and its fragmented nature in the novel. The text *White Noise* is set in the bucolic mid western college known as "The – College on-the Hill" in order to show the post-modern educated environment upon the main character Jack Gladney, a Professor of Hitler studies. His condition is fragmented and American capitalistic consumer culture has designed his personality,

which is no more than a cog of the machine. All the events depicted in the novel are directly related to the results of American capitalistic culture, which made the citizens as the puppets of advertisements of the productions. The consumer culture makes the human beings as the part of the production itself.

The novel *White Noise* is a satire against consumerism and void and hollowness of post-industrial American society. The novel presents American life "in comodification, and how an unparalleled quantum leap in the alienation of daily life in the city can now be experienced in the form of a strange new hallucinatory exhilaration" (Jameson, 562). As Jameson says American capitalism has commodified every object including human life. The fragmented and alienated city life is resulted into hallucinatory exhilaration. In the same way, the life of Jack Gladney, the post modern hero and his wife Babbette is presented in a city setting with consumer culture and its impacts upon them. So, Jack Gladney says, "I can't help being happy in a town" (3). The protagonist is in the town and he is not happy there because he is conditioned by the consumer culture.

The novel *White Noise* successfully depicts the hazardous condition of the people in new technocratic society. The white people themselves are more responsible for the development of consumerism. The ironic fact is that their own development has hampered them. That might be the cause the 'noise' is of white people. The white people have created noisy environment in American cities. So, the novel is entitled as *White Noise*. After the World War II, America promoted not only the way of purchasing but education, jobs and productions of numerous labour saving devices and means of entertainment. At first, Americans were eager to possess those materials to get the modern life standard but the same consuming desires turn out to be problematic for the ethics, morality and sense of familial belongingness. The

consuming the goods became "the act of relating to objects or persons in terms of their exchange value or sign- exchange value" (Tyson, 62). The sense of commodification remained not only of objects of production but of human life itself. In American consumer culture sex is also commodified and presented as a matter of commodity rather than a sacred and secret matter. Talking about the commodification of sex Jack Gladney further says:

I'm here to avoid situations. Cities are full situations, sexually cunning people. There are parts of my body I no longer encourage women to handle feely. I was in a situation with a woman in Detroit. She needed my semen in a divorce suit. The irony is that I love women. I fall apart at the sight of long legs, striding briskly, as a breeze carries up from the river, on a weekday, in the play of morning light [. . .]. The delicate chambering and massive undirectional flow, like a physics experiment. What fun it is to talk to an intelligent woman wearing stockings as she crosses her legs. That little statickly sound of rustling nylon can make me happy on several levels. (3)

As this statement opines, the central character of the novel is talking about sexuality and his own condition. He clearly states that he does not allow playing his body by the women but ironically he falls apart with the women. His sexual psyche is clearly seen when he talks about taking with women, having fun with them, and seeing their attractive legs. There is a wide gap between his claim and his psychic condition. He is more attracted with the 'nylon stockings' as these are the productions of new technologies and designed for women only.

The capitalistic society produces such kinds of productions, which separate the sex. Now sex has not been biological matter only but it is determined by the

production too, as Gladney talks about his sensuous feelings in nylon stockings wearing legs of women. That's why Jameson further clarifies that, "The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right because it seems to offer some privileged representational short hand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imagination to grasp. (566). The new technology is controlling human mind as Gladney's mind is controlled by the nylon stockings made by the new technology for modern women.

The Modern society is conditioned by the productions of new technologies. So, the human beings are commodified like the objects. Casting the light on the same issue Tyson further says that "An object becomes a commodity, however; only when it has exchange value or sign exchange value" (62). Further describing the sign exchange value she says, in the social status it confers on its owner" (62).

All the four parts of the novel, *White Noise* deal with the theme of commodification of human life and culture in America. Along with this theme, Don DeLillo does not forget to trace out the bad effects of commodification upon the people and nature as a whole. In the first chapter "Waves and Radiation" DeLillo presents "a chronicle of contemporary family life combined with academic satire" (Wikipedia, 1). Jack Gladney is a Professor of Hitler studies has known very little about Germany. His sense of consumption is seen funnier when Jack Gladney says:

Department heads wear academic robes at the College-on-the Hill. Not grand sweeping full length affairs but sleeveless tunics puckered at the shoulders. I like the idea. I like clearing my arm from the folds of the garment to look at my watch. The simple act of checking the time is transformed by this flourish. Decorative gestures add romance to life.

Idling students may see time itself as a complex embellishment, a romance of human consciousness, as they witness the chairman walking across campus, crooked arm emerging from his medieval robe, the digital watch blinking in late summer dusk. (41)

As the above quotation asserts, the central character Gladney is using "digital watch" in order to impress the students. The American consumer culture has taught its citizens as the time is money'. In order to know about time sense the digital watch is invented and people are forced to buy as it is the matter of dignity for Professor Gladney. That's why he is happy to wear "sleeveless tunic" as the uniform of the college. So, "the technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational short hand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our mind and imaginations to grasp" (Jameson 566). Gladney also thinks himself privileged when he gets a chance to show his digital watch on his wrist in sleeveless tunic.

