



## Analyzing Ecological Abjection in Don DeLillo's *Underworld*

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### ABSTRACT

The present study explores the process of identity formation by underscoring ecocritical thematics in Don DeLillo's novel *Underworld*. Environment plays a vital role in the formation of modern self. The study contends that modern man finds the structure of his self on the ruthless exploitation of nature. Nature acts as the primal other. The subjugation of this primal other furnishes the modern man with rotten core upon which he develops his notion of selfhood. The novel calls for symbiotic rather than parasitic relationship between the man and nature. The malfunctioned relationship with nature puts the psyche of modern man in jeopardy. It appears that the space is the register of the self. Ultimately the research concludes that the ruthless exploitation of nature results in psychological phenomena of abjection as theorized by Julia Kristeva. In order to reach this conclusion, the study applies an alloy of theories honed from *Ecocriticism* by Greg Garrard and *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* by Julia Kristeva.

**Key Words:** Identity formation, Self, Ecocriticism, Nature, Subjugation, Capitalism

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## 1. Introduction

The study is aimed at analyzing *Underworld* by Don DeLillo by applying a blend of two theories Ecocriticism by Greg Garrard and Abjection by Julia Kristeva. This fine blend will help us to understand the inner and outer worlds of the characters who are seeking their identities. Ecological degradation is consequence of the parasitic relationship between humans and the nature which is outcome of abjection on the part of man.

Ecocriticism is a cry to safeguard nature in the age of industrialization and a mad race for nuclear weapons. Every stratum of the society should play their role to save the mother earth from devastation. It is the obligations of literary scholars to introduce this aspect of literary studies to make masses aware of the relationship between literature and environment. The novel is analyzed by applying the theory of Greg Garrard discussed in his book *Ecocriticism*.

Ecocriticism is the description of the outer world of the man. This study aims at describing the outer as well as the inner world of the man. It is very interesting to search for the borders created by man to save his self-hood. These are the borders of self. This aspect of psychoanalytic theory is discussed by applying the Abjection theory of Kristeva in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. In different dictionaries abjection is defined as 'Degraded, self-abasing, miserable, despicable and brought low'. Kristeva is of the view that, 'when we define ourselves by what we are not', it is called abjection. So, we can say that it is a kind of rejection.

It is very interesting to note that prima facie interaction with this phrase confuses the reader. There is a relationship between the exploitation of nature and formation of human agency. This study is aimed at analyzing the emergence of self through psychological degradation. Man is asserting his supremacy by destroying the nature. His self-gratification is achieved at the cost of ecological degradation. For example, in modern capitalistic world twenty-five persons are travelling in twenty-five vehicles, although they can travel in one vehicle but the individual vehicle is a symbol of status and self-strengthening in modern capitalistic world. But this self-gratification is achieved at the cost of environmental pollution because twenty-five vehicles are polluting the environment, so this emergence of the self of men is at the cost of the





degradation of the nature. We are tending towards post humanism and self-emergence is closely related to the ecological degradation. We human being are constructing self on wrong footings. We are living the age that has been mediated by human domination of the planet earth that is termed as Anthropocene. The environment of the planet has been changed by human intervention. The Solution of this problem is that the human agency formation should have a symbiotic rather than a parasitic relationship with the nature.

## 2. Review of Literature

Sandip Kumar Mishra's article is an attempt to explore Ruskin Bond's *The Cherry Tree* through the lens of ecocriticism. The basic purpose of this contemporary approach is to inculcate the environmental awareness among the masses. When we are talking about nature, we are concerned with human and non-human organisms. This concept is discussed under the trope of ecocriticism that is called deep ecology. *The Cherry Tree* tells us about a child who is getting the awareness about environment with his close contact to the nature.

A Study of *Wuthering Heights* from the Perspective of Eco-Criticism (2002) is an article to apply ecocritical theory on the famous novel of Bronte. In this research paper the author tried to see the famous novel of Bronte from the lens of ecocriticism. It is an attempt to explore the important relationship between man and nature. So, there is a connection between literature and environment. Ecological crisis is a serious threat to environment and life. So, in this paper the author explored the interpretation of the novel by considering the relationship between the characters and nature.

In an article with the title *The Subject: Kristeva and the Antigone* (1995), the researcher Clifford Davis explores Kristeva's theory of abjection on Antigone. In this article, the author has discussed the theory of abject by Kristeva in detail. Here, we see the use of hermeneutic technique for the famous work of Sophocles titled as *Antigone*. In her book, *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva has applied her theory of abjection on the ban Saga. While discussing *Oedipus Tyrannous*, he has demonstrated the reinforcement of Lacanian theory of psychoanalysis and provided an extension of the theory of Lacan's abjection. Kristeva is of the view that the king is the reason which is the representation of the abject Pharmakos is the symbol of purification. In





this article the author has tried to elucidate the conflict and a psychological tension in Antigone. That tension is between patriarchy and feminine other.

