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Construction of reality and the Unreliable Narrator in the works of Don DeLillo

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Abstract- This paper studies the construction of reality and the role of the unreliable narrator in the works of Don DeLillo who is one of the most influential postmodern American novelists. His fiction interrogates the instability of truth, manipulation of perception, and the fragmented nature of contemporary reality shaped by media, consumer culture. This study analyses the how DeLillo employs unreliable narration, fragmented story telling, shifting perspectives, and metafictional techniques to challenge the reader's understanding of reality and authenticity. The paper also highlights the influence of postmodern theories on DeLillo's narrative style, particularly the ideas related to hyperreality, subjectivity, and deconstruction. Ultimately, this study seeks to show that DeLillo's works challenge conventional notions of truth and encourage readers to question the authenticity of the realities presented before them.

Keywords: Reality construction, unreliable narrator, postmodernism, media, subjectivity, hyperreality, narrative fragmentation, Don DeLillo.

Introduction

DeLillo focuses on the theme of the overwhelming power of the media over all human beings and society in general and how the media may be employed to control, distort and even recreate our reality. The works of DeLillo illustrate the way the real and the imaginary are at play with one other, the making of specific forms of consciousness by the media and the way technology influences how we understand the world and experience it. With all of these ingredients included in his themes, plots, characters, etc. DeLillo discusses how media defines identity and truth, how media aided the formation of our social networks; "Networked publics are spaces created by technology and humans where interactions are determined by the affordances of digital spaces" (Boyd 8-10).

DeLillo's *White Noise* states that we are living in the era of data, our data saturation is the state of existence in modern times. Society can be characterised by the eternal sounds and the omnipresent media feeds which shape the way we think, feel and what we know we are. This is due to the unending stream of information that is provided by the television, radio and other mediums of information that forms a reality where the differences between what is real and what is manufactured is ever harder to tell. The characters in *White Noise* live in a world where there is incessant exposure to the media broadcasts which defined the terms of their lives such as consumerism and fear of health; "Information has become a garbage of information" (Postman 68). DeLillo is worried about the character of the media to give reality by presenting



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a filtered or sensationalised image of the reality. The media and government discourses play a central role in the production of several versions of the truth regarding the act in *Libra*, which deals with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. There is a high probability that the real story has been covered in other opposing stories created by the very forces of the political interests and the media itself as indicated in the book, and the main characteristic of post modern culture; “the loss of the real... is the fundamental characteristic of postmodern culture” (Jameson 6). The economisation is the usual theme which DeLillo investigates. The media can afford the game of influencing the masses by manipulating the truth. Such a combination of many decades as the example of *Underworld* (1997) is really and a stack of media events and stories and the role played by politics and culture embodied by the media in shaping the perception of people and the truth as they know it. The opposition between the personal experience and the media presented reality always brings trouble to the characters of DeLillo; “The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation mediated by images” (Debord 12).

In *White Noise*, DeLillo explores the element of hyperreal by the fact that the images and representation that is transcended takes the place of the actual representation. The distinction between the actual world and the simulated one is even becoming grey as individuals are becoming more connected with the world via the media. The characters in the *White Noise* are a product of the *White Noise* of the media images and stories that starts getting even more real than what they are actually living in their life. The image of media as a creator and as a reflection of reality is presented by DeLillo in the following statement: Media in most of the novels by DeLillo is not a passive mirror of the reality but the active part in the making of the reality. One of the biggest reasons a media, length piece is so impressive is that comes through in its total impression that forms the communal memory and can even shape individual characterisation. What DeLillo isn't doing is just attacking the media whereas he is simply talking about how people digest the information and embrace the facts produced by the media. On a symbolic level, in *White Noise*, the media fear and lust are so forcibly implanted into the minds of the characters that whether it is even inside their interest in consumer goods, the health issue or what the characters watch on TV, There is an element in the world made by the media which is constantly changing the frontier between the real and the fabricated, just as DeLillo depicts, and such a world can influence people's lives, and their thoughts, and their communication with each other; “Cultural systems shape how reality is interpreted, demonstrating that what is considered real is always mediated through symbolic structures” (Sahlins 55-60).

