

The Mysticism of the Object: Commodity Fetishism, and the Reification of Identity in the Fiction of Don DeLillo

¹Naphia Akhter, ²Dr. Muzafar Ahmed Bhat

¹Research Scholar, School of Humanities (Department of English) Lovely Professional University, Phagwara, Punjab

²Assistant Professor, School of Humanities (Department of English) Lovely Professional University, Phagwara, Punjab

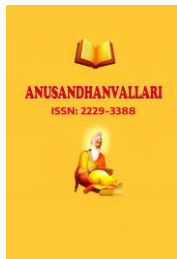
Abstract: Don DeLillo's novels are a strong criticism of the contemporary American culture and its reliance on commodities, mass media, consumption and systems of representation. This paper will explore the connection between commodity fetishism, reification and identity in DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Mao II*. The light of Karl Marx's notion of commodity fetishism and Georg Lukács's analysis of reification is used to investigate the objects, images, brands, media technologies and values in the marketplace that become influential beyond their material function. The supermarket, consumer culture, commercial items and the culture of consumption emerge as sources of knowledge of security, status and identity in *White Noise*. The novel depicts an environment in which the commonplace objects have an almost magical influence on human consciousness and social relations. Here it unfolds in *Mao II* with the media of mass media, photography, publishing, celebrity, and political event, and individual identity becomes an image with the capacity to be reproduced, circulated, and consumed. Offering an alternative to theories of identity as a personal or consistent mode of being, the paper posits that DeLillo's characters act out identity as an entity that is formed and circumscribed by objects, institutions, media representations, and capitalism. In these two novels, DeLillo showcases the more profound psychological and social effects of those lives that begin and end in objects and representations, in a culture where the human values are being quantified through objects and representations. His fiction thus offers an important literary critique of the ways in which consumer capitalism redefines the exchange value of things and the fascination, and control, of people.

Keywords: Don DeLillo, Commodity Fetishism, Reification, Identity, Consumerism, Postmodernism.

Introduction:

A significant figure in modern American literature, Don DeLillo is best known as a critic of consumer society, mass media, technology, capitalism, and the evolving identity of individuals. His novels often depict a society in which commodity, advertising, television, image of the political, the cult of celebrities and systems of information are increasingly shaping human experience. DeLillo does not simply focus on the economic aspects of consumerism as an activity, he's probing those other, deeper psychological and cultural aspects. He inhabits a world in which objects and images have more social authority than his own personal experience, and often finds himself perplexed in the understanding of himself. *White Noise* (1985) and *Mao II* (1991) offer important literary opportunities for the consideration of commodities, social systems, and identity.

One of Karl Marx's most important concepts in capital which comes into very useful service in comprehending DeLillo's depiction of modern consumer society is that of commodity fetishism. Marx offers an explanation for how commodities might be seen to have a value which is outside of their production values and a social power which is beyond their human labour and social power, in other words, how they can conceal their human labour and social power. Objects, in a society in which the consumer is the main agent of production, thus gain more than utility; they can serve as symbols of status, security, want and belonging. DeLillo uses familiar activities like shopping, branding, advertising, and consumption to build up this idea. In *White Noise*, the supermarket



evokes the significance as a symbolic area where commodities are staged, labels are produced and consumers are informed of their choices. Consumption is offered in the novel as a way for the individual to create a sense of order and meaning in a world where there is more uncertainty than ever before.

Reification is closely linked with the idea of commodity fetishism and was linked to Georg Lukács in particular. Reification is the process turning human relationships and qualities into relationships between things, relations exchangeable, calculable and having a value from outside its subject. In DeLillo's fiction, this goes beyond the commodities of commerce to the identity of the human being. Persons can be subjects of observation, representation, consumption, exchange. Institutions, technologies, images and commercial mechanisms play an increasing role in personal experiences. This instability of identity is manifested in feelings of the need to express one's identity through outside signs, and in the lack of an individual's sense of identity.

