Depiction of the Challenges of Postmodern Parenting in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*

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**ARTICLE INFO**

**Article History:**

Received: 11 September 2023
Revised: 12 December 2023
Accepted: 17 December 2023
Published online: 31 December 2023

**Keywords:**

Parenting
Postmodernism
White Noise
Don DeLillo

**ABSTRACT**

Postmodernism, an intellectual movement that is characterised by a nihilistic scepticism towards all metanarratives, has brought a paradigm shift in people’s perception of the world as it rejects epistemic certainty, stable meaning, universalism and the existence of absolute truth in favour of epistemological and moral relativism, a celebration of fragmentation, pluralism and eclecticism. Thus, different values and knowledge systems are perceived as contingent and products of social, historical, political and cultural discourses in the postmodern world. It is further characterised by consumer culture, rapid advancements in technology, media saturation and globalisation that have significantly jeopardised long-standing moral values, societal norms and family structures.

In such a context, parents face unprecedented challenges because universal ideas of truth, objective reality, morality, human nature and society that they are supposed to inculcate in their children are opposed, questioned and criticised by postmodernists. Identifying these challenges, therefore, is the main purpose of this research article. To do so, it critically evaluates Don DeLillo’s seminal work *White Noise* as the novel encompasses the multifaceted effects of postmodernity in the lives of the characters and inadvertently addresses the challenges of parenting in a postmodern world. This article also relies on long and thoughtful exegesis of different books, journal articles and scholarly writings to present different aspects of parenting and postmodernity.

1. **INTRODUCTION**

The first and foremost thing, before starting the discussion of parents’ responsibilities and the challenges posed to them by postmodernity, is to understand thoroughly the spirit of postmodernism from its definitions. Although many scholars have defined postmodernism differently, there are a few scholars whose definitions capture the spirit of postmodernity better than others. For example, Jean-François Lyotard defines postmodernism “as incredulity toward metanarratives” (Bennington & Massumi, 1979/1984, p. xxiv). Here, Lyotard refers to a metanarrative, also known as a grand narrative, as a theory that intends to provide a comprehensive and totalizing account of different events of history, experiences and socio-cultural phenomena that rely on some universal values or truth. Echoing Lyotard, Hutcheon (1986) considers postmodernism as a way of questioning, doubting, and criticizing all conventional structures rather than a brand-new aesthetic. From these definitions, it becomes clear that the spirit of postmodernity advocates the incredulity of universal values and all traditional systems/structures.

Furthermore, Hutcheon (1986) also comments that postmodernism maintains that all knowledge is contingent and provisional and rejects the idea of an unmediated or direct representation of reality. Thus, it can be argued that postmodernity essentially disrupts the foundational ethos of identities, societies, moral values and the objective perception of reality. Therefore, individuals, who live and subscribe inadvertently to the shifting paradigms of
postmodernity, suffer from loss of identity, alienation and moral dilemmas.

Parents, as individuals living in a postmodern reality, are also the victims of the detrimental effects of this worldview. If parents suffer from loss of identity, alienation and moral dilemmas, then their struggles and challenges to raise children appropriately will be more arduous than ever before because they are supposed to indoctrinate their children in social conventions, moral codes and ethical values. Since successful parenting refers to fulfilling a set of definite responsibilities and depends on instilling particular values, structures, modes of behaviours, knowledge and skills in children, this paper argues that parenting becomes very challenging in a world that celebrates fragmentation, subjectivity and moral relativism.

To exemplify the challenges of parenting in a postmodern setting, this paper chooses Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* because it is considered a cornerstone of postmodern literature. First published in 1984, the novel chronicles the life of a college professor Jack Gladney, his wife and stepchildren along with the people and incidents of his surroundings. The first-person narrative style of the novel uses Jack Gladney’s musings on different aspects of American society and his interactions with his surroundings in such a way that he as a narrator is barely aware of the length and breadth of the implications of his thoughts and encounters. Jack Gladney and his wife Babette’s predicaments with their sense of identity, fear of death, problematic social relations and the quest for authenticity in the context of shifting paradigms of technological and cultural phenomena, which are the by-products of postmodernity, ultimately reveal the anxieties and uncertainties of postmodernity and the parental challenges.

