



**Digital Alienation and Identity in "Don DeLillo's White Noise" and Contemporary Arabic Fiction**

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**ABSTRACT**

. This paper discusses digital disconnection and the search for identity by comparing Don DeLillo's White Noise, published in 1985 with some Arabic novels that were published after 2000. DeLillo's novel is one of the most important works of postmodernism as it presents a reality that has been overtly saturated by media abundance and technological revolution where human experience becomes commodified. Contemporary Arabic literature, Iraqi, and Arab fiction after 2000 spoke about similar issues in different sociopolitical contexts. Works like Frankenstein in Baghdad by Ahmed Saadawi show the reader how technology and media can be associated with violence, memories, and feelings of alienation that take place within a postwar environment. By contrast, these narratives bring out similarities and differences in the representation of identity in technologically influenced societies. The paper thus becomes a study of how American and Arabic writers respond to the same questions: In what ways does technology reshape self-identity? Which media narratives replace individual memory and identity? The comparative framework demonstrates that despite coming from different backgrounds, both literary traditions engage with the same universal problem – technological intervention in human identity – thus foregrounding the way comparative literature maps cross-cultural modes of estrangement even as it registers cultural specificity.

**Keywords:** digital alienation, identity, Arabic novel, comparative literature, media culture.



الاغتراب الرقمي والهوية في رواية دون ديليلو الضوضاء البيضاء والسرد العربي المعاصر  
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الملخص

يتناول هذا البحث موضوع الاغتراب الرقمي والبحث عن الهوية بقراءة مقارنة بين رواية دون ديللو "الضوضاء البيضاء" التي نُشرت عام 1985 مع بعض الروايات العربية التي نُشرت بعد عام 2000. وتعد رواية ديللو واحدة من أهم أعمال ما بعد الحداثة، إذ تقدم واقعاً مشتبهاً بشكل مفرط بالوسائط والتكنولوجيا، إذ تصبح التجربة الإنسانية سلعة قابلة للتداول. وقد تناول الأدب العربي المعاصر، والرواية العراقية والعربية بعد عام 2000 قضايا مشابهة ولكن ضمن سياقات اجتماعية وسياسية مختلفة. توضح أعمال مثل "فرانكشتاين في بغداد" لأحمد سعداوي للقارئ كيف يمكن أن ترتبط التكنولوجيا والإعلام بالعنف والذكريات ومشاعر الاغتراب ضمن بيئة ما بعد الحرب. وفي المقابل، تُظهر هذه الروايات أوجه الشبه والاختلاف في تمثيل الهوية في المجتمعات المتأثرة بالتكنولوجيا. وبذلك تصبح الورقة دراسة لكيفية استجابة الكتاب الأمريكيين والعرب لنفس التساؤلات: ما هي الطرق التي تعيد بها التكنولوجيا تشكيل الهوية الذاتية؟ وأي السرديات الإعلامية تحل محل الذاكرة الفردية والهوية؟ يبين الإطار المقارن أنه على الرغم من اختلاف الخلفيات، فإن كلا النوعين الأدبيين يتناولان نفس المشكلة العالمية – التدخل التكنولوجي في الهوية الإنسانية – مما يسلط الضوء على الطريقة التي يرسم بها الأدب المقارن أنماط الاغتراب عبر الثقافات مع مراعاة الخصوصية الثقافية.

الاغتراب الرقمي، الهوية، الرواية العربية، الأدب المقارن، ثقافة الإعلام.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

## Introduction

"Literature has always served as a powerful instrument for analysing and reflecting societal realities, power structures, and human experiences. Through narrative fiction, authors construct worlds that, while imaginary, often mirror and critique the societal processes and injustices present." ( Duaa Hafidh Hussein, 2025, p.1791 ) In a world increasingly defined by digital technology and mediated communication, identity, authenticity, and alienation have assumed central places not only in personal consciousness but in literary expression. The contemporary self, once grounded on firm social and cultural foundations, finds itself being constantly renegotiated within the scope of a perpetually expanding matrix of images, information, and technology contacts. Literature has tended to answer back continuously to its own temporal changes in the nature of human experience. Perhaps one of the most intelligent and prophetic works that could come about such fears is Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985). Set within a consumer society dazzled by television and by other media spectated onto it as the real condition for understanding postmodern alienation "that is, the loss of coherent self amidst never-ending assaults from the realms of reality that are mediated" (DeLillo, 1985, p. 64). Though DeLillo's narrative fixes very steadily in the American experience of the late twentieth century, thematic concerns reverberate across the globe—particularly with modern Arabic literature that engages similar questions within different historical and cultural contexts.

