

THE MODERN APOCALYPSE: CONTEXTUALIZING URBAN PANDEMIC IN SELECT WORK OF DON DELILLO

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Abstract:

Human existence has always been in close proximity of pandemics that may have a tendency to wipe them off the planet. However, with the evolutionary progress and rampant development of technology, these disasters are often man-made. The contemporary society that experiences Covid-19, mitigation of which often validated the usage of masks, lockdown and containment zones can also be read within the framework of Don DeLillo whose text *White Noise* presents a scenario of contemporary America that has fallen to a pandemic like situation after an urban disaster.

To comprehend the issues affecting the contemporary society, it is pertinent to take cognizance of the technological evolution and the subsequent sophisticated forms of repressions. They are a direct consequence of existence in these 'urban technoscapes' because modern living is often prone to man-made disasters. Keeping in cue with the aforesaid, the study attempts at underscoring the 'simulacrum' conjured in DeLillo's select fiction to discern the gradual catastrophe of technical expansion. The paper aims to underline how the rising scientific grandiose comes accompanied with man-made dissent and tragedy. It also attempts at highlighting how mitigating the modern day apocalypse is bound to the very technology that causes the collapse. DeLillo's America is similar to that of present day India with people facing unintelligible stress of a lockdown, forced evacuation and also zonal containment that has not only caused psychological issues but also crisis in current extant.

Keywords: Technology; Pandemic; Postmodern; Urban; Disaster; Hyperreal.

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Human beings have existed in the vicinity of epidemics and pandemics throughout their history of conception, evolution and existence. From natural catastrophes to man-made disarray, many events in the human history encircle the mankind's existence. Some have been powerful enough to not only ravage humanity but also bring about extinction of mankind if not mitigated properly. The world of epidemiology has however improved over the decades to lessen the impact of uneventful times but there are still instances of terrible outbreaks that threaten humanity more than often. Pandemics like the Black Death (1346-1353) and the Spanish Flu (1918) are two of the most widely covered events in the history of world, alongside the likes of the Great Plague of Marseille (1720-1723), Russian Plague (1770-1772), the Flu pandemic (1889-1890), the Asian Flu (1957-1958), H1N1 Swine Flu pandemic (2009-2010) and the AIDS pandemic (1981-present).

In recent times, the world has again witnessed a large scale destruction. The contemporary scenario is that of a social

collapse owing it to the arrival of Covid-19 pandemic. It generated a systemic mass hysteria that transcended international boundaries as nations were unable to withstand the wave after wave that conquered and spread vastly. According to a data report published by the World Health Organization, around 3.3 million people have lost their lives to Covid-19 by January 2020, making it one the deadliest hazards to ever occur, hence why it was declared as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) by WHO. The resulting crisis posed a worldwide challenge as administrations stretched to their limits and were at a global disadvantage pertaining to social, economic, health, information, and cultural as well as environmental spheres. It unveiled the hidden gaps and flaws of the political system and administrative agencies as they failed to mitigate the disaster and protect vulnerable communities from impending complications that arose due to this pandemic.

In an article authored by the International Crisis Group entitled as, “COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch” published in the year 2020, states that, “as seems likely, the disease disrupts humanitarian aid flows, limits peace operations and postpones or distracts conflict parties from nascent as well as ongoing efforts at diplomacy” (01). The article further elaborates on how this crisis enabled politically invested leaders to exploit the pandemic as a means to implicate and fuel the geopolitical friction whereas, the domestic impact on the third world countries, especially the ones “with weaker health systems, lower state capability or significant internal conflict” (01) the consequences of this pandemic were overwhelming. This collapse can also be accredited to the period of inaction during the incubation, manifestation and the spread period. To factor in the tangent that production, accessibility, and distribution of vaccination for this virus has been mostly inefficient and often inequitable in the contemporary times has added more to the crisis. To ensure the safety of the most vulnerable groups including the frontline workers, people with chronic health issues, women, seniors and children, it is imperative to overcome this challenge despite the strategic responses like “digitization and virtualization of content, downsizing staff, closures, and reductions in scale” as argued by Jenna Torney in her research article “Adapting During Crises: Arts Organizations’ Responses to Covid-19” published in the year 2021.

Another pertinent factor to corroborate the spread of this deadly disease includes the failure of government agencies to explicitly implement decorum like that of ‘social distancing’, usage of N-95 masks and PPE kits, constant sanitization, insufficient testing, availability of proper healthcare system and infrastructure, identifying the hotspots, and nation-wide lockdown, closing of all trade routes and shut down of travel between borders especially that of to and from China, further, Covid-19 also ensured the collapse of societal structure, as it had a severe neurological impact on the population especially on women and kids. The research article also underscores how the “global health challenge intersects with wars or political conditions – such as weak institutions, communal tensions, lack of trust in leaders and inter-state rivalries” (02) as this outbreak compounded the economic and political impact with that of “mismanagement, corruption or foreign sanctions, have left national health systems profoundly ill-prepared for COVID-19” (02). In a report published by World Health Organization entitled “Response in Action” published in 2020, states how on the international front, United Nation Crisis Management Team, has issued guidelines, forged partnerships internationally and fraternized multilateral alliances to support the developing countries through outreach programs and a systematic and coordinated engagement.