The production of individual and collective identities through the use of mass media, photography, publishing, acts of terror, celebrities, and political agitation is especially apparent in *Mao II*. This novel tells of a culture where it can be more potent to see images than to experience them personally. Words are represented visually, with the possibility of being reproduced and disseminated via media networks, by writers, public figures, political organizations and anyone else. Identity thus gets very much intertwined with the visible, the represented and the public. However, DeLillo does not just believe that such an "overwhelming" of media and commodities exists in modern society, but that it increasingly influences the conception of perception of self and the other.

White Noise and *Mao II*, then, illustrate different aspects of the same cultural context. Focusing particularly on the routine consumption practices, family life, technology, fear and the over-commercialised culture of the latter, *White Noise* extends this emphasis onto the media-satellite, the celebrity-star, political violence and the image as commodity in *Mao II*. But in both novels the person is embedded in structures that in certain ways make his or her identity increasingly contingent upon some object, image and form of social recognition.

DeLillo's depiction of commodity fetishism and the reification of identity in *White Noise* and *Mao II* is discussed in this paper. It posits that his fiction documents the consumer capitalism's impact on the formation of modern identity, on the ways commodities and media representations now shape people's wants and identities as well as their relationships with one another.

Review of Literature:

DeLillo has been interpreted under various theoretical frameworks such as consumer culture, simulation, technology, media studies, postmodernism and identity formation. All these studies help us grasp the centrality of the commodity, the image, the media and the experiences of postmodernity in DeLillo's fiction. Despite this connection, however, it is worth exploring the link of commodity fetishism and reification of identity further with a comparative study of *White Noise* and *Mao II*.

Hidalgo (2004) in the article entitled "The Consumer Society in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and Andy Warhol" explores DeLillo's portrayal of consumer society and visual culture from Andy Warhol. It is significant because it focuses on the relationship between the consumer good, the popular culture, the image and modern social experiences. In *White Noise*, Hidalgo makes it clear that consumption is not merely a backdrop to the American way of living, but is equally significant means by which people inhabit and negotiate with their environments. Images of consumption and commercial products become part of culture and affect the individual behavior. Marxist concept of commodity fetishism emphasises the link between commodities and the process of constructing meaning, especially in the wake of the present study.

In "Reading the Techno-Ethnic Other in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*," Basu (2005) looks at the novel with the questions of cultural difference and representation of the other, in addition to technology. The authors' findings

are illustrated in DeLillo's novels, in which the role of technology is not limited to represent a neutral instrument but is one of the social conditions that allow for the comprehension of self and other. Technological world affects perceptions of difference, and thereby construction of identity. Basu's analysis is important for the purpose of this study as it expands the discussion from a focus on physical commodities into a consideration of the connection between technology, social structures and identity.

The relationship between consumption and the novel as central to the concerns with death and meaning are clearly linked in the paper entitled "Consuming and Dying: Meaning and the Marketplace in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*" written by Weekes (2007). With the aid of the study, it is suggested that characters look in the marketplace as a vital route where they attempt to make their lives comprehensible and try to handle their anxieties. The study suggests that the marketplace becomes an important route by which characters try to make their lives comprehensible and try to handle their anxieties. Even with consumption exalting an illusory sense of order and consolation, it does not lift existential phobias. It is significant in this respect to note that Weekes's argument underscores the capacity for objects to gain symbolic or emotional value in addition to their functional purpose or utility, thus gaining insight into commodity fetishism. Commodities, associated with psychological security and social meaning, unveil the cultural force of the marketplace in *White Noise*.

For a broad overview of DeLillo's large body of work, themes, and literary strategies, see *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo* (2008). The collection situates DeLillo in the realm of contemporary American literature and looks at topics like media, technology, violence, politics, consumerism, and postmodern culture. Its critical frame is importantly broad because it shows that all of DeLillo's involvement with commodities and media is an aspect of a larger literary endeavor to a social and cultural resulting of America. The volume also acts as a useful reminder of the way that *White Noise* and *Mao II* belong to a larger series where Dillan deals with issues of a person's connection with more extensive cultural systems.

