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The Anxiety of Death in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

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Abstract:

Anxiety is a human condition which prevails common in many people. Anxieties can be differentiated into ' Primal anxiety', ' Ontological anxiety', ' Reality anxiety', Psychological anxiety', 'Social anxiety', and so on. The real fact is all these anxieties are in some way existential.Paul Tillich, a Christian existentialist says that according to him anxiety can be of three forms: Anxiety of Death, Anxiety of meaninglessness and Anxiety of Condemnation. Paul Tillich declares, "The Anxiety of death is the permanent horizon within which the anxiety of fate is at work". In the modern world anything that follows negativity triggers intense anxiety. A strong sense of psychological isolation also leads to anxiety. Incidents of guilt, fear, absurdity, alienation also lead to anxiety of death. Don DeLillo himself in an interview to William Goldstein in Publishers Weekly (August 19, 1988) explained anxiety as being "about danger, modern danger". The main characters in Don DeLillo novels face some of the causes for anxieties such as the necessity of choice, terrorism, technological and scientific advancement, lack of freedom, fear of death, dissatisfaction in life, boredom and loneliness. This paper examines Don DeLillo's *White Noise* based on the concept Anxiety of Death.

Key Words: Fear, Anxiety, Death, airborne toxic event, Nyodene D, Dylar, Consciousness of waste, supermarket.

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Introduction:

Anxiety is a human condition which prevails common in many people. Anxieties classified into ‘ Primal anxiety’, ‘ Ontological anxiety’, ‘ Reality anxiety’, Psychological anxiety’, ‘Social anxiety’ and so on. The real fact is all these anxieties are in some way existential. Don DeLillo himself in an interview to William Goldstein in Publishers Weekly (August 19, 1988) explained anxiety as being “about danger, modern danger”. The main characters in Don DeLillo novels face some of the causes for anxieties such as the necessity of choice, terrorism, technological and scientific advancement, lack of freedom, fear of death, dissatisfaction in life, boredom and loneliness. All these causes lead to Anxieties.

Paul Tillich, a Christian existentialist, says that according to him anxiety can be of three forms: Anxiety of Death, Anxiety of meaninglessness and Anxiety of Condemnation. Paul Tillich declares, “The Anxiety of death is the permanent horizon within which the anxiety of fate is at work”. This type of anxiety is prevalent in cultures that give excessive importance to individualisation. In the modern world anything that follows negativity triggers intense anxiety. A strong sense of psychological isolation also leads to anxiety. Every aspect of modern life is affected by anxieties such as consumer anxiety, media anxiety, environmental anxiety, pollution anxiety, crowd anxiety, and so on. One of the other among these anxieties creates anxiety of death. Incidents of guilt, fear, absurdity, alienation also lead to the anxiety of death. This paper examines Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* based on the concept Anxiety of Death.

Don DeLillo is a famous American novelist, whose journey as a writer began in 1960. John Dos Passos and Thomas Pynchon are said to be his source of Inspiration. Quoting Lionel Trilling words, Don DeLillo exhibits a “perpetual quest for reality” in his writings. Don DeLillo as a writer has written many short stories along with the novels. His first novel *Americana* was published in 1971. He has written seventeen novels till 2016. His other

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novels are as follows: *End Zone(1972), Great Jones Street(1973), Ratner's star(1976), Players(1977), Running Dog(1978), Amazons(1980), The Names(1982), White Noise(1985), Libra(1988), Mao II(1991), Underworld(1997), The Body Artist(2001), Cosmopolis (2003), Falling Man(2007), Point Omega(2010) and Zero K(2016).*

The novel *White Noise* is said to be one among the notable works of Don DeLillo which won the National Award for Fiction for this particular novel in the year 1986. Paul Bryant calls *White Noise* as anti-realistic fiction. The novel portrays events which are closer to the Bhopal gas tragedy in India. The main character of the novel is Jack Gladney, head of the department of Hitler studies at College-on-the-Hill. The plot of the novel moves around the character Jack Gladney and his wife,Babette.

Airborne toxic event:

The two major plots in the novel *White Noise* are the airborne toxic event and the psychopharmaceutical called Dylar. Jack Gladney is affected by the airborne toxic event, and Babette is related to Dylar. The first plot to be examined based on the concept anxiety of death is the airborne toxic event. The main character Jack lives in the mid-western town, Blacksmith. He married four times and lives with her fourth wife Babette and his children through different marriages. The entire city of Blacksmith has covered the airborne toxic event and some poisonous substance mixed in the air. Jack came to know about this event through his son Heinrich. At first Jack refuses the possibility of danger from the 'billowing cloud' and assures Heinrich that it won't come towards them. He thought the disaster would happen only to poor people. "I'm not just a college professor. "I'm the head of a department. I don't see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That's for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the country, where the fish hatcheries are." (WN 117).Since the town is in turmoil with poisonous substance, people are asked to evacuate the town. Jack along with his family left the town and reached the evacuation camp. In the evacuation camp,

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Jack was exposed to Nyodene D., a chemical, due to the airborne toxic event. The technicians also add that the compound lasts in his body for thirty years and the chance of survival will be known after fifteen years. The vague explanation about his survival in the world created a psychological hunchback to him. He decided not to reveal the truth about his survival to anyone. He was preoccupied with fear of death. Slowly the fear of death changed into Anxiety of death. *"*This death would penetrate, seep into the genes, show itself in bodies not yet born*."* (WN 116) This sentence shows Jack's fear of death being transferred to next generations.

