



Underworld: A Menagerie of Dark Forces and the Shattered American Dream

Dr. Mohammad Ahmad
ORCID 0000-0001-9852-7932

***Corresponding Author:** Dr. Mohammad Ahmad, ahmad0812@gmail.com
Assistant Professor, Department of English Studies and Research, Mahatma
Gandhi Memorial (PG) College, Sambhal, UP, India.

Abstract

Aims and Objectives: *The present study Underworld: A Menagerie of Dark Forces and the Shattered American Dream attempts to examine and explore new dimensions of existential and environmental challenges in Don DeLillo's masterpiece Underworld (1997).*

Methodology and Approach: *The study is based on the primary texts of DeLillo, critical books, articles and web sources. A brief comparison is also being made with some other DeLilleian novels. The methods adopted for writing this research article are analytical, observational and critical.*

Outcome: *This paper exposes the American monopoly and the existential conundrum of the people. It also points out two very prominent dark forces of American supremacy i.e., waste and weapons. In short, it may be said that Underworld is a powerful critique on the Great American Dream.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *As the topic suggests, the present study probes the grotesque American experiences, human consciousness and popular culture's emergence as a dominant force, especially, after World War II. Paranoid existence of human beings plays a very dominant role throughout the novel. DeLillo seems to have enough potential to challenge the neo-imperialist hegemony, deceptive notions and policies of his own country.*

Keywords: Menagerie, Dark Forces, The American Dream, Existential Dilemma, Weapons, Waste, USSR, Cold War, Paranoia, War Conspiracy.

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Underworld, published in 1997 and celebrated by literary critics as Don DeLillo's magnum opus, unmasks contemporary America as a "postmodern (waste)land" (Isaacson 2012), "the museum of dark forces" (*Underworld* 280), and home of "the devil twin" (*Underworld* 791). Besides the Cold War conspiracies, *Underworld* deals with the growing concerns of weapons and waste culture, existential dilemma, surveillance of individual choice and freedom and paranoid schizophrenia in contemporary American culture. It attempts to challenge and even break the shackle of 'the Great American Dream' which has been the national ethos of the United States. The set of ideals (democracy, rights, liberty, opportunity and equality) in which freedom includes the opportunity for prosperity and success as well as an upward social mobility for the family and

children achieved through hard work in a society with few barriers. In short, the American Dream is the set of beliefs or ideals that the government would protect and equally promote each individual's opportunity to pursue his/her idea of happiness and prosperity. But, at present, as DeLillo predicts several times in the novel, the American Dream is under profound economic and cultural pressure. Jon Meacham, an executive editor at Random House, contributing editor to *TIME* magazine and also Pulitzer Prize winner for biography/autobiography in 2009 for his work *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House* (2008), sees this enduring yet embattled idea of the American Dream in the contemporary American context thus:

The perennial conviction that those who work hard and play by the rules will be rewarded with a more comfortable present and a stronger future for their children faces assault from just about every direction. That great enemy of democratic capitalism, economic inequality, is real and growing. The unemployment rate is dispiritingly high. The nation's long-term fiscal health is at risk, and the American political system, the engine of what Thomas Jefferson called "the world's best hope", shows no sign of reaching solutions commensurate with the problems of the day. (Meacham 2012)

Underworld is a telescopic examination of postmodern American waste (land) in the wake of American Cold War paranoia and expansion of communism in which DeLillo scrutinizes the bleak chances of spiritual and aesthetic resuscitation in the age of multinational economy, free market consumerism and real versus image contest or, in Frederick Jameson's terms, media capitalism. Some other major ideas/issues and discourses that DeLillo puts forward and unfolds in *Underworld* are— the existential dilemma, the environmental threat of chemical pollutants, the monopoly of media and technology, television and