The novel skillfully tackles the major aspects of Post-industrial life in America, where consumerism and technological materials are inextricably intertwined with each other. The first part of novel depicts the digital watch like other electronic and technological productions and their effects on the meaning of everyday life in the postmodern age. It also sheds light on TV as an essential icon of this era. American people are shown to be living their lives, behaving, believing and disbelieving according to TV. The supermarket or the hypermarket is also shown as a new place that "controls people's lives and gives them a new meaning in the post industrial, consumer culture" (Baudrillard 432). The life of people in this post-industrial era is controlled by consumerism. They go to supermarket to buy the things and it is the

place of attraction for them. The same situation is seen in Gladney's case too as he says:

Supermarkets this large and clean and modern are a revelation to me. I spent my life in small steamy delicatessens with slanted display cabinets full of trays that hold soft wet lumpy matter in plate colours. High enough cabinets so you had to stand on tiptoes to give your order. Shouts, accents. In cities no one notices specific dying. Dying is a quality of the air. It's everywhere and nowhere. Men shout as they die, to be noticed, remembered for a second or two. To die in an apartment instead of a house can depress the soul, I would imagine, for several lives to come. In a town there are houses, plants in bay windows [. . .]. If you do not know a name, you know a street name, a dog's name.

(13).

As the statement claims to be in an apartment is the matter of dignity for Jack Gladney. He regrets for being late to come to the apartments because these are large, clean and modern places. The consumer culture has forced Gladney like persons to go to such places. He finds himself in the state of revelation where he is in the supermarkets and regrets for living in the small cabinets earlier. The above quoted statement clearly shows how the mind of people is controlled by the post-industrial settings.

After World War II, post industrial society developed its own form of culture of making people to purchase the things, and making the people to be there, where capitalism wishes. This sort of consumerism played very important role and it was marked by unseen creativity like in design, trade, advertisement, and in the field of technological innovations as a whole. In this culture, the non-material productions

like advertising, media, communication, and information have become dominant and use or exchange value of commodities has been replaced with sign-exchange value. The success of capitalism lies in its brainwashing the mind of the people. Here, it is worthy to quote Murray Jay Siskind, a college Professor and friend of Gladney and his fascination with in the places, where consumer culture wants to take him as he says, "When I was a sports writer, [. . .]. I travelled constantly, lived in planes and hotels and stadium smoke, never got to feel at home in my own apartment" (17). Murray is proud to be in hotels, planes and stadium but didn't feel so good to be in his home. The sense of home has been replaced with the sense of 'next to home'.

The other characters in the novel *White Noise* are also not far from the sense of consumerism, which manufactures many products offering illusive promises. Consumers believe that consuming the production might make them free from every physical and mental problem. The drug Dylar is a clear example of this claim. Dylar is believed to eliminate the fear of death. Although it proves ineffective with Babette, the wife of Gladney, Jack Gladney wants to take this drug to get rid of his fear and anxiety. So Gladney decides to take as a problem solving agency when he says:

It is not just a powerful tranquilizer. The drug specifically interacts with neurotransmitters in the brain that are related to the fear of death. Every emotion or sensation has its own neurotransmitters. Mr. Gray found fear of death and then went to work on finding the chemicals that would induce the brain to make its own inhibitors. Amazing and frightening. Ever thing that goes on in your whole life is a result of molecules rushing around somewhere in your brain. (73)

Jack Gladney decides to take the drug to remove the fear of death. The capitalism has given such anxieties of death in order to sell Dylar like drug. Gladney like people are ready to take such kind of drugs.

Dylar is similar to any other consumer products in the way that it makes an illusive promise to fulfill the needs of consumers and relieve them from mental and physical health problems. Even though the promise is illusive and false, desperate people like Gladney are ready to take it as a last refuge, they can cling to in the existing culture where threats are Ubiquitous. In the same way, Jack Gladney believes that Dylar will help him. It will help him no matter how strong or weak Dylar is. Jack Gladney tells his daughter, Denise that "the power of suggestion could be more important than the side effects" (251). Although Denise thinks this sounds stupid, Jack Gladney says, "I am eager to be humored, to be fooled [. . .]. This is what happens to desperate people" (251). Gladney like people are readily persuaded to take such kind of drugs. The people in the supra-rational societies are so hopeless that they are eager to be fooled too. They are ready to believe anything and indulge themselves in consumerism.