"The digital age has confused the lines of "real and the imagined, private and the social and difference and similarity." (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 12). For DeLillo, "the postmodern condition is one of abundance (white noise)—the title serves as a metaphor for the relentless stream of information that shapes

consciousness and perception." (DeLillo, 1985, p. 87). Jack Gladney, the novel's protagonist represents an atomized self whose identity is constructed out of technology, language, and anxiety about death. This attempt to find meaning in a world of consumerism and media spectacle speaks to a general identity crisis in postindustrial society. As DeLillo frames these issues, technology makes people even more alienated from real experience while at the same time redefining reality through simulation and representation (Baudrillard, 1994, p.6).

A parallel tendency marks the Arabic novel of the post-2000 era wherein writers have substantially engaged with the cultural and psychological consequences of globalization, strife, and technological transformation. The year 2000 in Arab literature is consistent with unprecedented social agitation: "wars' aftermaths, satellite television's emergence, the spread of the internet; also social media as both collective and separative tool." (Hassan, 2019, p. 22). Writers here turned attention to digital and mediated elements of contemporary existence which went elsewhere routes through which alienation could be explored or identity probed. Texts such as Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013) reconsider "the human body and identity within frames of technical reconstruction and media fixation." (Saadawi, 2013, p. 44), while Iraqi, Egyptian Lebanese Gulf narratives dwell on "the bewildering effects brought about by virtual realms oversight commodification of memory" (Al-Musawi, 2016, p. 57). This shows how the Arab person, like DeLillo's main characters, fights with "the doubt of meaning in a period when technology keeps and destroys human life at once" (Hassan, 2019, p. 25).

Reading *White Noise* with modern Arabic fiction opens a cross-cultural study of the meeting points between technology, identity, and alienation in the course of treating these themes by literature. DeLillo's narrative springs from postmodern, capitalist America urging consumption and simulation while Arabic writers often set their critique within a postcolonial and postwar condition framed by displacement, censorship, and swift modernization.

This comparative approach underlines the international character of digital estrangement as a phenomenon that knows neither territorial nor linguistic boundaries (Appadurai, 1996, p. 33). Technological advances in recent times have led to (novel forms of dependency), changing both the individual self-perception and societal ways of forming "collective memory and historical consciousness." (Assmann, 2011, p. 56). In the Western and Arab contexts alike, media is a powerful instrument of normalization; it is images and narratives that here come into play in defining what is to be seen, desired, and valued.

This study will discuss how *White Noise* and selected Arabic novels deal with media culture, identity, and narrative structure making a good bridge to emphasize how literature from different traditions

forms a common global conversation on the human costs of technical development (Jameson, 1991, p. 63).

## **2.Literature Review**

The concept of digital alienation has emerged as one of the most pressing concerns in the reading of postmodern and modern texts. By the late twentieth century, writers such as Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, and Guy Debord had articulated a growing feeling that modern individuals lived within mediating systems that distort reality and fragment identity. In Baudrillard's theory of simulation, "it is through technology that mediation takes over experience to represent something more real than reality itself; thus, "the real" cannot be found outside networks of signs." (Baudrillard 1994). Rather, according to Debord's analysis of "the society of the spectacle," contemporary life comes to be understood as a perpetual performance of images who replace actual experience (Debord, 1994, p.12). Jameson relates these to the cultural logic of late capitalism, arguing that "postmodern art and literature reveal a shallowness of history and personal realness at the level of technological saturation." (Jameson, 1991, p. 54). Thus, these basic theories serve as tools for reading *White Noise* as an attack on the postmodern condition.