"Postmodern Consumerist Condition and Its Effects on People in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*" (Vungthong, 2011) aims to directly examine the impact of consumerism on individuals. The project offers a concept of consumer culture as a key feature of the postmodern state and how consumer culture affects the behavior and consciousness of its consumers. Vungthong exemplifies how characters' values, relationships, and understanding of reality are influenced by consumption. There is a strong relation between the previous study and the current study, which is the notion of the extent of consumerism as a force shaping the subjectedness of human beings. The current study, however, leaves the increasing discussion in this sector by making a special point of linking consumer culture to commodity culture and identity-reification.

Yu (2010), in shopping mall in *White Noise*, or the Temple of the Sacred Capital? is an interpretation of the shopping mall as a symbolic expression of capitalist culture. The research highlights the significance of shopping space and shopping along with consumer space in DeLillo's novel and indicates its comparison with the characteristics of a sacred institution. Marx's idea of the mysterious social power which he gave to commodities is helpful for the understanding of this fetishist phenomenon of commodities. According to Yu's reading, the shopping mall is a space that offers individuals order, belongingness and meaning. The interpretation which forms the basis of the present study extends this idea by looking at the symbolic power that a commodity attributes to the human subject and which is part of the reification of the self.

This article, "Rethinking Postmodern Narrativity: Narrative Construction and Identity Formation in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*" is written by Wiese (2012) on the connection between form and identity. The research examines the novel's construction of identities rather than seeing its identities as rigid and stable entities, claiming that identities are developed in language, social experiences, and in the ways in which narratives are put together. This is significant as the present study is one that does not view identity as an inherent personal

characteristic. Wiese's work therefore lends itself to the link between postmodern narrative techniques and the swirl of identity in *White Noise*.

In "Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: An Initial Postmodern Society Struggling with Fledgling Policies of Consumerism," Najjarzadeha (2015) analyzes the novel as an image of a new postmodern consumers society and looks at the novel as a form of cultural documentation. The research shows the conflict between the old and new meaning making trends: the consumerism resurgence. In a society where commercial values are increasingly intruding into everyday life and shaping their perception, DeLillo's characters are not alone. In the opinion of this study this could be considered an important literary study about the shift towards the very consumer society we live in today with *White Noise*.

The fusion of consumerism, simulation and existential fear of death can be found in Hamdi (2020) entitled "Consumerism, Simulation, and the Fear of Death in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*". The study demonstrates that consumer culture gives characters the sense of "security" and the feeling of "meaning" in life but it will not eradicate the fear of death for consumer characters. In this argument, deepens understanding of the culture of commodities in the novel. Commodities are not just bought to serve functional purposes, but as a psychological strategy to help sway uncertainty and anxiety. Hamdi's work is among the current research on the emotional and psychological aspects of commodity fetishism, however.

In 'Toxic Waste and Unpaid Labour: Don DeLillo's *Everyday*', Lambert investigates the nexus between environmental risk, everyday life and types of labour in DeLillo's fiction. Social and material processes are alluded to in the study, highlighting the invisible aspects of everyday experiences. It is important to bear in mind this view while thinking about commodity fetishism, because of the 'blurring' of labour and social relations that create commodities. Lambert's work calls us to mind issues of "stuff" in relation to consumer lifestyles that are not immediately apparent. It thus supplements research on the shopping, advertising and consumption-oriented aspects.

In "An Examination of Consumerism and the Role of Technology in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*," Malumani looks at the connection between consumerism and technology in DeLillo's fiction. The research sheds light on the inter-twinement of technology with contemporary lifestyles and consumption. It also raises the question of how different technological systems are impacting on human relations and human consciousness, which DeLillo continued to explore as a concern throughout his career. While the work does not directly concern *Cosmopolis* as it may apply to *White Noise*, the concepts of material and technological environments are used in this study for the purposes of explaining the topics of the present study and understanding how they contribute to the transformation of identity.

Last, however, in *Commodifying Art, Media, and Identity: A Critical Analysis of Cultural Consumerism in Don DeLillo's *Mao II* and *White Noise**, the relationship of how the concept of "commodification" is connected to "Media" and "Art" and "Identity" are directly discussed by Hamid, Sharma, and Qazi (2024) in the two following novels. The study is important in particular regards the fact that it acknowledges that besides things themselves, the realms of art, media and personal identity are also commodifiable. The authors demonstrate the trend with which DeLillo's fiction charts a culture in which the artist's and the human voice can be made palatable. Both their work and the present study contribute to the theoretical development that takes place after them; their work provides a recent and critical background for the development of the argument in the present study and the present study develops the present theory by means of specific considerations relating to the theoretical concepts of Marx's commodity fetishism and Lukács's reification.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine the representation of commodity fetishism in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Mao II*.