Jack Gladney and his teaching fellow Murray are discussing about the fear of death, the later convinces the former to be a 'killer' rather than a 'dier' and to use violence in order to resist the fear of death. Along with the fear of death, Jack Gladney talks about other kinds of apocalypse in consumer cultural productions. He talks about the dream of discovering something new through technological innovations as he further says:

These are mainly B-movies, TV movies, rural drive-in movies. I tell my students not to look for apocalypse in such places. I see these car crashes as part of a long tradition of American optimism. They are

positive events, full of the old 'can-do' spirit. Each car crash is meant to be better than the last. There is a constant upgrading of tools and skills, a meeting of challenges. A director says, 'I need this flatbed truck to do a midair double somersault that produces an orange ball of fire with a thirty-six foot diameter, which the cinematographer will use to light the scene.' I tell my students if they want to bring technology into it, they have to take this into account, this tendency towards grandiose deeds, toward pursuing a dream. (80)

In this statement Jack Gladney talks about American movie culture, one of the most striking productions of consumer culture. By seeing the movies, the people are describing the reality. Movies have been new reproductive processes. The teachers and students both are mesmerized with new form of technology because film narratives "are about the processes of reproduction and include movie cameras, video, tape recorders whole technology of the production and reproduction of the simulacrum" (Jameson 565). The film itself is the reproduction but the people are believing and taking it as the real. So, new technologies and "mesmerizing and fascinating" (566) the people of post-industrial age.

### **Critique of American Consumer Culture: Textual Analysis of Delillo's novel**

#### ***White Noise***

The *White Noise* deeply examines the consumerism and its effects upon people's mental and physical health into two ways; as the toxicity of the post-industrial consumerist environment and the logic of consumerism. The first meaning of *White Noise* is the inevitable toxicity that prevails in the post-industrial consumerist condition. Delillo vividly depicts this toxicity as being found in daily products, existing everywhere within the society, permeating existence, and being

unidentifiable. As a result, people are unable to avoid this kind of threat are forced to suffer both physically and mentally. The people of contemporary era are guided the consumerism. So, it makes human personality disunited. People are deviated from the mainstream of the society and deprived of a real personal identity if they could not buy the intended productions. The new consumerism makes the people so strong that their identity becomes dependent on the image of the products they buy. Therefore Jack Gladney has to go to shop in order to fulfill his desirable images. He finds his own mesmerizing images in the different places as he states, "I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out found new aspects of myself, located a person I forgot existed . . . our images appeared on mirrored columns, in glassware and chrome, on TV monitors in security rooms" (48). Gladney finds his real personality in the mirror or glass screens. His value lies in those mirror images rather than his own self.

Jack Gladney feels that he himself has not real identity and that he must buy products for the images. He wants to wear in order to find his personality. In the novel Don DeLillo presents American consumerism and the people of that culture are designation of post-industrial society. The novel presents the way to gain the identity in the postmodern consumering society is to buy and display products as a representation of one's own image. Casting the light on the same issue Nigel Watson argues that "People actively wish to Join in and activity desire the opportunities for self expression and display which are provided by the choices of the pink shopping malls . . . we like to identify with the style that best represents the way that we wish to be seen" (37). People in the consumer culture identify themselves with the things they purchase. We consumers are given different choices by the shopping malls and

we are destined to follow its rules and regulations. The American consumers reach to the shopping mall to find their identity.

The search for identity in the shopping malls is sometimes shocking when unexpected events are seen. Jack Gladney saw a shocking death of somebody else in a UFO but that very death is not investigated properly as he states:

This was the week a policeman saw a body thrown from a UFO. It happened while he was on routine. Patrol on the outskirts of Glassboro. The rain-soaked corpse of an unidentified male was found later that night, fully clothed. An autopsy disclosed that death was due to multiple fractures and heart failure- the result, perhaps, of a ghastly shock. Under hypnosis, the policemen, Jerry Tee walker, relived in detail the baffling sight of the neon bright object that resembled an enormous spinning top as it hovered eighty feet above a field. Officer Walker, a Vietnam vet, said the bizarre scene reminded him of helicopter crews throwing Vietcong suspects out of the door [. . .]. Walker sensed an eerie message being psychically transmitted to his brain. Police hypnotists plan to intensify their sessions in an attempt to uncover the message. (86)

As in this statement the death has been a matter of bizarre scene in consumer society. Here, UFO, helicopter, neon bright etc are some of the examples of post industrial consumer culture. Before the goods to purchase, the death is virtually unimportant. Police also does not like to reach into the depth of the investigation rather makes insignificant remarks because the goods are more important than the human life. The consumerism has taught the people that the life is valuable only on the consumption of the productions. They believe that their existence and happiness depend on the

consumer products. Consequently, they think that they can evade death by purchasing goods. It is noted that right after the toxic event at the school and one caused by a leak of these toxic scenes and the supermarket scene imply that after being threatened by fatal incidents too, Jack Gladney's family tries to grope after the sense of fulfillment. Security and replenishment through consumerism when Gladney further opines:

It seemed to me that Babette and I in the mass and variety of our purchase, in the Sheer plentitude those crowded bags suggested, the weight and size and number, the familiar package designs and vivid lettering, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-G10 sale stickers, in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls- it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening. (120)

This statement clearly indicates that how Jack Gladney family takes consumption of the products, how they are mesmerized to buy the things. Those buying desires are conditioned by the consumer ideology. Gladney family feels the completeness of existence in buying those things in the supermarket. The people in the consumer culture feel insecure if they do not buy the productions. "And because the kinds of personal insecurities that make us buy consumer products are produced by comparing over selves with other people [. . .]. Competition is promoted among people who feel they must "sell" themselves in order to be popular or successful" (Tyson 63). The people in the society compare themselves with other people in terms of consuming the production. That sense of competition is in the core of the consumerism's ideologies. These very "repressive ideologies that serve to blind us to this fact in order to keep us

subservient to the ruling power system" (Tyson 57). Consumerism also circulates a sort of power through its ideologies in order to colonize the mind of the people.