For a better clarity of the issues addressed, this article is divided into two sections. The first section outlines the roles and responsibilities of parents in different areas of the development of children by drawing extensively from different literatures. Additionally, the second section critically interprets Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* using the postmodernist literary framework to show the parental challenges in postmodern reality.

2. PARENTAL ROLES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN

Parenting, a universal phenomenon, refers not only to the biological relationship between children and parents but also to the complex spectrum of raising a child. The complex pathway to successful parenting evolves as traditions, social norms and cultural practices change over time (Ishizuka, 2018). Although parenting styles and practices may vary across different periods of history and places, the objectives of successful parenting are more or less similar. These major objectives include but are not limited to the development of behavioural patterns, social skills and cognitive potential which are directly correlated with the nature of interactions among parents and children. Needless to say, parents equip children with necessary survival skills and defence mechanisms so that they can survive in the absence of their parents and pass their knowledge to the subsequent generations. Researchers like Smetana (1988) identify four major domains where parents may exert their authority to reach the desired goals of parenting. These domains are- moral, prudential, social conventions and personal. The roles performed by parents in these four domains are interrelated, overlapping and complementary.

In the moral domain, parents play a vital role since children depend on their parents and live in close contact with them in their early years. Therefore, parents to a great extent determine children’s modes of interaction with their surroundings. It is believed that children mostly learn by imitating and observing their parents (Bandura, 1977). Thus, children model their moral behaviours in their day-to-day interactions with their parents. If parents demonstrate kindness, honesty, fairness and empathy, then there is a high possibility that children will incorporate these values into their behaviour by internalizing the contexts and implications of such values (Eisenberg et al., 2015). In other words, the ideologies, moral values and other practices of the parents are reflected in the moral development of the children.

Additionally, parents across different periods of history, cultures and races employ different strategies to teach moral lessons to children. For example, stories are told to children and discussion of the stories with explicit instruction follows to convey ethical dilemmas and moral principles so that children can understand societal expectations. Thus, parents promote critical thinking and contribute to the development of moral autonomy in children (Kohlberg et al., 1984). Apart from that parental supervision and monitoring of the activities of children help them to align their moral development with societal norms (Stattin & Kerr, 2000). More importantly, parental sensitivity and warmth create an environment, where children feel secure to express their emotions, which results in the development of compassion, empathy and moral concern for others.

The prudential domain, where parents also play a significant role, refers to the development of children in making proper decisions regarding their physical and mental well-being. Parents help children by sharing knowledge and strategies that allow them to become skillful in assessing potential dangers and their consequences (Gullone & Moore, 2000). For example, parents warn children not to run with sharp objects because it might hurt
them. Also, parents demonstrate the use of fire by remaining safe from the dangers of it.

Furthermore, the prudential domain extends to the social sphere in the sense that children are supposed to learn manners and etiquettes from their parents and behave properly in different social situations because if they behave recklessly and inappropriately with the other members of the society, it may negatively affect their process of identity formation and growing a sense of belonging in the society that are necessary for their mental well-being. Primarily, parents help children to understand the implications of different social situations, to learn proper behaviour and to make them aware of the dangers of behaving recklessly in different social contexts. To do so parents create a very structured environment so that they understand limits, consequences and expectations (Baumrind, 1991). Also, they play a crucial role in maintaining the autonomy of the children so that they can make decisions independently. This balance is struck by age-appropriate discussions, encouraging risk assessments, problem-solving activities and initiating alternative courses of action. As a result, children learn coping strategies to manage anxiety, stress and peer pressure very effectively (Compas et al., 2017). Furthermore, children understand what is good for them and what will harm them through these processes.