The WHO compiles data from around 212 countries and routinely publishes both globally as well as region specific levels apart from which it ensures to “strengthen complementary surveillance at the level of individual cases where

appropriate, and at the aggregate level for countries with sustained transmission” (14) so that the true information related to Covid-19 and subsequent updates are availed even by people who do not have direct access to internet. Another important aspect that the organization makes sure of is “to gather data to deepen our understanding of transmission patterns, severity, clinical features and risk factors for infection, all of which were unknown at the start of the outbreak” (15) via the prior established Four Early Investigation Protocols. The pandemic has also been “accompanied by an “infodemic:” an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not - that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it” (17), as a result there is a lot of misinformation available to common masses. To counter it WHO assimilated the initiative called as EPI-WIN that not only identifies, gathers an assesses real tie evidence but also makes sure to engage communities by reaching out with advices and messages and keeping a check on this “infodemic” via attempts like guided toolkits, webinars, awareness campaigns, advertisements and digital applications (17).

The dynamics of this pandemic have been constantly evolving and the flow of information is more than often unpredictable, but, the compiling factor remains in the hands of experts pertaining to the field of healthcare mostly. The frontline workers not only included the health professionals but encompassed scientists, research scholars, administrators social workers and ground level workers who risked their lives in order to better assess the situation and respond likewise. The strategic workload has unfurled a heap of pressure that has toyed around with the mental fortitude of these working professionals, almost manifesting into neuropsychological issues. “The experts found themselves operating in an environment where not only was the round constantly shifting but the proper responses were contested” (26) as argued by Prof Mark Evans and Michelle Grattan Ao, in their article entitled as “Health Expertise and Covid-19” published in the year 2021. The article elaborates on how “the leaders of almost every country were forced to rely in their health experts to advise them on the sudden threat” (20). The privileged position of these experts exhibited in the realm of policy making during these difficult times dominated bureaucratic domains as the pandemic ensured social and economic dislocation through all tiers of society, especially affecting the working class.

The complications in health for patients already vulnerable to chronic diseases and infections demarcates them as clear targets because of their compromised immune systems in the times of the pandemic however, in a report published by WHO in 2021 entitled as, “Clinical Management of Covid-19” it has also been detailed how the neurological and psychological implications of the pandemic have been exhibited in the affected. The document also details how the most affected group suffers from major “neuropsychiatric manifestations such as delirium/encephalopathy and neurological manifestations such as stroke” (46) that may be present. Contributing factors also include post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, panic attacks and sleep disorders. The physical isolation and mental trauma of quarantine has skyrocketed the fears such as “fear of falling ill and dying, fear of being socially excluded/placed in quarantine loss of livelihood and loss of loved ones, and feeling of helplessness, boredom and loneliness due to being isolated” (46), has caused acute stress. These factors further enhance the possible cognitive dysfunction caused due to unsurmountable distress and mental manifestation of the same as all interactive places such as offices, schools, universities, public places such as markets, shopping centers, parks, entertainment units or any congregational setting has been halted down to an absolute shut. Within these systems, the proportion of vulnerable people is way higher as there are limited medical provisions for the mental health in a time of crisis and the

accessibility to them is even lower because all health care provisions have been reallocated to the patients with severe physical emergencies especially that of the lung and heart diseases.

Women have to be one of the most vulnerable groups that got affected as most of the healthcare force like that of ER nurses comprises of this section, apart from which majority of the household care and chores fall to women as well. In the article, “Covid-19 and Impacts on Women” published in the year 2020, authors S. Nanthini and Tamara Nair argue about how this burden has manifested into deep psychological issues pertaining to gendered roles and bias. The already prevailing inequalities have allowed for a “disproportionate impact on women” (02). Adding to the burden of care and the pressure of working a remunerated job, women have also been forced to completely take over the responsibilities of domestic work including that of home-schooling as schools were shut down impromptu and switched to online mode of education. This triple threat has impeded their own well-being and the gendered impact has impaled them altogether. To substantiate this argument the authors quote how the chronic shortage of PPE kits affects female workers and the availability of the same is biased because the PPE kits “tend to be ill-fitted for women as most are designed and sized based on male template” (04), it gives an idea of how the healthcare industry uses ‘generic male’ as the representative figure, highlighting the discrete indiscrimination that women are subdued to.

Women have also suffered other tremendous effects of the pandemic as majority of the resources that were available to them via primary healthcare systems have now been reallocated and reimbursed into emergency pandemic services, thus, denying them of the vital healthcare that can be translated into the emotional distress and factors like maternal, neonatal and stillbirths. It is also imperative to note that, with the rise in stress factors because of curfews, quarantines, isolation, increased tension and fear, trauma of possible death and subsequent crisis, the cases of domestic violence against women have also increased. The economic tie-up of women employed in the commercial and hospitality industry has also gone through severe after effects as there is a pan world shutdown of travel, businesses and labor etc.