Don DeLillo characterizes the media as instruments of the spectators and those who distort the reality through his stories. DeLillo, through his complex characters and intricate plots, brings his readers to a realisation point of how the media is manipulating them, how the media can condition their world in terms of perceptions, which therefore means that the realities



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are (more than) media creations. The author in his literary piece presents the ability of the media to compile the facts of people and individuals to the detriment of the real and imaginary, thus he is reminding us of the issue of media oversaturation of the world; “Cinematic apparatuses construct a specific mode of perception, positioning the spectator in ways that shape how reality is understood and interpreted” (Baudry 40-47). In both the *White Noise* (1985) and *Mao II* (1991) Don DeLillo criticizes the omnipotent nature of the media in creating a sense of reality DeLillo is exploring the way these media construct fake truths with television, radio and advertisements in his work of analysing these media forms as they aim to create distortions and sometimes even replace the experience of life. DeLillo does not simply show us the dangers of the media, he shows us how the media builds and alters the world that we live in. due to the mediation that is rife, it is far more challenging to relate with other people in person making it far more challenging to know what is genuine and what is a fake product created to be consumed. The presence of collective perception takes precedence over the truth of reality and the truth of the individual is lost; “The future belongs to the crowd” (*Mao II* 16). TV, as an element of the *White Noise*, can be viewed as the overwhelmingness of information that shapes not only the actions of the characters though not more precisely the character of Jack Gladney. TV is an overflow of content and transfers into information overload, it is experience that becomes replaced, what is real, with a fake reality of the media with which has no content and value (except the crumbs) and is not the mirror of life. A good example is that Jack is the one who spends too much time watching television forms of entertainment, thus creating a disconnection between himself and his problems like death, which he transfers to a nameless and faceless image to the media. “Cinema creates an impression of reality through its codes and conventions, making spectators believe in the reality of what they see despite its constructed nature” (Metz 3-5). In *Mao II*, DeLillo takes that concept to an extreme and critiques how television has created the image of an isolated writer named Bill Gray, who lacks any real connection with the rest of the world. This character of the writer in the novel is also likened to the emergence of mass media celebrities particularly the television and the image of Mao Zedong whose image has become one of the dominant themes of the novel. DeLillo presents the image of Mao as having an overwhelming symbolism of how the mass media may ultimately turn the political and ideological leadership into a consumer product. This figure of Mao is no longer associated with the happenings of the historical context but has been re-contextualized and commodified by media and has become a sort of empty, ubiquitous image, which tells people about their image of power and their realities; “Mass media are ideological institutions” (Herman 2).

The book *Libra* and *Underworld* by DeLillo is a powerful study of the instability of the historical narrative. Through his fact/fiction combination, DeLillo shows that people create history by developing competing historical accounts which stem from their personal recollections and their political beliefs and their media exposure. The JFK assassination turns



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into a Lakotown in *Libra* with its approaches to manipulation of the historical process by conspiracy and the searching of the hidden truths whereas in *Underworld* DeLillo demonstrates that historical events and eras are perceived and perceived differently by the people, and the history turns out to be as fragmented and mutable as possible. The two novels show that history exists as changeable storytelling which cultural and political and personal factors determine. The manner in which DeLillo introduces fact and fiction in these works reveals how historical truth is becoming difficult to comprehend and it demands the reader to challenge his or her knowledge of the historical events; “We seem to be looking for something we can’t quite name. something that will make the past coherent. But the search itself becomes the story, leaving us unsure what is real” (*Libra* 15). The construction of new truths is an ongoing process in society characterised by the excessive use of visual media such as television and print journalism. The following explains this characteristic with a focus on one of the works of DeLillo, prompted by the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, in which he portrays his media critique from two different angles. He focuses his narrative on the murder of JFK and how he depicts the influence of media organisations on people's perception of history, while living the event himself. The two forms of media in this case, the television networks that were broadcast live from the scene of the assassination and the media companies who used letters of the alphabet to describe the event, played a significant role in shaping the perception of the assassination as well as creating multiple truths or narratives that depict the assassination differently. “Meaning in communication is not fixed but negotiated through interaction, shaped by context, culture, and the expectations of participants. What can be referred to as truth is a concept highly dependent on its situational portrayal during a conversation” (Tannen 32-35). By using the two different types of historical roles of the media, the historical truth-marker and the historical quasi-truth-maker, DeLillo reveals not only how the game is played by the media but also that the conspiracy theories developed about the assassination of JFK and the media outlets that perpetuate these theories show us that the concept of truth is a changing concept that is constantly being developed by individuals using diverse information sources. This power is the metaphysical power where alternative historical realities are brought out which contradict historical evidence, thus the media constructs new historical truth. Media manipulates our self-image through events and character selectivity in the coverage that results to the people losing their own identity portrayed by *Libra*. *Underworld* by DeLillo is a story about the connection between history, memory and myth. The main characters influence their history through their own will whether it is cultural transformation or media. The structure of the novel shows the magnitude with which the personal memory controls the remembered history because it ultimately results in the provision of the two possible trajectories in which people could take history. The Dallas Cowboy demonstrates upon this that it is his symbolic role in the novel that social personalities and their experiences are altered in the development of the memory and are mythified. It is the JFK assassination that takes place throughout the novel and turns into a