In the realm of social conventions, children learn to conform to different pre-existing structures outside the close circuit of the family with the help of their parents. Although this overlaps with the previous two domains, here they specifically become more familiar with manners, etiquette, gender roles and social values. For example, in this domain, they learn that elders must be respected. Also, they learn to demonstrate politeness and respect for authority. Maccoby (1984) states that parents encourage children to conform to societal norms using appraisal and positive reinforcement of certain behaviours. Violation of certain expected behaviours may also be met with punishments. Furthermore, by selecting toys, and assigning household chores the parents indoctrinate the children with conventions associated with femininity and masculinity (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). These are crucial for children to independently function in any social context.

Lastly, the personal domain encompasses several things ranging from privacy and preferences to self-expression and different experimental activities. It further involves aspects of autonomy, character development and self-esteem. It is argued that most of the conflict between children and parents begins in this domain (Smetana & Asquith, 1994). The reason is that while children may not argue about the prudential regulations, they may argue about their clothing preferences.

3. DEPICTION OF POSTMODERN PARENTING IN DON DELILLO’S WHITE NOISE

Since the central focus of Don DeLillo’s novel titled White Noise is to portray the perils of postmodernity, it also illustrates how Jack Gladney, the protagonist of the novel, and Babette, his fourth wife, face challenges while parenting their children in all four domains, where parental authority is of significant importance, as the denizens of the postmodern world. Although Jack and Babette’s children demonstrate considerable cognitive aptitude and intellectual development, both of them, this paper argues, face enormous challenges in fulfilling their roles properly as parents due to the generational gap which is caused by the shifting paradigms of moral values, personal safety, family structures and social conventions along with the ecological imbalance in the postmodern world. This paper, therefore, highlights how Jack and Babette struggle as parents in all four domains of parenting.

Firstly, if the moral domain is considered, parents are supposed to be the role models of their children whereas Jack and Babette are morally corrupt in the context of the novel. Of course, their moral degradation is a result of their struggles to sustain themselves in a world where everything is deconstructed and morality depends on subjective interpretations. Thus the characters often resort to immoral activities for self-sustenance although their perceptions and experiences are very different than the actual reality. DeLillo aptly uses dark humour and ironies while presenting the predicaments of the characters in differentiating between simulations and realities in a postmodern world (Devetak, 2009).

In the case of Jack Gladney, his moral self is characterized by hypocrisy, authoritarianism and fluidity due to the ways of the world where he lives. His hypocrisy is evident in his professional as well as personal life. As a college professor, he establishes the Department of Hitler Studies which does not exist in academia. Moreover, although he is the head of the department, he does not speak German whereas the students must take a one-year course on German language to pursue their degree. In personal life, he continuously lies to Babette about his desire to die first although he is secretly afraid to die. In those circumstances, it is indicated that his attempt to show his love and devotion to his wife is hypocritical.

Here, Jack’s establishment of a department which does not exist anywhere else and his tendency to lie to his wife suggest that he suffers from an existential void which is caused by the absurdity of his academic pursuit, his lack of authentic relationship with his wife and his fear of death. Jack Gladney attempts to fill his existential void with authoritarianism in both his professional and personal life. For instance, he wears dark glasses, writes his name as
J.A.K. Gladney, and wears academic robes to show his authority. In his personal life, he fails to empathise with Heinrich’s plea to evacuate in the context of the ‘airborne toxic event’ and makes a derogatory comment about other people as he responds, “I'm not just a college professor. I'm the head of a department. I don't see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event” (DeLillo, 1984/2011, p. 136-7). According to him, it must be poor people who should flee.