Media control and existential alienation are the common metaphors which *White Noise* is read against in DeLillo studies. As pointed out by Cowart (2002) and Duvall (2008), Don DeLillo employs irony and parody to expose how ridiculous a society can be with its obsession over consumable products, television programs, and scientific mastery. As noted by Cowart, "media slogans, brand names, and broadcast disasters, that are so abundantly referred to within the pages of the novel serve as evidence of what he sees as an invasion of private selfhood by public discourse." (Cowart, 2002, p.112). As described by Duvall, "*White Noise* does mediate the transformation of death from an individual event into a media event." (Duvall, 2008, p. 47). The novel mediates fear, death, and communication that therefore reveals understanding as something that leads not to communication but rather creates alienation.

It has also been said that DeLillo's writings anticipate the major issues of identity in the digital world of the twenty-first century. DeLillo's texts seem to predict, at first, a "networked consciousness" as described by Boxall (2013), "where screens and information networks mediate subjective experience." (Boxall, 2013, p. 78). The white noise that fills his novel becomes an anticipation for the constant flow of information and notifications today. Thus, DeLillo's novel works not only as a work of postmodern critique but also as a piece of prophecy about contemporary conditions that are governed by social networks, surveillance, and digital distraction (Johnston, 2016, p.35).

Within the Arab literary domain, the intersection of technology, identity, and alienation has taken a separate though parallel route. Globalization, political upheaval, and rapid growth in digital communication technologies are factors noted as influencing Modern Arabic literature in the post-

2000 era. As Hassan observes, "By representing increasingly the digital subject as fragmented, displaced, and agonized by mediated experience, contemporary Arab writers have come to terms with new realities." (Hassan, 2019, p. 28). The opening up of satellite channels and internet services since the 1990s introduced new forms of visibility and control inside both individual and collective self-imaginings was happening technologically while wars were fighting occupation was occurring revolutions were being intensified apprehension was being lost.

Frankenstein in Baghdad by Ahmed Saadawi (2013) retells the myth of Mary Shelley with a particularly immediate twist set in postwar Iraq. A grotesque creature formed out of body parts left over after bombing victims comes alive through the rage and confusion of a community that has been destroyed by violence. The novel channels its creature via media reports and street gossip, demonstrating how trauma is transformed into spectacle as argued by Al-Musawi "Media technologies transform the ways contemporary Arab societies experience death-remembering-moral responsibility" (Al-Musawi, 2016, p. 61).

Outside Iraq, various other Arab writers like Rabee Jaber also explored similar notions of technologic alienation and mangled identity. The Queue depicts a totalitarian government that speaks only through bureaucratic channels and prerecorded messages in an endless queue on which people sit waiting for permits that never arrive "the dehumanizing rationale of technological bureaucracy." (Abdel Aziz, 2016, p. 39). Basma Abdel Aziz's digital control systems reproduce the social hierarchies they apply to keep individuality suppressed. Meanwhile, Mohammad Rabie's Otared imagines "dystopian Cairo watched over by unseen monitors as technology serves both as a means of repression and as an existential source of anguish." (Rabie, 2014, p. 75). It is through works such as these—technically DeLillo's too—that explore the erosion of self within the interlocking dynamics of media manipulation, political deceit, and ethical confusion.

Recent comparative studies between Western and Arabic literatures are beginning to use these parallel experiences of alienation as entry points. Al-Rawi (2021) and El-Ariss (2018) have taken the position that the Arab post-digital condition converges with Western postmodern concerns while it is articulated through specific histories of colonialism and conflict. El-Ariss observes "how digital metaphors are productively deployed by contemporary Arab writers to describe this problematic exposure-invisibility, communication-isolation tension." (El-Ariss, 2018, p.52). This recapitulates what Jameson identified as "the waning of affect» or individual depth in the postmodern subject." (Jameson 1991, p. 60), suggesting that the technological self is a global phenomenon inflected by political economies.