Samantha Pentony's essay How Kristeva's theory of abjection works in relation to the fairy tale and post-colonial novel: Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, and Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* (1996) is one of the best examples of the application of the abjection theory of Julia Kristeva. In this essay Pentony has made a unit by defining abjection and the abject. Lateritis explained how this very idea of abjection is developed from Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis. Later some of the examples of the abjection are quoted from the book *Powers of the Horror*.

In this article An Ecocritical Analysis of Young Adult Dystopian Novel in Veronica Rossi's *Under the Never Sky* (2017), the author Saadah has discussed the novel through the lens of ecocriticism by applying the ecocritical theory of Gregg Garrard. The attempt is to observe how nature is presented in the novel and how the main characters are interacting with the nature. Another perspective with which the novel is seen is Basu's famous perspective on literature of dystopia. Results have been obtained on the basis of the different tropes of ecocriticism discussed by Garrard. At the first step there is distinction between the country and to win which is explained in terms of pastoral. The second step is to explore the wilderness in the society of the novel. The third step is to describe the apocalypse in the novel by showing the extinction of the human beings.

### 3. Research Questions

1. How does nature figure in DeLillo's *Underworld*?
2. How do the dumps and nuclear waste contribute to the presentation of ecological agenda?
3. What role does the psychological phenomenon of abjection play in the identity-formation of DeLillo's characters?

### 4. Research Methodology

This research explores the identity formation of the characters emerged from the degradation of nature. Ecocriticism theory propounded by Greg Garrard has been used as main theory that highlights the importance of nature. This research illuminates the relationship between literature





and nature with the lens of ecocriticism. Psychoanalytic theory of Julia Kristeva is used with special emphasis on the concept of Abjection.

We should start our discussion about the subject from some basic definition by Glotfelty in his famous book *The Ecocriticism Reader (1996)*. According to her ecocriticism is the relationship between environment and literature. It is an approach to literary studies emphasizing the earth centeredness. Glotfelty raised many questions asked by the ecocritics like ‘How nature is presented in any piece of literature?’ ‘How the very idea of Wilderness is changed? And ‘How it is possible to relate the domains of literary studies and environment studies.

The concept of abjection is discussed in detail in Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. She got this idea from Lacan’s theory of psychoanalysis. According to Kristeva abjection is “The state of objecting of rejecting what is other to oneself- and thereby creating borders of an always tenuous ‘I’” (MacAfee, 2004, p.45). The Psychoanalytical theory of Kristeva with special emphasis on her concept of abjection would help the researcher to analyze the text and find the answer the questions set for this study.

## 5. Data Analysis

To start the discussion, it is very important to answer the question related to the working of the nature, it means how nature works in the novel because this question is of vital importance in ecocritical discourse. Nature figures in this novel *Underworld* in different ways. First, we discuss how the writer describes and paints the picture of nature in the novel.

The second way of the working nature is nature as a character, how nature plays active role in the novel. Sometimes it looks that nature is the protagonist in the novel and the other characters are just its agents. Capitalism is a sinister force. The way nature presented is actually the disfiguring of the nature. Where nature is discussed, it is defaced. And where there is no nature, it is in background. We can observe defacement and effacement of nature. Absence of nature is when we see dumps and when nature appears it in the form of landfills.

The job of Matt was related to the nuclear weapons, and he was not happy with that job. ‘He wasn’t made for this kind of work’. This job was against the very nature of Matt. It signifies that some of the things we are doing against the commands of our own nature are also against the





external nature. So, there is link between the internal and external nature of human beings. At another part at same moment in the novel there is a thought-provoking line, 'Whatever we're doing in secret, they're doing something worse'. We human beings have a speedy justice court in ourselves, most of the time there is a command from of inner self that we are not doing something good then certainly we should think about the credibility of the work.

One of the motherly qualities of the nature is that it guides the distracted human beings towards the right path. We can have this idea from the novel when Matt was unable to sleep in the bunker and he goes into the woods observe the setting of the sun while Janet was sleeping in the bunker. He enjoys the beauty of wilderness and observes that the sun is rising from the side which is behind him. So, in this way nature was guiding him that he was walking in the wrong side of the life. 'It meant that he'd been facing in the wrong direction all along'. It is a kind of prophesy of nature that is issued from the pen of DeLillo that whole the world is going in the wrong direction of consumerism and nuclear race. They are facing in the very dangerous direction. If they are going to keep heading towards this wrong direction, they are surely near the destruction.

'First we saw the garbage, then we saw the product'. Being a waste manager Nick Shay was fully aware of the horrors of the waste and he was able to foresee the dangerous consequences of the mad race of consumerism and waste. People were doing wrong to nature, and they were ready to face the music of what nature was going to do with them. In these lines Shay wants to tell people who were the slaves of consumerism that do not look just on the things which are available on stores but also so see what these things are going to do with the environment. It is criticism on the near sightedness of the people. 'But it turned out that forward didn't mean the future. It meant do it now'.