So, it can be argued that Jack Gladney deviates from his role of being an ideal parent as he fails to set moral examples for his children. This argument can further be established by referring to his elaborate plot of killing Willie Mink and his strenuous effort to execute the plan although he does not succeed in his mission. Similarly, Babette also fails to create a structured environment that might contribute to the moral development of their children because she too suffers from the same detrimental effects of postmodernity like her husband. Although her ways of dealing with the problems are very different, she also exhibits immoral behaviours on multiple occasions. For instance, she is a pathological liar who continuously lies about her consumption of an untested drug called ‘Dylar’. She also lies, about her habit of frequently chewing gums, and gets caught and reprimanded by her daughters. Furthermore, her method of getting ‘Dylar’, which supposedly eradicates the fear of death, from Willie Mink elucidates her moral degradation. While analysing the nature of both characters, Baya (2009) considers them as “a couple of illegal drug addicts than of those of a committed mother and a university professor, as Jack describes both” (p. 100).

Therefore, it can be said that both of the concerned characters, as parents, face immense challenges in the moral domain as it is argued that parental psychopathology can significantly influence the behaviours of the children (Schechter & Willheim, 2009). As both parents, in the context of White Noise, fail to uphold proper moral stature, they inadvertently influence Heinrich, who is the eldest and the most observant among all of Gladney’s children, because he echoes his parents’ immorality. Furthermore, he develops a nihilistic worldview that contributes to his moral apathy. His moral oblivion goes to such an extent that he attempts to justify incestuous relationships as he states, “Animals commit incest all the time. So how unnatural can it be?” (DeLillo, 1984/2011, p. 39).

Secondly, the challenges of parenting in the prudential domain are intensified in a postmodern world because the nature of dangers and precautions to remain safe against them are highly unpredictable. Traditional approaches to parenting in this domain become ineffective as it is argued that the rapid advancements in technology in postmodern reality pose new threats of mindless consumer culture, alienation and environmental hazards (Terleckyj, 2023). In such circumstances, even parents are vulnerable whereas they are supposed to ensure the safety of their children.

DeLillo, in White Noise, aptly shows the nuances of dangers and the uncertainties of postmodern reality that contribute to the inefficacy of parents’ desperate attempt to keep their children safe and sound. In the novel, the incidents of the smoke alarm going off when the family is having dinner, the ‘airborne toxic event’ of Nyodend D., the ‘Mylex’ contamination in elementary school and the engine failure of an airplane successfully render the uncertainties of postmodern reality where anything might happen at any time. The author further points out the fact that children, who are supposed to be raised in a safe and secure environment, may inadvertently get exposed to unpleasant things or harmful chemicals. For instance, Heinrich gets acquainted and maintains his relationship with a murderer called Tommy in a very unconventional way. Furthermore, Steffie’s excessive consumption of television commercials, despite Babette’s sincere effort to curtail her children’s exposure to it, is apparent when she repeats the phrase “Toyota Celica” (DeLillo, 1984/2011, p. 180), a popular car model at that time, a couple of times in her dreams.

Furthermore, parents struggle in the prudential domain because of the alienation which results in communication barriers. As each of the individuals lives in their subjective realities, parental instructions might prove to be ineffective. In a postmodern setting, Zhao (2016) argues, “family members are relatively independent and lack a common topic, resulting in barriers to communication” (p. 124). Additionally, parents’ incapacity to predict the potential dangers in an uncertain world further complicates the process of imparting necessary knowledge and skills to ensure the physical and mental well-being of the children. Jack and Babette, in the context of the novel, face these challenges on multiple occasions.

DeLillo successfully uses the interplay of sounds and silences to present both the unpredictability of dangers and the lack of transparency among the characters. He includes the ever present humming noise of the moving vehicles in the expressway and the household appliances to illustrate the foreboding evil of postmodernity. Furthermore, regarding the unpredictability of dangers of it, DeLillo depicts Heinrich’s random adventures in different chapters and Wilder’s attempt to cross the busy expressway in his tricycle in the last chapter. Also, he shows how technology of postmodernity affects the interpersonal relationship of the characters. The effects of television on the Gladneys and the interruption of their conversation by the broken tuner of the radio at one point of the novel indicate a sense of alienation that exists among them. This alienation between parents and also among parents and children makes parenting difficult because they are unable to share an authentic relationship.
Thus, the stories and instructions of the parents most of the time render no value to the children.