Media are forces of unity and alienation in DeLillo's White Noise as much as they are in contemporary Arabic fiction. Screens and networks perpetually sustain a new mode of conscious life



The study is based on multiple interlocking theoretical perspectives. Primarily, it draws on postmodern theory, particularly Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulation whereby "images and representations replace the real and come to a state of hyperreality." (Baudrillard, 1994, p.37). The framework helps understand the environment of *White Noise*. Secondly, it draws from Fredric Jameson's theorization of postmodernism in cultural and economic terms by relating electronic alienation to the logic of late capitalism as well as its effects on identity and temporality. Postcolonial and globalization theories therefore make up the third analytical perspective in reading, or rather understanding, the Arabic context. It is through Homi Bhabha that hybridity first forms our analytical tools while Arjun Appadurai brings in dimensions of ethnoscapas and mediascapas through which we can perhaps begin to understand means by which Arab writers articulate identity in a world so heavily marked by international media and mobility (Bhabha, 1994, p.114).

#### **4. Analysis and Discussion**

##### **4.1. Technology and Media Noise**

In *White Noise*, technology does not surface as artifacts of development but as a pervasive force reconfiguring the surface levels of human consciousness. DeLillo situates his narrative in an environment saturated by the media, with a population living in a perpetual flux of electronic communications. The setting for Jack Gladney is "soaked in television, radio, and information streams that merge into a steady hum" (DeLillo, 1985, p. I'm sorry, but there doesn't seem to be any text provided for me to paraphrase. Could you please provide the content you would like me to rephrase? This "white noise" becomes symbolic of postmodern alienation—the constant intrusions of mediated imagery that mask real human experience. As Baudrillard notes on simulacra and simulation: "the real is transmuted; it is now what can be reproduced" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. It seems that you haven't provided any text to paraphrase. DeLillo's narrative anticipates this conceptualization by demonstrating the replacement of reality with its television version: "For most people, there are just two places in the world. Where they live and their television." (DeLillo, 1985, p. 60).

A technological landscape also mediates the worlds presented in contemporary Arabic literature. In *The Queue*, Basma Abdel Aziz sets forth the managerial city of an unnamed Middle Eastern setting where government bureaucracy and manipulation through the media solidify into a framework for total surveillance. Gate, a vague yet powerful entity akin to DeLillo's invisible hand of media dynamics in our world—here wielding its power through televised announcements only, does not involve opening or interacting with people directly. Citizens must wait for an opening; described viewing them sitting before television sets and loudspeakers—waiting for a reality founded on political propaganda. "The Gate's voice was omnipresent, but no one had ever laid eyes on it." "It commanded, and the city complied" (Abdel Aziz, 2016, p. 27). Castells describes this as writing that

in networked societies power is exercised "by managing the flows of communication rather than by means of physical force." (Castells, 2010, p. 29). Both DeLillo and Abdel Aziz have significant illustrations of how technologically mediated behavior turns humans into programmed conformists.

Saadawi puts technology in a setting of strife and pain. The press shows how acts of harm set a new world that numbs moral responses. "People saw blasts on TV before they heard them outside." (Saadawi, 2013, p. 56). Like DeLillo's televised store and news images, Saadawi's media scene makes fear into a show. Both writers say that the plenty of mediated pictures lessens feeling and builds a shared lack of care. This pulling away is thus not just technological but also a matter of morals—a situation where reality is felt as simple amusement.

#### 4.2. Death, Alienation, and the Fear of Erasure

Death is the main fixation in *White Noise*, and its representation shows how technology masks and reveals the existential angst. Jack Gladney demonstrates that media does not successfully assuage his anxiety; "The noise is too deep. We can't hear ourselves think." (DeLillo, 1985, p. 71). Consumption and diversion create a "white noise" that fundamentally serve as an evasion of death. Indeed, Jameson argues that contemporary individuals live "in a perpetual present... of no depth in which death and history alike are equally abolished." (Jameson, 1991, p. 20). DeLillo's supermarket satire evokes just this condition whereby product presence displaces the anxiety of death: "There were doors at the supermarket. I felt a sense of having been saved for one more day." (DeLillo, 1985, p. 37).

