



## **Towards a Haiku War: An Ecocritical Perspective of DeLillo's**

### ***Point Omega***

**Ganga Parameswari.T**

Research Scholar

Department of English

Manonmaniam Sundaranar University

Tirunelveli

E-mail: gangaparameswari@gmail.com



### **ABSTRACT**

This paper analyzes DeLillo's *Point Omega* in an ecocritical perspective. The novel revolves around three characters Elster, an aged man, Finley, the film director and Jessie, Elster's daughter. *Point Omega* deals with the life of Elster, who involved himself in the secret planning of the Iraq war. He retires to a desert, leaving everything in his city. His living in that Arizona desert seems to have a transcendent state to Elster. He questions, answers and philosophises many things in his life. The other characters Finley and Jessie too encounter changes in their life. What type of comfort they experience in that desert, and how did the desert change their life is analyzed in this paper.

**Keywords:** desert, haiku war, omega point, civilization, technology, nature, ecocriticism, wilderness.

### **ECOCRITICISM & LITERATURE**

Ecocriticism is studied as a relationship between man with other members of the ecosystem. Glotfelty defines Ecocriticism as the study of the relationships between literature and the physical environment, in his introduction to the *Ecocritical Reader* (xix). At the same

time, healthy, peaceful and harmonious living condition of man directly and indirectly relates and reflects the welfare of other branches of Eco study. Hence an anthropo study of ecocriticism concentrates purely on the entire personality of man. Man's healthy survival could only protect the ecosphere. This approach questions the

basic element of humanness in human beings. It also questions the changed nature of man towards nature. It is certain that man's nature has seen a tremendous mechanical transformation from the age of civilization to the age of information. Wherever peace of man is disturbed which in turn disturbs the entire community of man, ecocriticism speaks for the affected group and for the future community.

### THE PHILOSOPHY OF DELILLO

Considering DeLillo and his concern for creating a better environment to both nature and man, he explores the mixed composition of nature, culture, human and technology, their interconnectedness and their effects. DeLillo has concentrated much on environmental degradation and crisis in his novels like *White Noise*, *Underworld*, and *Falling Man*. DeLillo's novels expose a human community, which believes in the illusory world for their existence, and at the same time, the complacent culture they glorify drags them towards their doom and destroy the nature in the name of man's environment. However, nature is always a soother of man's unidentified puzzle in his life. The novel *Point Omega* is a culmination of a man's eternal search for identity, the pride of his dominion, and his technological supremacy over nature.

Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* is about a man's intellectual quest of What Next. Civilization, the embryonic sign of man's intelligence is the reason for the initial divide between nature and man. Man's intellectual consciousness strengthened him towards an anthropogenic attitude of this present day globally polymorphous age. With the changing mindset of a man, with his changing cultural, social and political life encounters nothing but an unhealthy living in this earth. He fails to have a healthy mind and a healthy body. With *Point Omega*, the main character Elster, who is seventy-three, retires to Arizona to find solace. He is comfortable in that place. Finley, another character who wishes to shoot a documentary on Elster states Elster's stay in the desert in the following passage:

This was desert, out beyond cities and scattered towns. He was here to eat, sleep and sweat, here to do nothing, sit and think. There was the house and then nothing but distances, not vistas or sweeping sightlines but only distances. He was here, he said, to stop talking (22).

### ECO THEORISTS & CRITICS

Thoreau in his *Walden* states that people must lead a more simple life and have a more ecologically oriented

existence. Buell also explains relinquishment in his *Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* in the following words

To give up individual autonomy itself, to forgo the illusion of mental and even bodily apartness from one's environment and eliminate any involvement of human consciousness that may allow anthropocentrism to enter into the equation (144).

Distance relieves Elster from all the burdens of this world at his late age. Finley observes in Elster his understanding of life

Elster retires in the desert to do nothing. He also wishes to stop talking. Deep time, To see what's here, finally to look and know you are looking, to feel time passing, to be alive to what is happening in the small registers of motion(6 – 7).

### **CRITICAL STUDY OF THE NOVEL**

Elster helped the Pentagon conceptualize an intellectual framework for the Iraq War. He comments his work place, the third floor of the E ring at the pentagon as, "Bulk and swagger" (24). He even comments his release of his mental state as,

News and Traffic. Sports and Weather. These are his acid terms for the life he'd left behind, more than two years of living with the tight minds that made the war. It was all background noise, he said, waving a hand (23).

Being wounded heavily as a member of the war, he renounces everything, including his family. He never wants to recollect or miss anything so far he enjoyed in his city and he rests peacefully in that desert. His life has changed a lot. He finds time to see 'what' surrounds him. He wonders at the brightness of the sun, "The sun was burning down. This is what he wanted, to feel the deep heat beating into his body, feel the body itself, reclaim the body from what we called the nausea of News and Traffic" (22). He also wishes to see the bighorn sheep, a rare species seen in that desert. He has a sentimental belief of getting a meaning in his life to see that sheep.