The post-industrial society does have its hazardous effects upon the environment too. In the second part of the novel entitled as "The Airborne Toxic Event" Don DeLillo describes the ecological destructions. A toxic chemical is spilled from a rail car and that releases a black noxious cloud over Jack Gladney's home region too. This makes these surrounding evacuating. Jack Gladney is forced to confront his morality at that time too. That event left him in the indelible anxiety of death. This very technological breakthrough can demonstrate both the ominous dangers inherent in the technology and the psychological perils. The book emphasizes the fact that over twenty years after its original publication too; it still functions as an astute and incisive satirical critique of developments that are no longer exclusively American. In this sense, Frank Lentricchia's scathing statement is worthy to quote as he says, "we are people of, by and for the image has almost become a universal truth" (415). As Lentricchia's claim we are in an increasingly global culture fueled and shaped by an internationally operating capitalist system. Talking about the technological effect upon the human beings Babette, the wife of Jack Gladney states that "Every day on the news there's another toxic spill. Cancerous solvents from storage tanks, arsenic from smokerstacks, radioactive water from power plants. How serious can it be if it happens all the time?" (63-64.)

The technologies are not only helping hands for the human beings but the devastating too. That's why Gladney and his wife are too frightened with such kind of spilling of toxic gases. Talking about the bad effect of toxic gases Jack Gladney further says:

I turned into our street and walked past men bent over shovels in their driveways, breathing vapor. A squirrel moved along a lime in a flowing motion, a passage so continuous it seemed to be its own physical law, different from the ones we've learned to trust when I was half way down the street I saw Heinrich Crouched on a small ledge outside out attic window. He wore his camouflage Jacket and cap, an outfit with complex meaning for him, at fourteen, struggling to grow and to escape notice simultaneously, his secrets known to us all. He looked east through binoculars. (39)

In the above statement, Jack Gladney talks about the hopeless condition of human beings and creatures just after the spread of toxic gas. People are breathing the vapor of toxic gas. A squirrel's motion also seems unnatural and Heinrich is trying to escape seeing through his binoculars. This statement truly reflects the devastating effect of toxic gas in the area, where Jack Gladney lives. Repression of technology's dark side is a recurrent theme in *White Noise*. If the uncanny nature and inherent danger of the expressway are repressed by Blacksmith's society, Wilder's miracle like ride can be interpreted as a return of the repressed, an unambiguous and dramatic reminder of the traffic's brute force. In a similar dynamic, the toxic spill shatters the idyllic calm of Blacksmith and confronts its inhabitants with what they habitually ignore. Their rejection seems momentary when Gladney further talks about the hazards of toxic gas spill and says:

I put the glasses to my face and peered through the gesturing dark. Beneath the cloud of vaporized chemicals, the scene was one of urgency and operative chaos. Floodlights swept across the switching yard. Army helicopters hovered at various points, shining additional

lights down on the scene. Colored lights from police cruisers crisscrossed these wilder beams. The tank cars sat solidly on tracks, fumes rising from what appeared to be a hole in one end. The coupling device from a second car had apparently pierced the tank car. Fire engines were deployed at a distance, ambulances and police vans at a greater distance. I could hear sirens voices calling through hull horns, a layer of radio static causing small warps in the frosty air. Men raced from one vehicle to another, unpacked equipment, carried empty stretchers. Other men in bright yellow mylex suits and respirator masks moved slowly through the luminous hazard carrying death-measuring instruments. The snow-blowers sprayed a pink substance toward the tank car and the surrounding landscape. This thick mist arched through the air like some grand confection at a concert of patriotic music. (42)

The hazard of supra-rational industry does not evacuate the dwelling areas only but destroy the nature too. Jack Gladney's evacuating description makes us aware about the consequences of living in post-industrial era. The noteworthy point is that people of consumer culture still cling to the consumer goods even in the difficult situation. They are listening the radio, wearing glasses, mylex suits, respiratory masks etc. All of those things are products of designed and invented by capitalist cultures. Here, main point of concern is to see the attachment with the post-industrial goods. The consumer culture hypnotizes the people to use such productions. They cannot be separated from the productions of capitalism even in the hazardous condition too.