Dylar:

The next primary concept that induces anxiety of death is Dylar. Babette is the major character to be related to the overcoming death medicine Dylar. Babette is the wife, Jack Gladney. She reads scriptures for others in the church. Babette is a person who attains psychological comfort in the shoulders of Jack Gladney. Their discussions are always about death. Their main point in the talks will be on who dies first."Who will die first? This question comes up from time to time, like where are the car keys."(WN, 15) Babette herself admitted that she wants to die before Jack. Though she always talks about death, her fear of death prevails all the time. Babette's fear of death has increased after the consequences of the airborne toxic event. Later the death fear developed into death anxiety.

To overcome the fear of death, Babette seeks the help of Mr.Gray. He is the product manager of the unlicensed drug Dylar. Babette obtained the drug Dylar from Mr.Gray. In exchange, she offered herself to Mr.Gray. Jack inquires about Dylar. Babette replies,

> "It haunts me, Jack. I can't get it off my mind. I know I'm not supposed to experience such a fear so consciously and so steadily. What can I do? It's just there. That's why I was so quick to notice Mr.Gray's ad in the tabloid I was reading aloud. The headline

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> hit home. FEAR OF DEATH, it said. I think about it all the time. You're disappointed. I can tell." (WN 196).

Jack understood the reason for taking the drug. Jack too confessed about the exposure to Nyodene D chemical. Both of them are in the deliberate need of overcoming death anxiety.

Media:

The next concept that provokes anxiety in the novel is Media. People of Blacksmith suffer through the airborne toxic event,and there are no media to expose the event. In the media- centred existence, people felt the absence of media surveillance and the anxiety of the people multiplies. A man bursts to outpoint a tiny screen with blank screen, "not a word, not a picture…no film footage, no live report"(WN 161). The people of Blacksmith rage with anger against the media people and it turned into anxiety.

Radio:

The people of Blacksmith got the message of the airborne toxic event through Radio. Even the radio messages are not authentic at the beginning of the disaster event. First, the radio calls the event as 'feathery plume'. Then the radio changed it as 'Black boiling cloud' and finally the radio confirmed it as 'airborne toxic event'. Don DeLillo writes "The Medium is a primal force in the American home". Since the medium between people and authorities goes wrong, anxiety of the people increased about their lives.

Consciousness of Waste:

Consciousness on Waste plays an important role in the novel White Noise. Waste appears as a strong power that authorises the lives of the people. In the beginning the disaster event was considered as 'black boiling cloud', but it has changed into venomous airborne toxic event. The airborne toxic event becomes the consciousness of the people. The poisonous gas Nyodene D becomes more powerful than human being as it decides the lifetime of the people. A chemical which decides the lives of the people become a very big

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death anxiety of the Blacksmith people. Best example for this is Jack who undergoes anxiety of death till the end. Jack declares, "Death has entered. It is inside you" (WN 141-142).

Another best example of death anxiety is Heinrich and his friend Orest Mercator. Orest is a nineteen year old boy who is ready to set a record of sitting in the room full of snakes. Jack asked Orest about this: "Do you think what happens…?Do you think about dying? Does death scares you?"(WN 305) Orest is a person who never fears death and he replied "everybody who's dead is now dead."(WN 305)

It is also interesting to be noted that the characters in *White Noise*respond differently to the concept of death. For Jack and Babette, Death is terrifying; Heinrich faces death analytically; Murray sees death everywhere and adds texture to life.

Conclusion:

Throughout the novel starting from Jack's Hitler studies to Murray's concept of supermarket; from the airborne toxic event to the unlicensed drug; from waste to media moves around the deep-seated death anxiety of the Blacksmith people. The day to day life activities also symbolises death: "traffic washes past, a remote and steady murmur around our sleep, as of dead souls babbling at the edge of the dream".(WN 4). The sound of the household machines, trash computer, dishwasher or refrigerator brings death to mind.

All through the novel, Jack suffers from the anxiety of death. The only place, he acquires peace is the old burying ground. There is no modern technology; instead, it has old nostalgic memories. Even finding peace in the graveyard with the fear of death is also a kind of anxiety as well as the solution for Jack's death anxiety.

Another major solution for his Death anxiety comes through his friend Murray. Murray is a practical who sees the solution in the day-to-day life of ordinary people. He says, "nothing is stronger than death. Do you believe the only people who fear death are those who are afraid of life?"(WN 327) But Jack has never learned how to express things normal people.

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They went to the supermarket, and Murray says supermarket is a kind of place designed to keep people's mind occupied with something other than death.

Murray also gives an idea of overcoming death anxiety. He adds taking life and death in one's own hands will help to remove death anxiety. Jack gets the clarity that killing someone will reduce death anxiety. He took the gun given by his father-in-law and shot twice towards Mr.Gray. Through this Jack overcome the death anxiety. Along with this the words of Heinrich and his friend Orest helped Jack to come out of his Death anxiety.

Throughout the narration in *White Noise*DeLillo tries to show how the stress disorder leads a person in a state of anxiety until its resolution. At the end of the novel, Jack accepts the concept of Murray: Supermarket as a massive amount of psychic data. He also realised that fact, death is a part of life. Both Jack and Babette understood real- life and lives in reality without death anxiety.

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