The visit of Brian to the landfills on the place known as Staten Island presents a gruesome picture of capitalism and consumption. Here nature is presented as subverted nature in the clutches of human beings. See the description, 'It was reddish brown, flat-topped, monumental, sunset burning in the heights'. At another moment, 'He imagined he was watching the construction of the great pyramids at Gaza'. This much presence waste is a proof of the fact that we people are buying the things to fulfil our day to day need but perhaps to satisfy our sense of





nihilism. It is the useless struggle of men to cover the empty space of their lives. The description of the landfills is eye opening and if humanity wants to survive, it must mend its ways to save our dearest planet.

According to Viktor, 'Waste is the devil twin. Because waste is the secret history, the under history'. Here we can find a relationship that is between the waste and weapons. In this discussion we can have the idea that how the mad race of weapons has deprived man of the thought of the byproducts which are closely attach to these weapons.

Viktor takes them to a place where we see the ugliest outcome of the death business of the consumer and cruel world. Here they see a room which was filled with the deformed fetuses. This was the small picture of the results of that devil game. This scene is really heart touching and horrible to see those deformed fetuses. The unchecked intervention of man in the running of natural process can be so disastrous but the consumer culture is blind to these harsh realities.

'From the first day I find that everything I see is garbage'. These are the words uttered by Big Sims who was working in the waste managing company from five years. These words describe the situation of the consumer society. In the same chapter Detwiler describes the same issue in more eye-opening way, 'the crater it layered that would accept thousands of tons of garbage day, your trash and mine for desert burial'. Look at the description of the thousands of tons of the waste per day and the burial of it to the wilderness. This is what we are giving to nature, and we should expect the same from the nature. The way the seasons are changed and the climate change in the world is outcome of these kind of acts in which we are changing this natural landscape into a wasteland.

Man is wandering in the wastes. Waste is like mountains, and it is the next form of nature. Eliot has presented the wasteland, but this novel describes the waste man. Life of a modern man is life of dumps. As we see the life of main two characters which are collection of ruins not more than that. Modern men are the inhabitants of dumps. Dumps are fragments, they are the shattering of reality. This the development of modern man. Skyscrapers are the dump yards actually. Novel is not about the man but the dumps. This the decentering of the humanity and decentering of nature. Centre is dumps. Humanity as at addendum.





The waste dumps contribute to the furtherance of ecological agenda. Let us take the example of Nick Shay when he is sharing his experience of visiting a plant that is treating the garbage. It is handling garbage in millions of tons. This much garbage and its processing are a question mark on the advancement and development slogans of modern world. According to Nick Shay, 'Why do bad smell seem to tell us something about ourselves'. Our senses are natural, and they never go against the rules of the nature. Here the sense of the smell is guiding the ignorant man that he is playing with the fire and destroying his parental planet just for the sake of little advantages. He is doing a very bad bargain and destroying himself. The smell of the garbage is a kind of alarm to warn us that something bad is going to happen to all of us due to our blunders.

It is the alarming situation of a society when the people become so selfish that they want to sacrifice the other people and the environment for the sake of their personal interests. Take the example of Janet when she was talking to Matthew about his job, 'I want to be safe, Matthew'. She was persuading her husband to carry on the job what he hated the most. It was job related to the nuclear fallout. Janet is a typical example of the selfish society which is sacrificing the lives of so many people for the sake of their safety. On broader level the same view is parented by the eccritics that they see capitalists as the selfish people who are exploiting the labor as well as the nature for their personal gains. This selfishness on the few people of the society is the omen for the disaster and destruction of whole the world.

The discussion between Klara and Nick where she wants to point towards the nostalgia that the people of America were feeling in the days of cold war for the period of peace and prosperity. 'The past brings out our patriotism you know? We want to feel an allegiance'. This line also indicates that in the past the people were close to nature, and they were owning the mother earth and feeling a strong sense of love to this planet. They were there as loyal children of the mother earth in the past. The modern race of materialism and consumerism has made this world as modern wasteland. Consumerism has demolished the pretty face of the earth and its inhabitants. People in the past were loving their countries and nature but now how can they be loyal to the waste dumps. It also points towards the peaceful past life of American people.

'When JFK was shot, people went inside. But when Thomson hit the homer, people rushed outside'. Latest technology is creating borders between people. We are feeling that virtually we





are connected to so many people but, we are getting alone and alone with the time. It was a time when there was radio and people rushed outside to share the news but with the change of time and invention of T.V. people started talking to their friends and relatives on cell phones while sitting in their rooms. This statement of Brian Grassic is also criticism on the advocates of consumerism and materialism of modern age.