The concern authority tries to hide the true nature of airborne toxic gas. The capitalist culture does not tell the truth of its weakness. It is technology "which turns

back on and against us in unrecognizable forms" (Jameson 35). The helplessness condition of Jack Gladney is further seen when he says:

The snow blowers were the type used on airport run ways, the police vans were the type to transport riot casualties. Smoke drifted from red beams of light into darkness and then into the breadth of scenic white floods. the men in mylex suits moved with a lunar caution. Each step was the exercise of some anxiety not provided for by instinct. Fire and explosion were not the inherent dangers here. This death would penetrate, seep into the genes, show itself in bodies not yet born. They moved as if across a swale of moon dust bulky and wobbling, trapped in the idea of the nature of time. I crawled back inside with some difficulty. (42)

Here, Jack Gladney is helpless on the one hand and shows deep desires too. He sees a thin ray of hope even in such destruction because "the desire of the present-day masses to get closer to things, and their equally passionate concern for overcoming each things' uniqueness by assimilating it as a reproduction" (Benjamin 159). Present consumer culture tries to hide the reality as American authority tries to hide the true nature of toxic spill and its effects. So, it is "Simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from technology" (Tabbi 1).

Defining the present scenario of capitalistic culture Jameson further says:

There have been three fundamental moments in capitalism, each one marking a dialectical expansion over the previous stage. These are market capitalism, the monopoly stage or the stage of imperialism, and our own, mostly called postindustrial, but what might better be termed multinational capital [. . .]. This purer capitalism of our own time thus

eliminates the enclaves of pre capitalistic organization and [ . . . ] is tempted to speak in this connection of a new and historically original penetration and colonization of Nature and the unconscious. (Jameson 564).

Jameson is of the opinion that present capitalistic mode eliminates the traditional ideas of productions and tries to colonize the nature and unconscious part of human mind. That might be the cause Jack Gladney is in the state of dilemma even after the evacuating toxic spill too. This dilemma is caused because the present mode of capitalism has colonized the unconscious part of his mind. Even in such destruction too, Gladney sees thin rays of hope. Jameson's point is noteworthy in the case of Gladney's dualism and destruction in the nature because of toxic gas.

As Jameson describes, the mind of the people is colonized by the present consumer culture. The people in the consumer culture can't go beyond the technological devices even in the dangerous situation. They have to rely on those technologies. Television, one of the main control mechanisms of consumer culture teaches them what is to do and not to do. Television has been the main motivating for in the life of American citizens living in post-industrial era. Television does not flash advertisements only it gives useful suggestions also. The people in the capitalistic society do not have to go to the doctors in order to get health tips neither they have to read books but they get everything from the television. Describing the role of television Richard J Lane in the "Introduction" of "Mass Media, Culture and Postmodernism" a seminal anthology of essay says:

Another mode of television which began to predominate in the 1980s was what Umberto Eco calls "neo-television" or television with an obsession with itself. As Strinati notes neo-television "is television

which is about television. Its concern is with the world of television, its conventions, programmes and personalities, rather than with its capacity to open a window onto the real world outside television. Neo-television may simply be a synonym for post-modernism. [. . .] with the rise of a fully immersive and self-reflective media culture. The new televisual simulated worlds stop taking the form of a copy or pale reflection of the "outside" world and instead begin to feel more real than the real itself. (150)

Richard J. Lane describes the role of television in the post modern era. In fact television has been another name for postmodernism. Television has played significant role in the lives of contemporary people. Nowadays everything is seen in the television and it is controlling the human beings. The controlling nature of television is seen further in Jack Gladney's remarks as he says:

Knowledge changes every day. People like to have their beliefs reinforced. Don't lie down after eating a heavy meal. Don't drink liquor on an empty stomach. If you must swim, wait at least an hour after eating. The world is more complicated for adults that it is for children. We didn't grow up with all these shifting facts and attitudes. One day they just started appearing. So, people need to be reassured by someone in a position of authority that a certain way to do something is the right way or the wrong way, at least for the time being. I'm the closest they could find, that's all. A staticky piece of lint clung to the TV screen. (63)

In this statement Jack Gladney talks about the shifting trend of knowledge. That very knowledge is changing along with the capitalistic mode of determiners. The authority

as Gladney claims is nothing more than the television itself. People have lost the sense of decision also. In order to decide something else about their lives too, they need the help of somebody else. That very helping hand is television. The capitalistic cultural industry has designed the human beings as they have been imitated the production of that very industry itself.

In the contemporary cultural industry, this imitation finally becomes absolute. Having ceased to be anything but style. People of consumer culture follow the style of capitalism. They can't go beyond the designation of capitalism. Today's aesthetic barbarity completes what has threatened the creations of the spirit since they were gathered together as culture and neutralized. To speak of culture was always contrary to culture. In the present post-industrial era, culture as a common denominator already contains in embryo that schematization and process of cataloguing and classification which bring culture within the sphere of administration. And it is precisely the industrialized, the consequent, subsumption, which entirely accords with this notion of culture. By subordinating in the same way and to the same end all areas of intellectual creation by occupying men's senses. The television has been important culture nowadays as Gladney says, "I have been sitting in this room for more than two months, watching TV into the early hours, listening carefully, taking notes. A great and humbling experience let me tell you. Close to mystical" (18). The television culture has been a common denominator in the life of Jack Gladney in the novel *White Noise*. Whatever the knowledge he has been getting, it is from the television. Gladney cannot escape from the television culture, as it is designed to motivate him. He watches TV in the college and home. Gladney like persons have to go for work with that knowledge and return back to the home with same kind of assumption. This

"subsumption mockingly satisfied the concept of a unified culture which the philosophers of personality contrasted with mass culture" (Adorno 257).