DeLillo has taken the concept of advancement of technology and the dehumanizing effects it creates as the prominent themes in his novels. Technology and its advancement never can settle man's struggle. Never can it free man's quest towards peace. Instead it gets man into trouble. Man's pride of his discoveries and findings could have helped him to extend and expand his space in this

world. The quest of 'What Next' can never get any answer by his intellectual consciousness. *Point Omega* denotes the end of his search, and gives a meaning to man's life by limiting his thinking. He could have uplifted the standard of living in a narrow sense of comfortable living. Unfortunately, the comfort seems 'temporal'. All of man's effort is temporal. Knowledge, Intelligence and Power are handicapped before the immeasurable damage he invested on his living planet. The realization of a man about his limitation of his intelligence brings him one with nature. This is the "omega point".

### CONCEPT OF TIME, SPACE AND MAN

The highly philosophical concept of Time, Space and Man links the story. He talks about time and the power of epochal time and explains temporality. He lives in slow time. Meantime, he is interviewed by Finley, because he intends to shoot a documentary film with a title "Man and the Wall" in a single shot. However, Elster never replies for or against his task. Frequently they discuss, drink and think philosophically. His daughter Jessie surprises them and spends some days with them. Jessie, a peculiar character twists the mind of Elster and Finley. Jessie compares city life to the desert. Elster discusses with Jessie about the "24 Hour Psycho" of

Hitchcock. It is a slowed down documentary which Elster and Finley watch, was highly appealing to Elster. Elster recollects the forgotten and neglected moments about the universe and comments about the film as if he is watching the universe die over a period of about seven billion years.

### LONGING FOR NATURE

DeLillo senses the universal feel that everyone finds life appealing, but at the same time, it is beyond understanding. It is again the omega point, where man ends up finding, what is further, and at a still point, simply accepts something when he could not change or fight further and calls it as fate or philosophy of life. Frank Lentricchia characterizes DeLillo's novels as "montages of tones, styles, and voices that have the effect of yoking together terror and wild humor as the essential tone of contemporary America" (2). Antony Perkins is the killer of the film

"24 Hour Psycho" screened at the museum. Elster says, "In the time it took for Anthony to turn his head, there seemed to flow an array of ideas involving science and philosophy and nameless other things or maybe he was seeing too much. The less there was to see, the harder

he looked, the more he saw. This was the point” (6).

Jessie interprets the film as, “the heat death of the Universe” (60). Jessie’s admiration of the nature also has been brought out when her father promised her to show a bighorn sheep, “She went slack-jawed and held her hands out, palms up, like where did this come from, like what did I do to deserve this, eyes wide, a dumbfounded cartoon child.” (84)

Suddenly the novel witnesses Jessie’s missing. Elster is disturbed at the news of his missing daughter. As an aged father, he struggles to find his daughter but fails instead. However, Elster is a less expressive person; he could have been ashamed of sending thousands of soldiers to war and willing to die unnecessarily. This haunts him heavily when he gets a loss or a threat of death in the form of Jessie’s disappearance with no hint. This incident moves Elster towards a ‘longing’ that he never considers as a human feeling,

The true life is not reducible to words spoken or written. Not by anyone, and ever. The true life takes place when we’re alone, thinking, feeling, lost in memory, dreamingly self-aware, the submicroscopic moments (21).

## **HAIKU WAR**

Elster sometimes prophesies that America needs a great power to act, to retake the future. He talks about “Haiku War” means nothing beyond what it is. He also warns this is the time to close everything. This is what drives us now. Elster exclaims,

Haiku means nothing beyond what it is. A pond in summer, a leaf in the wind. It’s human consciousness located in nature. It’s the answer to everything in a set number of lines, a prescribed syllable count. I wanted a haiku war” (37).

He further compliments nature and time as, “Time slows down when I’m here. Time becomes blind. I feel the landscape more than see it. I never know what day it is. I never know if a minute has passed or an hour. I don’t get old here.” (30). For Elster, the desert is a distancing landscape that changes his altitude and attitude of life,

Day turns to night eventually, but it’s a matter of light and darkness, it’s not time passing, mortal time. There’s none of the usual terror. It’s different here, palpably. Time that precedes us and survives us (56).