2. To analyse the reification and commodification of individual identity in the two novels.
3. To explore how consumerism, mass media, and postmodern culture influence human relationships and identity formation in DeLillo's fiction.

Analysis and Discussion:

1. Commodity Fetishism in White Noise

As the embodiment of consumer culture, Don DeLillo makes it a force that defines everyday life, and in turn, human consciousness. Among all of the most significant space in the novel is the supermarket, which symbolizes a place where commodities seem to have a meaning that transcends their function. Consumers start to identify products with their own security, social standing and personal gratification. Food, brands, packaging, and consumers' choices now carry a security, social, personal gratification meaning. Shopping is more than an economic act; it also provides the chance to order societies in the face of uncertainty. The supermarket is thus the symbolic space in which commodities can almost wield a cultural power of their own. It is Marx's premise of commodity fetishism that the social value of the product can obscure the social relationships and later the economics or economics of production. The novel implies that as consumption improves, we are defining our reality and our self through the ability to consume materials. The novel implies that as consumption improves, so are our constructs of reality and ourselves.

2. Reification and Identity in White Noise

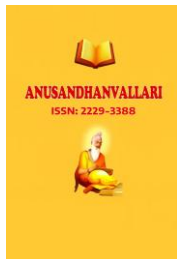
Reification can also be viewed as a central idea in the creation of identity in White Noise. The characters exist within social and institutional structures that categorize, quantify and define human experience. Identity is influenced by profession, family position, consumer behaviour, academic status, and material possessions. Jack Gladney, for instance, builds his identity as a scholar and as an expert on Hitler studies. His professional identity gives him the authority and a sense of stability that is, however, intertwined with the institutional value. By showing the ways in which people can begin to understand themselves through outside roles and objects and not independent sense of self, DeLillo demonstrates as well. Human identity becomes more and more objectified, formed through a times of social categorization and consumer sign. In the novel therefore, reification becomes a psychological state where people are depending on the external structures in order to determine themselves.

3. Commodity Culture and Mass Media in Mao II

In Mao II DeLillo extends his attack on commodity culture from consumer goods to images, information, publishing and mass media. Throughout the novel, a society that is moving at a fast-paced political tempo encompasses the images, photographs, and newspapers that play a game of press the button in a powerful way on the collective consciousness. Media is not merely reporting facts but also help construct facts. The importance of the figure of the writer merging in with celebrity and/or public visibility and the importance of images of political and terrorist organizations are realized. The novel thus implies that images become things as commodities. They are generated, transmitted and consumed, and bartered for attention and influence. Mass Media is presented by DeLillo as a system that can selectively represent more complex human events as images that are recognizable and consumable.

4. Reification of Identity in Mao II

The idea of reification of identity issues can be easily spotted in the following aspect of Mao II; between the people and their public image. At the heart of these events is the novel-writer himself, Bill Gray, who tries his best to keep out of the limelight, but, already, his name takes the place of celebrities like J.R. in the cultural landscape. His photographs, reputation and literary position give him more than just him. Representations of ideology, politics and media also help to shape other characters. In the eyes of an individual, DeLillo



demonstrates that a person can be an image which is watched and consumed by another. Identity is no longer all about/in the personal but reproducible, circulated and used commercially and politically. The novel asks itself if true identity can endure when one's personal experience is outweighed by a public image.

5. Comparative Analysis of White Noise and Mao II

Both novels, *White Noise* and *Mao II*, look at aspects of today's society but both discuss the change of the human identity as a result of consumer capitalism and media culture. *White Noise* more clearly states a world of commodities, supermarkets, advertising, technology and consumer anxiety while *Mao II* stresses consumption, photography and publishing, celebrity, political spectacle, mass communication, more emphatically. In both novels, however, human beings and social interdependencies are held in power by objects and images.