In the present commodifying culture of America, the capitalist principles sustain and underlie a consumer society, which is ironically represented in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise*. In this production, he makes strong political statements by foregrounding this postmodern phenomenon known as the consumer society or the culture of mass consumption. It does not do it in the spirit of contempt or scorn but rather in an attempt to represent how mass advertising and consumptions have become part of the ordinary lives of people and homogenizing role they play in the formation of identity. In the same way DeLillo uses the products of mass consumption as his scriogrphahy's as iconic symbols. He describes television, super markets and shopping malls as the iconic symbols of the consumer society. For instance, Jack Gladney is pondering who will die first, whether himself or his wife Babette. His ruminations are interpreted by the fragment, "Mastercard, visa, American Express" (100). This very fragmentary speech of Gladney exposes the fragmented identity of an individual in consumer culture. The interruption is carried out without any warning as there are no coordinating or subordinating conjunctions, either within the sentence or at paragraph boundary, which would logically connect the fragments to any preceding or following piece of discourse. The fragments are given additional prominence by its graphic position in the text. It stands as an isolated chunk of language amid two well-developed paragraphs. The massive consumption of catastrophe is also portrayed in the novel as the Gladney family sits in front of the television on a Friday evening as Jack Gladney narrates:

That night, a Friday, we gathered in front of the set, as was the custom and the rule, with take-out Chinese. There were floods, earthquakes,

mud slides, erupting volcanoes. We'd never before been so attentive to our duty, our Friday assembly. Heinrich was not sullen, I was not bored. Steffie, brought close to tears by a sitcom husband arguing with his wife, appeared totally absorbed in these documentary clips of calamity and death. Babette tried to switch to a comedy series about a group of racially, mixed kids who build their own communications satellite. She was startled by the force of our objection. We were otherwise silent, watching houses slide into the ocean, whole villages crackle and ignite in a mass of advancing lava. Every disaster made us wish for more, for something bigger, grander more sweeping. (64)

This statement clearly shows that how the consumer culture is developed through television. In order to hide the failure of Americanism, the exotic television programmes are broad casted. The television has been a main motivator of knowledge for those American post industrial people like Gladney family. Commercials and sitcom programs are consumed together with real life catastrophes to the extent that the division between what is real and what is not creates no difference in the emotional response of the viewer. Steffie cries over a sitcom drama as well as over an earthquake. The concept of commodification of discourse is one of the main features in the portrayal of a consumer society. In the *Discourse and Social Change* Norman Fairclough casts the light on the same issue and says that commodification as the process whereby "social domains and institutions, whose concern is not producing commodities in the narrower economic sense of goods for sale, come nevertheless to be organized and conceptualized in terms of commodity production, distribution and consumption" (207). That's why commodification is not only the matter of producing and selling but it is the colonization of institutional orders of discourse by discourse

types associated with commodity production, i.e. a metaphorical transfer of the vocabulary of commodities and markets into other orders of discourse. Before becoming a writer Don DeLillo used to work for an advertising agency and knew, therefore, how advertising agencies can manipulate a person's unconscious mind and intrude upon the ordinary lives of people to turn them into 'happy consumer'. Both the commodification of discourse and the unconscious manipulation of consumers through advertising inform many parts of the novel *White Noise* in which commodification is one of the informing principles underlying.

The post-industrial commodifying culture is clearly seen in the chapter two after the "air born toxic event". In this chapter the toxic gas has wreaked havoc in the town of Blacksmith and Jack Gladney and his family members are being evacuated. "It was a terrible thing to see, so close, so low, packed with chlorides, benzenes, phenols, hydrocarbons, or whatever the precise toxic content. This was a death made in a laboratory" (127). This very hazard also has been a part of American consumerism.

This post-industrial scene involves an emergence of a cultural domination and a mode of cultural production, which differs markedly in its various manifestations from those of its predecessors. Every position on post industrialism today, whether apologia or stigmatization, is also a necessarily an implicitly and explicitly a political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today. The recent mode of capitalist evolution as involving a new and previously unparallel global reach. It is known as informational capitalism. Such kind of consumerism and capitalist theme can be shown in *White Noise* abundantly. The supermarket is the place where the novel's title makes its significant appearance. Jack Gladney narrates the events in the novel as he stands in the shopping aisle listening to the supermarket's ambient noise, "or under it

all, a dull and locatable roar, as of some form of swarming, life just outside the range of human apprehension" (36). This is an almost mystical observation by a highly attend consciousness, reminiscent of a mystic on the brink of spiritual discovery. Here, Murray, Jack Gladney's young colleague and the novel's spokesperson of post modernist ideas, makes the comparison explicit when he says, "This place recharges us spiritually" (37) as he talks about the primary function of the supermarket upon the people in the consumer society.