advertisement and its profound impact on American society and culture, the complexity of language, crisis of history, gigantic landfill sites, nuclear and chemical weapons, constant anxiety about death, sense of paranoia, obsession with sports, incurable diseases, mechanical and illicit sexual relationship, children born non biologically as well as non-biological sexual organs, organ trading, to name but a few *Americana* (1971), although DeLillo's first novel and that took him four years to write, in some respect may be linked to *Underworld* in terms of discursive multiplicity and thematic concerns through which DeLillo attempts to expose American identity crisis and existential dilemma about the monopoly of media and American consumerism. The protagonists/artists of DeLillo's both novels seek their lost existence. David Bell is a young man in *Americana* who runs away from his job as a television executive to find his real self, but in *Underworld*, on the other hand, it is an older man, Nick Shay, a waste/weapons management executive at Whiz Co, a firm with "an inside track to the future" and adopted "the comprehensive philosophy of Weltanschauung." Nick races off into the desert of Kazakhstan, a part of the USSR till 1991, in a conference on the topic of "The Future of Waste" (*Underworld* 282) with BigSims, Klara Sax, Brian Classic and Jesse Detwiler, in search of his lost existence. Nick gets nostalgic for his lost existence and rues his disillusionment of having a romantic idea to lead a life of his own. Henceforth, Nick shows aversion to his profession which is not compatible with his personality as he dreamt of something big. For Nick, such type of job is just "an artificial limb" (*Underworld* 796):

From the first day I find that everything I see is garbage. I studied engineering. I didn't study garbage. I thought I might go to Tunisia and build roads. I had a romantic idea, you know, wear a safari jacket and pave the world . . . Trouble is, the job follows me. The subject follows me. (*Underworld* 283).

Other than *Underworld*, DeLillo also prophesies the threat of nuclear annihilation in an allegorical novel *End Zone* (1972), an American college football/nuclear war black comedy, in which college football players personify various philosophical positions and also contemplates the connections between football, metaphorically, as warfare and that of nuclear war. The metaphor of football as warfare is challenged in the line “warfare is warfare”. Since the worldwide acclaim of *White Noise* (1985), DeLillo has accelerated an element that had been an important aspect of his earlier narratives also i.e. an oblique, sometimes overt, satire and parody of contemporary American culture and society. DeLillo’s post-mortem of postmodern America continues in *Libra* (1988) and *Mao II* (1991). He has long been inclined with crowds and people’s collective urge to be part of something larger than themselves. *Mao II* with its frightening evocations of crowds both in text and image -- a huge mass marriage ceremony performed by Reverend Moon at Yankee Stadium, the grappling of people checked against a restraining fence at a soccer match and the mass hysteria/madness at the funeral of Ayatollah Khomeini, the top leader of Iran – can be analyzed in relation to DeLillo’s representation of a hysterical American crowd at the baseball game that opens *Underworld*. It is also interesting to note to find similarities between Bill Gray, a famous reclusive writer, the protagonist of *Mao II*, and the author himself who until the publication of *Underworld* was well known for guarding his private life.

Underworld is an attempt to account for the emergence of constant fear of death and paranoia that replaced religious faith as a significant feature of contemporary American national identity due to the World War II annihilation and the Cold War which broke out just after World War II between the Eastern Block or the socialist states (the USSR and its allies) and the Western Block or the capitalist states (the USA and its allies) and ended either in 1989, when communism collapsed in Eastern Europe or in 1991, when the Soviet Union

collapsed. This novel also delineates about how the US became postmodern, politically, culturally as well as aesthetically. The novel clues the triumph of capitalism over communism during the Cold War which was not achieved entirely by the United States' containment of communism. Instead, *Underworld* posits that America won the Cold War in large part because of its master plan – the proliferation of consumer goods and weapons. Hence, Nick Shay, the narrator, and protagonist of the novel, very similarly hints at the American classic economic metaphors:

I thought leaders of nations used to dream of vast land empires— expansion, annexation, troop movements, armored units driving in dusty juggernauts over the plains, the forced march of language and appetite, the digging of mass graves. They wanted to extend their shadows across the territories. (*Underworld* 787).