The two novels also illustrate various types of reification. Identities are produced with the consumption of consumer products, institutional positions, and every day practices of consumption in the case of *White Noise*. With *Mao II* we can see how the concept of identity is gradually becoming the mediatable image of identity, one that can be reproduced and consumed by an audience. DeLillo thus traverses the transition from the in-the-object to the in-the-identity of the commodity. His fiction implies that modern capitalism is not only a seller of goods; it also is a manufacturer of identities, images of reality and desires. In both *White Noise* and *Mao II*, DeLillo is provocatively exposing the erosion of any divide between people and goods, be they individual items or social networks, between human beings and commodities by a culture of consumption, a culture of representation.

Conclusion:

These two works by Don DeLillo, *White Noise* and *Mao II*, are analyzed to show how commodity culture, mass media and capitalist structures affect one's identity today. Commodities, supermarkets, adverts, and consumerism become other significant sources in which people struggle for security, meaning and social identity in *White Noise*. As in Marxist theory of the commodity fetishism, the novel demonstrates that an object gains a power different from all its functionality. Meanwhile, characters gain knowledge of themselves via roles, things and social groups and become more and more reified.

The theme of mass media, mass photographs, publishing, celebrity, and political spectacle are explored in *Mao II*. In this context identity is more or less becoming comparable to a commodity, as the person is converted into a picture that can be presented, circulated and consumed. The book proposes that the culture of the media does not just represent identity; it also helps to create it. The difference between private self and public image, therefore, becomes more and more obscure.

A contrast of the two novels shows a remarkable evolution in focus. *White Noise* looks at how things change the shape of identity, *Mao II* at how identity changes the shape of things. Consumer Capitalism and Postmodern Media Culture are both themes explored in both novels. In the end DeLillo's fiction implies that when the real world of objects, images and market values become the prime movers of social life, real social relationships and an individual sense of identity become even more difficult to maintain. His novels as such are still important for the study of how capitalism, consumerism, the media and identity change in modern society.

References:

- [1] Basu, B. (2005). Reading the techno-ethnic other in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, 61(2), 87–111.
- [2] Duvall, J. N. (Ed.). (2008). *The Cambridge companion to Don DeLillo*. Cambridge University Press.
- [3] Hamdi, H. (2020). Consumerism, simulation, and the fear of death in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. *ELLIDS Journal*, 3(3), 45–59.

- [4] Hamid, I., Sharma, S., & Qazi, A. K. (2024). Commodifying art, media, and identity: A critical analysis of cultural consumerism in Don DeLillo's *Mao II* and *White Noise*. *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 5(5), 1631–1635. <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i5.2024.3578>
- [5] Hidalgo, E. B. (2004). The consumer society in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and Andy Warhol. *Atlantis: Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies*, 26(2), 91–103.
- [6] Lambert, S. (2021). Toxic waste and unpaid labor: Don DeLillo's everyday. *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 67(2), 109–138. <https://doi.org/10.1215/0041462X-9084302>
- [7] Malumani, K. (2023). An examination of consumerism and the role of technology in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and *Cosmopolis*. *Journal of Law and Social Sciences*, 5(3), 50–69. <https://doi.org/10.53974/unza.jlss.5.3.1126>
- [8] Najjarzadeha, M. S. (2015). Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: An initial postmodern society struggling with fledgling policies of consumerism. *International Journal of English Literature and Culture*, 3(11), 269–276.
- [9] Vungthong, S. (2011). Postmodern consumerist condition and its effects on people in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. *Journal of Liberal Arts, Prince of Songkla University*, 3(1), 28.
- [10] Weekes, K. (2007). Consuming and dying: Meaning and the marketplace in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. *Literature Interpretation Theory*, 18, 285–302.
- [11] Wiese, A. (2012). Rethinking postmodern narrativity: Narrative construction and identity formation in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. *College Literature*, 39(3), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lit.2012.0034>
- [12] Yu, J. W. (2010). Shopping mall in *White Noise*, or the temple of the sacred capital? *Contemporary English Fiction Studies*, 17(2), 85–109. <https://doi.org/10.22909/smf.2010.17.2.004>