People in the post-industrial society do not consume such products as Dylar and the tabloids only but also resort to the idea that wealth and commodities can prevent them from facing environmental hazards. For instant, Jack Gladney tries to convince himself that the disaster will not happen to the upper middle class, the privileged class with the power to buy and thus to take refuge in consumerist ecstasy. Jack ponders on natural and manmade disasters as he says, "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. People in low-lying areas get the floods; people in shanties get the hurricanes and tornadoes" (114). Jack Gladney believes that his social and financial status can protect him from such kinds of disasters. That's why the consumer culture's colonization of his mind can be seen when he says, "I'm the head of a department. I don't see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event" (117). His assumption is that he has a strong house in a good location and the power to buy products will prevent him from environmental disasters.

The consumerism does not force the people to buy the commodities and colonize the unconscious part of mind only but it also distorts the ideas of death, life, and existence. When we see the contrast between American and Tibetan life style, in

the novel *White Noise* in a society relatively free from consumerism, such as Tibet and Sherpas in Himalays region, the way to respond to death is different from that in the consumerist society. Tibetans and mountaineering Sherpas see death as a natural phenomenon that one cannot avoid. Thus they accept death for what it is. For them, life and death are not different in the way that they both are part of the human life. In the novel Gladney narrates oriental practices of death and says, "It is the end of attachment to things. This simple truth is hard to fathom. We do not have to cling to life artificially, or to death for that matter" (38). For Tibetans the brand name products are not important parts of life. When they die, they can't take those commodities with them and are forced to abandon all those things even the bodies. However in America Murray, Jack Gladney's friend tells us, "Here we don't die, we shop" (38).

The consumer culture teaches people to reject the death and try to run away from it by turning to consumer products. People cannot easily accept death because death in this society is unnatural. As Jack Gladney states "There's something artificial about my death. It's shallow unfulfilling. I don't belong to the earth or sky" (283). Jack Gladney's death is artificial because he has been exposed to the human made toxic substances. In addition, death in this kind of society is fearful because it is inevitably premature. To illustrate, people can die anytime because of the toxic environment. This reality reflects the fact that death in the consumerist society is not natural but happens to consumers through their own act of relentless buying. Furthermore, consumerism distorts the consumers' ideas of existence. In Tibet, people learn that they can find true happiness by letting go of everything.

In contrast, in American people are brainwashed into believing that their existence and happiness depend on consumer products. Consequently they think that

they can evade death by buying goods. It should also be noted that right after toxic event at the school and one caused by a leak of these toxic scenes and the supermarket scene imply that after being threatened by fatal incidents, Jack Gladney's family tires to grope after the sense of fulfillment, security and replenishment through consumerism.

The novel *White Noise* talks about "Dylarama" in its third chapter, which discovers that Babette is cheating her husband by taking fictional drug Dylar for an experimental treatment for the terror of death. This chapter becomes a meditation on post industrial society's fear of death and its obsession with chemical cures as Jack Gladney seeks to obtain his own black market supply of Dylar. On the other hand, during a discussion about mortality with Murray, Jack Gladney's friend hypothesizes that killing somebody might alleviate the fear of death. Jack Gladney decides to test this idea too, by killing the man who had given Dylar to his wife Babette in exchange for sex.

The novel *White Noise* ends with the tricycle riding of wilder, Jack Gladney's youngest child across the highway and miraculously surviving. The text gives a portrayal of post modern consumer culture. The people in that society choose to revel in the consumer world because consumerism itself and its various products give them hope and meaning although they are illusive and empty. Tabloids and holographic scanners are both the products of consumerism, offering illusive hopes for consumers that everything is fine. The scanners are described as a mystic entity that people can always depend on. For desperate consumers attacked by toxic threats. Tabloids provide them the realm of superstition and other kids of distractions such as star stories and false advertisement of amazing drugs that can cure all kinds of diseases caused by consumerism. No matter how severe the confusion and the panic area,

consumers try to seek comfort in consumerism. They are fully relied on the product of post-industrial society.

The consumerism and technologies are interrelated with each other in order to commodify the culture and lives of the people. The consumerism highlights the mass conception. That's why Jack Gladney says that "we are agreed to be part of a collective perception" (4). The main character of the novel *White Noise*, Jack Gladney clearly accepts the impact of consumer culture as it reinforces its idea of collective perception. The technology mediates to impose such ideology. Fredric Jameson is worthy to quote in this situation as he says "technology may well serve as adequate short hand to designate that enormous properly human and anti-natural power [. . . ] which turns back on and against us in unrecognizable forms and seems to constitute the massive dystopian horizon of our collective as well as our individual praxis. (563). Technology is helping to promote the consumeric sense of values. So, the role of technology can't be denied for the flourishing of consumer culture.

### **Projection of Consumerism and Its Failure**

Don DeLillo's postmodern novel *White Noise* exposes the bitter reality of the people living in the post-industrial consumer culture. The people in such society do not have any thing of their own because everything is designed for them by the capitalist culture. The capitalism produces the objects to hypnotize them, to control them and to colonize their mind through advertisements and other cultural ideologies. Consumer culture is essentially a post industrial idea though originated in 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is spread all over the world nowadays but the minds of the Americans are colonized by it. Consumer culture is a system in which human society is controlled and regulated by consumption of commercial products. Material possession determine a person's standard of living.