There is a relationship between the exploitation of nature and formation of human agency. This study is aimed at analyzing the emergence of self through psychological degradation. Man is asserting his supremacy by destroying nature. His self-gratification is achieved at the cost of ecological degradation. For example, in modern capitalistic world twenty-five persons are travelling in twenty-five vehicles, although they can travel in one vehicle, but the individual vehicle is a symbol of status and self-strengthening in modern capitalistic world. But this self-gratification is achieved at the cost of environmental pollution because twenty-five vehicles are polluting the environment, so this emergence of the self of men is at the cost of the degradation of the nature.

Matt said, 'You crush your opponent. It's not a question of win or lose. You crush him. You annihilate him. You strip him of dignity, manhood, womanhood, you destroy him, you expose him publicly as inferior being'. Matt was talking about the game of chess and the behavior of the opponents. He was also pointing towards the mentality of the people in cold war. It also resembles Kristeva's concept of abjection. The game of chess or the baseball or the cold war, and also the behavior of people in real life is same. They are creating the boundaries of 'Us and They'. They are in the fear of collapsing. So, they always think to crush their enemies and try to destroy them. People always try to expose others publicly to prove themselves pure. It means in this competition of the life every one wants to crush others to save themselves.

According to Detwiler, 'Bring garbage into the open. Let people see it and respect it. Get to know your garbage'. These are beautiful lines of Detwiler on the commoditization of the trash. It is a kind of wake-up call to the sleeping community who are so ignorant of the disease of consumerism that they are ready to visit the garbage in the place of some natural resort. This is the way to degrade nature and upgrade the sinister forces working for the disaster and apocalypse. This is abjection that modern people of American society are forming their new





identities out of the waste. They are loyal to the waste that they are respecting the waste and they are disloyal to nature and disrespecting it. So, the modern man wants to upgrade himself by downgrading the nature.

The question of identity is the main concern of the many characters in the novel. We can take the example of Matt. How he was continuing his aimless struggle for his identity. His job was against the real identity of him, and he was feeling a kind of abjection towards it. This job was actually acting as an abject. He was negating his relationship with the job but at the same time it was the part and parcel of his identity. See the conflict in the personality of this character who was called Matt, as a child when he was playing chess, he was not in then favor of destroying his opponents even, 'It is not enough to hate your enemy. You have to understand how the two of you bring each other to deep completion'.

## 6. Conclusion

Nature plays an active role in the course of the novel *Underworld* by Don DeLillo. It is acting as a protagonist but a tragic protagonist. We can see capitalism as a sinister force in the activity of whole the novel. Disfiguring of nature can be seen at every event of the novel. We can see the horrible sights of the waste dumps, mountains of garbage, landfills absorbing hundreds of tons of waste per day, the presence of military in the desert and the wandering of a mysterious ship on the ports of different countries.

In all the activity of the novel we see humans are degrading nature to assert their self and for the sake of identity formation. Camping trip of Matt Shay, the subversion of nature in Kazakhstan and the room full of the deformed fetuses unveiled by Viktor are the proofs that how we are playing havoc with the nature. Nick's view about the situation in Jersey that the chemical is eating at the houses of the people is an eye-opening event in the novel. Not only the natural landscape but the animals are facing destruction due to the monopoly of greedy human beings on the planet. The description of the ribs of the dog are the point to ponder for us that how we are maltreating the animals. The rule of the machines and nuclear weapons can be observed in all the events of the novel, even the very stadium of sports is not saved from the news of atom bombs and war. The natural human relations are also disturbed by the unnatural deeds of characters.





To sum up the discussion in a concluding way we can say with confidence that if we do not care ecology then the world will be changed into waste dumps. The ecological agenda is presented in the novel by various types of the waste. First type of the waste is in the form of wrappers. The second form of the waste is the junk of waste eatables. The third type of the waste is the waste of military machines. The fourth type of the waste is nuclear waste that is the most dangerous form of waste. The fifth type of the waste is waste lives of the characters. All the types of the waste are destroying nature and its inhabitants. Modern selfish humanity wants to place nature at margin by placing itself in the center, but the waste of humanity has decentered the man from the center. Now humanity is at addendum waste is at the center of the world.

The whole discussion in this study have proved that there is a relationship between the exploitation of nature and formation of human agency. The researcher is successful in analyzing that the emergence of self is achieved by characters through psychological degradation. Characters in the novel assert their supremacy by destroying nature. Their self-gratification is achieved at the cost of ecological degradation. All the characters are tending towards posthumanism, and their self-emergence is closely related to the ecological degradation. They are constructing self on wrong footings. They are living in the age that has been mediated by human domination of the planet earth that is termed as Anthropocene. The environment of the planet has been changed by human intervention. The solution of this problem is that the human agency formation should have a symbiotic rather than a parasitic relationship with the nature.

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