The field of Arts includes all verbal representations, the myriad of which includes paintings, sculpting, music, literature, Broadway, theatre, movies, museums, opera and computer games etc. and to view pandemics through the lens of art is no new attempt. In the contemporary times, when Covid-19 has affected the field of art deeply, many art organizations either temporarily stopped or were completely shut as a result. Literature on the other hand has seen pandemics and epidemics as modus operandi of apocalypses that will enable the reset of natural order and usher in a new era of balance and enlightenment. Christos Lynteris in his 2014 published article entitled as, “Introduction: The Time of Epidemics” argues that “infectious disease epidemics are the result of long-term and complex social, ecological, economic and political processes, outbreaks are more often than not, experienced on the ground as unexpected eruptions” (24). The victims of these outbreaks suffer the ruptures in social, political and economic spheres with catastrophes occurring at short intervals due to multiplicity of causes. Pandemics in earlier literature represented the divine scourge however in twenty-first century they contribute to the history of human existence as Ernest B. Gilman in his article “The Subject of the Plague” published in the year 2010 argues that, “a resurgent pandemic could kill off a significant fraction of the human population just as it did in ages past, indeed from the earliest moment...” (28) establishing that the subject matter of pandemics has curiously been closely monitored since ancient times and the posthumanist trends in contemporary times study epidemiology that decenters the humankind and locates man as the reservoir for most of the pathogenic transmissions that turn into pandemics.

The American author, Don DeLillo's repertoire is a collection of criticism on the evolutionary relationship that man has with its contemporary extant. His works mostly are postmodern grounds that highlight the urban dystopia and his fiction engages scholars that closely want to study the consistent technological developments and their consequential effects on the mankind. His oeuvre is of great interest to people who want to engross in the discussions of what the repercussions of human tendencies are in this anthropocentric turn. Connor Pitetti in his 2017 published article entitled as, "Uses of the End of the World: Apocalypse and Postapocalypse as Narrative Modes" argues how in the "twenty-first century the modern atom bomb and the classical armies of angels in the sky have been joined by a veritable pantheon of eschatological powers and millennial figures" (437). DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) is a literary representation of intersection between human desire and excessive developmental pursuits that snowball into an apocalyptic turn by collapsing into itself and mimicking a pandemic like situation where the city is forced into an absolute shutdown, citizens need evacuation, there is mass hysteria that implodes into a state of panic and frenzy with no clear information available to the common masses.

These events in the history of humans thus, are marked as the sites of apocalypses that are a result of the gradual catastrophe of technical expansion. The apocalyptic event in *White Noise* is the 'airborne toxic event', *White Noise* therefore, is the narrative of the dystopic postmodern world negotiating a relationship between utopic idea of existence that transcends into the dystopia as technology that both compliments and overlaps senses, producing both fear and acceptance through the myriad of changes. While the characters in the novel experience fear and confusion in the face of mechanization, mass mediation, and the toxic side effects of technological innovation, *White Noise* also provides insight into the pleasures of technology with which Americans often negotiate and the representations of which have become pertinent to their existence. DeLillo plays upon these interpretations of High-Tech America, making the threats of technology hyper visible as he foregrounds the disaster as an event that don't just happen anywhere, defamiliarizing the entirety of it as a consequence of disorienting chain of events forcing the protagonist and his family, The Galdneys to sort through the various bits of information they are getting and process it and cope with the disaster. Their understanding of their current situation comes partly in terms from what they have seen on TV, then assessing its importance, seriousness and validity on the various representations that their techno-sensibility.

The novel's disaster is as unpredictable as that of the contemporary pandemic with no clue as to how to navigate through it. The unprecedented circumstances are not countered properly as the first death in the novel occurs when a frontline worker suddenly collapses and dies while he is on investigation of a contamination site that happens to be an elementary school. To quote Karen Weekes from her 2007 published article, "Consuming and Dying: Meaning and the Marketplace in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*" that the "Blacksmith residents are evacuated as the Airborne Toxic Event sweeps over their homes" (289) signifying the wave of an ongoing pandemic that results in literal contaminations. The novel also graphically discusses how "in nearby Bakersville, two bodies are found buried in a backyard. Watertown appears only in a news report..." (290) highlighting the mass hysteria that resonates with the contemporary times as life was forced shut and the unavailability of information made people not just cautious but almost deranged in panic, fearing for their own lives. There is psychological trauma involved as both Jack Gladney and his wife suffer from extreme delusions, paranoia and anxiety, so much so that Jack, in a sense of taking control of his life, looks into murdering his wife's possible affair partner to rid himself of the urge as they are so close to their own deaths because of the 'Airborne Toxic Event'. They live in a fear of constant death that soon turns into denial for

Jack. The isolation turns at peak when Jack’s family unit crumbles into a party of three alone, and their daily existence turns merely into suffering together. Towards the end of the novel we see how the protagonist “only a few months after his exposure, he has settled back into his routine...” (295) pointing at how even in the contemporary times, people in the pandemic have acclimatized themselves to their surroundings and are on the road to resettle their disoriented lives after a confrontation with death.

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