Finley inquires Elster, about his further move to his city, “You have a life back

there.”(30). Finley wonders at his reply, “A Life. That may be too strong a word.”(30)

Elster finds the French philosopher Tedhard de Chardin's concept of *Omega Point* as relevant to his thinking and imagination, which means beyond consciousness and human evolution. Naturalness is not the same thing as what it meant some ten or fifteen years ago. It is man who touched everything and hence nature has become second nature. Elster compares his stay in the Sonoran desert as “This is different, a spiritual retreat” (29). He adds, “There were no mornings or afternoons. It was one seamless day, every day, until the sun began to arc and fade, mountains emerging from their silhouettes. This is when we sat and watched in silence” (46).

DeLillo indirectly questions the decline of civilization. It was civilization, which has taken man to the height of his pride “Anthropocene”. Elster asks the threatening fact about our existence,

We become ourselves beneath the running thoughts and dim images, wondering idly when we'll die. This is how we live and think whether we know it or not. These are the unsorted thoughts we have been looking out the train window, small, dull smears of meditative panic. (21-22)

He explains, “I looked at kinescope of the early years, every distant minute, it was another civilization, midcentury America, the footage resembling some deviant technological life form struggling out of the irradiated dust of the atomic age” (32).

## REALIZATION OF TEMPORALITY

Elster at one point opined his idea about war.

War creates a closed world and not only for those in combat, but for the plotters, the strategists. Expect their ear is acronyms, projections, contingencies, methodologies... They become paralyzed by the systems at their disposal. Their war is abstract. They think they're sending an army into a place on a map (35).

Elster discusses with Finley about the blur of technology, army and the philosophy of war,

We're a crowd, a swarm. We think in groups, travel in armies. Armies carry the gene for destruction. One bomb is never enough. The blur of technology, this is where the oracles plot their wars. Because now comes the introversion. Father Teilhard knew this, the omega point. A leap out of our biology. Ask yourself this

question. Do we have to be human forever? Consciousness is exhausted. Back now to inorganic matter. This is what we want. We want to be stones in a field. (66-67)

Though Elster headed a mission of destruction he confesses, "I hate violence. I fear the thought of it, won't watch violent movies, turn away from news reports on television that show dead or wounded people... Violence freezes my blood" (63). Finley gets the clue for his thought as it is clear when he says, "I tried to think of further workable prospects for the end of human life on earth" (65). They even talk about extinct animals, "There was a North American camel. Where is it now?" (65). We'll be here the way flies and mice are here, localized, seeing and knowing nothing but whatever our scanted nature allows. A dim idyll in the summer flatlands (90).

All citizens, especially Americans at the millennial crossroads, find *Point Omega* a compliment, a synthesis of the moment since it explains the art of living in an art. Though Jessie's missing is untraceable, it is clear that Jessie encounters some problem at the family and city. Like Elster, Jessie could not think beyond and proceed further, but finds comfort in the desert. Even after all types of efforts, including the emergency camps, have been taken to find Jessie, no clue can assure her missing to be suicide or

elopement. Sonoran desert extends its hands, Jessie lost herself physically, and mentally in the desert without letting any trace so that her union should never be disturbed. Finley observes,

He knew where he was, in his chair, alive to the protoworld. I thought, the seas and reefs of ten million years ago. He closed his eyes, silently divining the nature of later extinctions, grassy plains in picture books for children, a region swarming with happy camels and giant zebras, mastodons, sabertooth tigers. Extinction was a current theme of his. (25)

Man will soon become an endangered species, lacking in the sense of having biologically perfect genes. Finley expresses,

We drove in silence behind a motorboat being towed by a black pickup. I thought of his remarks about the matter and being, those long nights on the deck, half smashed, he and I, transcendence, paroxysm, the end of human consciousness. It seemed so much dead now. Point omega. A million years away. The omega point has narrowed, here and now, to the point of a knife as kit centers a

body. All the man's grand themes funneled down to local grief, one body, out there somewhere or not. (124)

## CONCLUSION

In short *Point Omega* is what DeLillo captures in the postmodern uncertainty. The Desert is an imagery where one examines, realizes and repairs to simplify and purify one's self. DeLillo has made desert asceticism as a spiritual reconciliation to pastoral and to be noted as a mark of purification and simplification. The transformation with in Elster who supported Iraq War wishes to have a Haiku war is a testimony towards man's longing to unite with nature. All the three characters get some kind of resolution and refinement being close to the desert. The desert landscape with its silence and profound self-explanation merges with their mind to renew and transcend themselves to a new life. The wildness of the desert with its vast land, heat and light of the sun, different birds and animals answer the mysteries that confused the characters in their life.

## REFERENCES

1. Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. MA:Harvard UP,1995. Print.
2. DeLillo,Don. *Point Omega*. London: Picador, 2010.print.
3. Glotfelty, Cheryll. "Introduction." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. GA: Georgia UP:1996. Print.
4. Lentricchia, Frank. "Tales of the Electronic Tribe." *New Essays on White Noise*. Ed. Frank Lentricchia. New York: Cambridge University Press,1991. Print.