In *White Noise*, the United States has a consumer economy and is known for its material growth. It satirizes a postmodern materialistic world in which the ethos of capitalism, consumer culture and materialism determine people's existence. Consumer culture raises a question for human security and propels them to be inclined with the purchased goods. The security of an individual lies in his/her purchasing power of the capitalist's products. So, the people feel unsecured while being unable to buy the designs of capitalism. By raising the fear or insecurity of life, consumer culture successfully applies its ideologies. So, the people in consumer culture feel secured within the materialistic lifestyle.

The present research project tries to trace out the negative effects of consumerism tool along with its fascinating and attractive life style. The novel examines the threats of consumerism to the human beings. It affects physically and psychologically. Physically, the people in such society cannot avoid the environmental ills and hazards created by the capitalism. Chewing gum, smoking, drinks and toxic gas spilling are some of the noteworthy points in the novel *White Noise* to be acknowledged about the physical destructions in the human personality. These things are hazardous for the human health though people in the consumer society use such things frequently. Consumerism can cause serious mental problems too. It leads the people towards the faulty perception, a consumerist type of psychic disorder. That might be the cause Babette, the wife of Jack Gladney, takes drug to elevate the fear of death. She does have problem of psychic disorder caused by mass media and other technological breakthrough. In the same way, Jack Gladney is also ready to take the drug Dylar in order to remove the anxiety of death. Here, the main point to be acknowledged is that the consumerism makes people aware of death and motivates them to buy the things in order to continue the life ahead. To get death is to

lose the sense of purchasing power. So, if people have to avoid death they have to buy the things. They have to make themselves secured by collecting things from the market, whether those consumed things do have use value or not. The people in consumer culture have to buy the things even if these things are not needed for the day-to-day life.

The novel explores the post-industrial features of hyper reality. The television has been the most important denominator in the lives of consumer culture. The televisions, supermarkets or hypermarkets have been the life determining factors in the consumer society. The lives of the people in such society are not more than the commodity itself. Human life is commodified in consumer culture. There is not any authenticity of life but everything is determined by the productions of the post-industrial era. That's why Jack Gladney's family members perform rituals like activities before the television screen on Friday evening. Everything is taught by the television along with its flashy and exaggerated advertisements. The television broadcasts such programs which are full of capitalistic ideologies in order to colonize the mind of the people. It has been like a master for them. The people in the consumer culture can't avoid television as it is a denominator of contemporary life.

In the light of consumer culture, a postmodern theory, it examines the pathetic condition of the human beings and hazards of technologies too. The environmental ills caused by the toxic spill can be taken as an example of the negative impact of consumer culture. But it has such a designation that even the truth of chemical hazards is kept secrets and people are motivated to be secured by buying the material goods. That might be the cause Jack Gladney feels secured in his upper middle class power of buying the things and following the contemporary modes of productions even in the spread of toxic gas. He locates himself in secured place and sees other

poor people as the victim of technological hazards. In consumer culture people have to spell bound to buy according to the advertisements in relation to consuming objects and technology. In fact those consuming objects are making them confused because their minds and behaviours are manipulated by the logic of capitalism.

In the post-modern society, the identity of an individual is determined by the materials they behold. The people are deviated from the main stream society and deprived of their personal identity if they are unable to buy the productions as desired by capitalism. Their identity depends upon the products they buy. In the novel too, the main character Jack Gladney finds the reflection of his own identity in the goods he buys. The consumer identity is schizophrenic because of having a lack to direct the individual thought towards proper boundary due to the technological ills, environmental hazards and flashy commodities. In the novel most of the characters including Jack Gladney, Change their perceptions as technology mediates the reality. Those technologies like holo graphic scanners at the super market computers; stereo sets, radios and televisions are determining the lives of human beings living in that post-industrial society.

People in the consumer culture live their lives on infancy. They have no real identity as they feel proud and see their own images in the buying things. Jack Gladney, a responsible father and a Professor of a university attempts to boost up his confidence and recreates his own authority in terms of consuming productions. The people in post-industrial society can't depend on their will because the unconscious mind is colonized by the capitalistic ethos. The novel *White Noise* successfully makes a critique of post-modern capitalistic project of colonizing the mind of the common people.

The consumer culture tries to hide its true nature. So, the people have to rely on superficial consumerism. It makes people closer to things and equally designs them to be passionate towards the commodities, which are productions of capitalism. The people in consumer culture are unable to unmask the truth behind the capitalistic ideologies of motivating and dominating them. The people do not have their sense of own decision and will power as it is determined and designed by consumer culture. The people in such society can do nothing else as they are dependent on mass productions of capitalism. Their life is commodified like the objects of production. The consumerism does not motivate people to buy the commodities and does not colonize the unconscious part of mind only but it also distorts the ideas of death, and existence. So, the novel *White Noise* successfully makes criticism of consumer culture and its commodifying nature upon the lives of people in the society.

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