Existentialism In The Novels Of Don DeLillo

The novels of Don DeLillo contains major core existential thematic aspects such as fear of death, alienation, authenticity, creating essence to existence, urge for Power and to become Superman. The main protagonists David Bell, Gary Harkness, Keith, Oswald and Jack Gladney can be proved as Existential Heroes within the content of these major core aspects of existential philosophy.

According to Heidegger, the interpretations of death are two kinds. The objective perception of death is to become conscious of the fact that death is real and nobody lives forever. The subjective view of death means that every single day of the life, people realise that death can occur at any moment and there is no reason to live for another day. Some characters of DeLillo live in a subjective perception of death. They are preoccupied with anxiety of death and DeLillo has made Gladney and Keith concept of death as central to their behaviour in the novels.

Gladney and Keith preoccupation with death means that they always think about death. They relate their reality and situations to the concept of death. For Keith, all human interactions after 9/11 attack are interrelated with death. Similarly Jack Gladney has the same perspective and all his family relations all interrelated with death. Both the character's narrative can be linked with death, which ultimately leads them to search for self. In the journey of searching the self, Keith comes under Sartre's concept of Existentialism who tries to create essence for his existence. He recalls the pre 9/11 attack incidents and tries to overcome the fear of death. Jack Gladney on the other hand, follows Nietzsche's concept of Existentialism. He thinks himself as superior in the beginning of the novel. To survive in the disoriented society, Gladney creates a false identity which is authoritative with Power and in Nietzsche's term it is known as 'Superman'. The false identity he creates does not protect him from the exposure of airborne toxic effect. Instead it invades death. He becomes the sum total of data who are affected by the effect. At the end of the novel Jack understands the reality of life. Gladney's transfiguration from the false identity to the reality of life is the key existential concept in his search for the self.

The characters constant fear of death, boredom, alienation, dissatisfaction, meaninglessness and their recurring search for the self are due to their loss of survival in American society. DeLillo characters preference for 'Becoming' over 'Being' is clear when David call off profession and choose to film his autobiography; when Gary quit football after several attempts and decides to read books on nuclear warfare; when Keith stops to worry about the 9/11 attack incident and start to accept the reality; when Oswald forget his past unhappy memories and assassinates John. F. Kennedy to attain Power; when Gladney removes his false identity and overcome the fear of death by understanding the reality.

The characters status as an existentialist requires additional concepts like alienation and authenticity. Alienation is a concept which has been extensively analysed in the existential fiction. It puts an alien individual juxtaposed between life and death. The characters of DeLillo feel alien in several occasions. David Bell feels alien in his work place. Gary suffers alienation in his football practice. Keith accepts alienation in the phase of post 9/11 attack. Oswald admits alienation from his childhood until his plan to assassinate John. F. Kennedy. Gladney feels alienated after the exposure of the airborne toxic effect. The characters who feel alienated from

their society moves out of the condition and starts their journey from nothingness to meaningfulness in their search for identity.

Another important cause for the characters search for self may be in the social and historical context of the time. This is evident in the characters of DeLillo. Characters like David, Gary, Keith, Lianne, Oswald and Gladney live in the materialistic comfort of American society. They lack family relationship. It is destroyed by materialism. Bell's longing for his relationship with mother after her death; Gary's longing to seek comfort after his failures in life; Keith and Lianne's struggle to attain existence in the post 9/11 attack; Oswald's despair brought up by his mother in childhood; and Gladney's materialistic relationship with his family lead to search for self. These characters overcome all the struggles and attain their identity.

The Existential concept of Authenticity developed by Heidegger and Sartre also be traced in DeLillo novels. The characters of DeLillo exhibits frustration and aggravation against certain kind of materialistic ideas such as suppression, moral corruption, hypocrisy and indifference. As pointed out by Richard Gill and Ernest Sherman, "an authentic individual constantly strives to attain self-awareness, rather than keeping to safe and customary paths inherently alien to him, chooses to realize his own true self" (20). The concept of authenticity is defined by Sartre as, "the courage whereby man consents to bear the burdens of freedom" (Scott 177). DeLillo characters reject all the directive norms of the disoriented society. Thus choice is not influenced by what other people think about them, but what truly they want to be. They enjoy freedom as an authentic being. David Bell and Gary face the hypocrisy in their profession. Similarly Oswald faces indifference, suppression and hypocrisy in his life. Jack Gladney is a part of hypocrisy and indifference based on his though process about the people of Blacksmith. Due to the struggle, these characters leave their mundane existence and try to attain the authentic being.

The characters of DeLillo never stop an attempt to define themselves in society. Each time the characters fail, they try again to attain the identity. They are Existential Heroes because they make their own choice; they keep on trying even though their choice fails and they refuse to compromise. The characters of DeLillo are changing from a suppressed individual to an Existential individual. Their preoccupation with fear of death, boredom, dissatisfaction, alienation and meaninglessness are in concord with existential themes, examined by Sartre and Nietzsche. Their behavioural change moves them gradually to a state of freedom and identified individual. The characters are Existential Heroes because they want to give meaning to their Existence and in the pursuit of doing so; they view themselves and attain self- discovery and self- awareness.

Existentialism as a school of thought believes in the absence of God and a total lack of meaning in human action. Existentialists put forth the truth that no inherent morals or values exist in the world; rather they believe in the freedom of choice and shouldering the responsibility of decision. They think that with the freedom of choice man can assert meaning or no meaning in his life. Nihilism, as a school of philosophy takes existentialism a step further and exhibits the bleaker view of the world. Both of these schools simultaneously deny the existence of any inherent meaning or value in the world. At the conclusion, by analysing the five American novels in the light of Existential aspects, it is obvious that all the five novels are Existential novels. Americana exposes the freedom of choice and the struggle of David Bell. End zone deals with Existential aspects such as alienation, dread and meaninglessness of human. Falling Man protagonist is a confused character who thinks seriously about his Existence after the survival of 9/11 attack. Libra demonstrates the struggle of a suppressed individual who waits for fame in

the society. White Noise explores an authoritative individual who tries to overcome the fear of death and false identity. After scrutinizing the select novels it become clear that the protagonists of all the five novels are deeply concerned with their own identity in the society. Their struggle to know ‘who I am’, ‘what is the meaning of life’, ‘the Will to Power’ are the prime motto of Existentialism. In this sense all the five novels are Existential novels and are mainly concerned with Human Existence.