Thirdly, in the domain of social conventions, parents face challenges due to the deterioration of traditional structures and social roles in a postmodern world. In the context of the novel, comparing social relations with “supermarket shopping”, it is argued that “in postmodern times domestic relations themselves have become commodified” (Baya, 2009, p. 93). This statement is further justified when the protagonist, while describing his house, states, “We regard the rest of the house as storage space for furniture, toys, and all the unused objects of earlier marriages and different sets of children” (DeLillo, 1984/2011, p. 8).

Therefore, Jack and Babette naturally face challenges in imparting social values due to the very structure of their family. Although the marriage between Jack and Babette seems to be a “happy and harmonious one” where both spouses have flourishing careers, there is no denying the fact that their relationship hinges more on mutual indifference. It can also be seen that they are supposedly fulfilling their roles as parents of the four stepchildren namely Heinrich, Denise, Steffie and Wilder but these children are the result of their previous marriages and none of them are born from their marriage. This particular family structure diverges from the archetypal structure of a nuclear family.

So, it can be said that Jack and Babette fail as parents in the realm of social conventions because the postmodern family structure and the nature of their relationship hinder them from achieving their goals as successful parents. This paper, however, does not claim that Gladney’s children lack manners, etiquette and understanding of gender roles rather it focuses on the psychological impacts of their parents’ failure in their formation of social identities as they fail to achieve a sense of belonging from their home that is supposed to be a safe haven for children. The lack of their parents’ stability in maintaining social relations results in Steffie’s unconscious perception of herself as victim which is evident in the incident where she volunteers to play the role of a victim in a simulation of an emergency drill. Similarly, Heinrich, as it is already mentioned, loses his respect for humanity and becomes nihilistic.

Finally, in the personal domain, parental challenges take a completely new turn as to express the chaos of the postmodern world it is argued that “every aspect of this media-saturated universe seems to stand under a constant pressure for perpetual renewal” (Baya, 2009, p. 103). So, the continual changes in the realm of fashion trends, technological innovations, and social norms negatively affect the efficacy of parenting strategies because parents, who have their preferences, experiences and pre-conceived notions of almost everything, fail to cope with the shifting preferences of the children. Moreover, the personal domain, as it includes a wider spectrum ranging from the autonomy of the children to their development of self-esteem, is very difficult for parents to navigate through as the future success of their children depends on their performance. However, postmodernism, which celebrates fragmentation, makes it more difficult for the parents due to their inability to anticipate the changes.

That is why Jack confesses that he does not understand why Denise is so obsessed with her green visor that she would not go out without it for weeks. In another instance, Jack fails to understand why Orest Mercator, one of Heinrich’s friends, decides to spend a considerable amount of time with venomous snakes that might end up in his death. Similarly, Babette is afraid of Heinrich’s continuous experiments with different things and thinks that one day SWAT team will surround and imprison him. Jack and Babette’s concerns for the growth of their children reflect the fear of all the parents who live in the postmodern reality.

**4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, it can be said from the above discussion that though parenting is already a challenging phenomenon, the postmodern movement makes it even more challenging for several reasons. Moreover, these challenges extend to all the domains where parents play crucial roles in the holistic development of the future generation. Sadly, the effects of postmodernity have continued to plague us to this day though the movement is thought to have started in the late 20th century. Breakdown of the traditional structures, moral relativism, rapid advancement in technology, rise of consumer culture and celebration of subjective realities, which are the key components of the postmodern world, are some of the reasons that make it extremely difficult for parents to raise their children following the traditional approaches because everything in this reality goes through a process of continuous renewal. Thus, the inherent uncertainties of postmodernity, as depicted in Don DeLillo’s novel titled *White Noise*, have made parenting a far more challenging task than it was earlier.

**References**


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