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historical event that transforms into a narrative that gains new insights over time due to its dual character as both the collective and the fragmented historical memory. Neither the people of *Libra* nor *Underworld* accept the fact that conspiracy theories assisted in the formation of the historical events. DeLillo explores how the different versions of the conspiracy narratives with both historical and fictional elements reacted on the idea of the past in our mind. The John F. Kennedy assailant conspiracy theory is an instrument in *Libra* of how individuals create convictions in different accounts of history that political ideology, paranoia and the necessity of rationalising disorderly historical occasions to argument information of past occurrences; “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions” (Althusser 162).

Underworld is marked by a high degree of conspiracy which is reflected in the dread of the Cold War and the political instability. The novel offers a world in which the political events take place as leaders have in secret activities that are exercises of hidden agenda alongside the elements of mythology. The conspiracy of the *Underworld* is based on the hidden force that regulates history in relation to remote forces which exist outside human perception. The plot of *Underworld* is a conspiracy based on continuous wrangle of non-overt forces and their mastery of the past that has been manifested in the existence of the American life throughout the Cold War and the period of his living. In both *Libra* and *Underworld*, DeLillo introduces the notion that history is not pre-destined and continues wherever it consists of recounting and reinterpreting it as people re-read and alter its connotation over time. The conspiracy theorists and other individuals who have the personal interests in the John F. Kennedy assassination are re writing the historical events in the first-hand narration of events in the novel *Libra*. The unsteadiness of the scenario evidences the strength of influential narratives to set what individuals believe to be historical truth. DeLillo uses an all-encompassing view in *Underworld* to show that entire historical periods including the postwar American period can be re-examined through a new perspective and turned into myth. DeLillo uses fragmented storytelling to show how different people understand history and how time creates changes in their memory of past events. The novel's non-linear design demonstrates that historical facts exist as personal interpretations and that complete knowledge of history remains impossible because our memories and ongoing historical reinterpretations shape our understanding of past events; “Everyday practices involve the interpretation and transformation of imposed structures, highlighting the active role individuals play in constructing meaning” (Certeau xiii-xv).

The aspect of identity disappearance that DeLillo illuminates is the loss of personal identity when shared stories are created by the media. Characters in both *White Noise* and *Underworld* struggle to establish their identities as they are influenced by external factors, which are redefined by the media as their identities. The contemporary world is the setting where people make their identities through inner experiences and media contents constantly



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intervene to shape their identities by controlling their identity constructions through its everlasting presence that dictates social norms regarding the way to think, feel and act. DeLillo strongly believes that people surrounded by a lot of media cannot really see the actual real life as they get more and more absorbed in the virtual worlds. *Underworld* is a film that has some very strong examples of how media and technology can create an illusory reality that is allowed to override actual human relations and experience. With the presence of television and film in every corner of the world and the global news broadcast, it is now a situation where people consider movies and shows more real and closer to them than the world outside that they watch through the screens.

Conclusion

DeLillo's work reveals how the media environment doesn't just report on identity it actively reshapes it. By distorting and fabricating who we are, the media gains the power to manipulate how people see themselves and others, turning personal identity into something constructed, performed, and ultimately controlled by the stories we consume. The system produces the actual existence that people experience while it defines their fundamental wants and fears and their self-perception. Media content possesses metaphysical power because it creates new truths and establishes acceptable reality versions which lead people to build their individual and group identities through which they struggle to identify genuine elements from fabricated components. The construction of new truths is an ongoing process in society characterised by the excessive use of visual media such as television and print journalism. The metaphysics of media by DeLillo is a criticism of the old approach to the media as a passive conduction of information. As an alternative, he proposes media as the persuasive and deforming factor that constructs the new realities, attaches borders between personal and collective identity and falsifies even the reality. The media in the novels like *White Noise*, *Libra* and *Underworld* is not merely a reflection of the world, but the creator of the world, the shaper of human experience and altered of even what people are. The criticism that DeLillo delivers encourages the readers to think about how much their perception of both themselves, history, and reality is mediated and constrained by a set of outside influences that aim to set the truth, power, and meaning in a world overwhelmed with information.

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