Each section of the novel is marked by temporal distortions, nonlinear narration and sarcastic humor. DeLillo's preoccupation with the crowd exhibits some contradiction here, on the one hand "when you deal with crowds, nothing's predictable" (*Underworld* 15) but on the other hand, DeLillo proclaims that the "future belongs to crowd" (*Mao II* 16). The connection between the final baseball game and the nuclear test done by the Soviet Union on October 3, 1951 becomes the central reference point for the actions, conflicts and intersections in the novel. J. Edgar Hoover, one of the major historical figures and also the first Director of FBI, addresses his companion on the atomic test done by the Soviet Union in a very serious and sarcastic tone:

It seems the Soviet Union has conducted an atomic test at a secret location somewhere inside its own borders. They have exploded a bomb in plain unpretending language. And our

detection devices indicate this is clearly what it is— it is a bomb, a weapon, it is an instrument of conflict, it produces heat and blast and shock. It is not some peaceful use of atomic energy with home-heating applications. It is red bomb that spouts a great white cloud like some thunder god of ancient Eurasia. (*Underworld* 23)

Hence, on the surface level, the bomb is an instrument of conflict between the US and the Soviet Union, but in the depth, it was, in fact, the conflict of ideologies between the capital states and the socialist or communist states. *Underworld* also considers what happens to the ‘American Dream’ when this firmground of belief is suddenly broken in the aftermath of the Cold War. As Marvin Lundy, a historian artist reveals to Brian Classic the conspiracies/ideologies deployed by the states for the Cold War. Marvin Lundy, further, mocks the American and the Soviet Union war strategy and master plan to dominate the world in a very ironic manner:

You need the leaders of both sides to keep the cold war going. It’s the one constant thing. It’s honest, it’s dependable. Because when the tension and rivalry come to an end, that’s when your worst nightmare begin. All the power and intimidation of the state will seep out of your personal bloodstream. (*Underworld* 170)

To conclude, if we look at the current implications and chaotic condition of the world phenomena through the lens of the above-mentioned prophetic lines, we will find that the constant fear of nuclear war between the US and the Soviet Union receded for some time after the fall of the USSR. But since the end of 2016 over Russia’s alleged interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, their relations have been greatly strained and mutual sanctions imposed

in 2014 remain in place. In January 2016, senior UK government officials were reported to have registered their growing fears that “a new cold war” was now unfolding in Europe. The two superpowers, the United States and Russia are standing face to face over differences in Russian military intervention in the Syrian Civil War and the ongoing Ukraine crisis. International media has been observing the Syrian Civil War and the Ukraine tension as a proxy war between Russia and the United States and even a “proto-world war”. At present, the North Korean totalitarian leader Kim Jong Un along with the Chinese President Xi Jinping has almost waged a nuclear and trade war against the US. This conflict is also being seen as a “new cold war” as both groups are highly equipped with nuclear and mass destructive weapons. Hence, once again, it seems an ideological conflict i.e. US versus Them or Capitalism versus Communism. So far, the world may have escaped a confrontation of nuclear war, but an environmental and ecological apocalypse has been looming due to an excessive acceleration of consumerism and nuclear and chemical weapons. Taking into consideration the current mess, DeLillo’s prophetic arguments testify the fact that nuclear weapons, capitalism, consumerism, and disposable goods have been used as the key metaphors of America’s expansionism, war strategy and national policy.

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Dr. Mohammad Ahmad

Dr. Mohammad Ahmad is Assistant Professor of English at MGM PG College, Sambhal, Uttar Pradesh. His doctoral research was on Articulating the

Postmodernist American Experience through the Mise-en-Scene of Don DeLillo's Novels: A Study. He has co-authored a book entitled as *Fragrantica Ultimatus* for NET/JRF aspirants in English. His areas of interest include Cultural Studies, Translation Studies, Classical Islamic Texts, World Literature, Comparative Literature and postmodern literature.