Mortality refusal is also there in Arabic dystopian literature though through tales of violence and mourning. Mohamed Rabie introduces a future-oriented Cairo in his novel *Otared* where digital surveillance and gun rule make people numb and emotionless. "We do not die anymore; we disappear within the system" (Rabie, 2014, p. 102). Therefore, it is not death that is denied but rather transformed—datafied. The fear associated with corporeal demise becomes an anxiety about symbolic erasure, obliteration from communal memory. Similarly, Saadawi's creation of the "Whatsitsname"—a creature made up of human body parts out of Frankenstein in Baghdad turns death into weird technologic resuscitation. "He was many deaths but he did not know yet who he was." (Saadawi, 2013, p. 83). The dismembered self of the monster reflects a society looking for meaning amidst chaos and technologically assisted violence.

The difference between DeLillo's America and Saadawi's Baghdad lies in the context, not the essence. In both places, it is through cultural rituals that technologies are used to deny or manage death, but misery breaks the denial in Baghdad; however, here actual desolation precipitates it. Baudrillard wrote, "when reality becomes an event too great to grasp, it does become simulation." (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 17). This is thus a city of hyperreality because the media reports on violence rather than actually experiencing pain. Data is what the person has become; mourning cannot be achieved.



In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, memory is also broken up by digital reporting and political lies. "People remembered the bombing in different ways based on the channel they watched" (Saadawi, 2013, p. 122). Memory is formed by media link rather than by real life. In *Otared*, memory is wiped on purpose: "Our records are updated every day to forget what happened yesterday" (Rabie, 2014, p. 118). Rabie's dystopia takes in the symbolic loss of historical insight that DeLillo's America goes through. Both worlds are hit by the lack of memory, a mark of what Baudrillard calls 'the vanishing of the real.'

The combination of these narratives proves that digital alienation transcends spatial boundaries. In DeLillo's suburban America and Rabie's Cairo of the future, people come to terms with a world in which technology is not only about perception but also the basic elements of history itself. This global condition takes on different looks: in the Arab world, digital detachment comes together with political repression and trauma; in DeLillo's America, it is a function of consumerism and emptiness. What does happen is a fall in human subjectivity amidst media culture dominance.

## 5. Conclusion

A comparison between Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and contemporary Arabic novels—Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013), Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* (2016), and Mohammed Rabie's *Otared* (2014)—reveals a shared literary consciousness shaped by the prevailing forces of technology, media, and postmodern fragmentation. In these works, alienation is both a private and public experience exacerbated by the onslaught of electronic and technological systems that now dominate perception, selfhood, and recollection. Despite all the cultural, historical, and linguistic distances that separate DeLillo's America from the Arab world of the post-2000s, the two traditions seem to articulate an analogous anxiety over the dehumanizing effects of modern communication on real identity lost.

Technological forces act all-pervasive and unperceived, their power rooted in the regular, mundane. The reality of Jack Gladney's world is plausible within "the waves and radiation," that define his environment (DeLillo, 1985, p. 36). It is within the white noise of television and radio that those who inhabit this house pursue meaningless rites — a background hum offering comfort while it deadens pain. This level of technological invasion builds a status unauthentic to reality—meaning transmitted on screens and in signs promoting products for sale. The question mark here does not signify the query but rather emphasis that the real does not exist. Jack's fear of death — his most human emotion — is heightened by his great participation in such systems, so much that he cannot tell the real emotions from their commodified representation.

In Saadawi's narrative, technology becomes at once the watcher and doer of control over violence. The creature admits, "I am made up of other people's sorrows." (Saadawi, 2013, p. 125). He stands for

collective trauma in a society whose coherence has been destroyed- this reflects DeLillo's intuition that the postmodern subject is constructed more through outside images and systems than from within by some organic continuity. To put it another way, what comes out strongly from both novels is that technological mediation of death-disaster on TV or war footage-turns human suffering into a spectacle: it puts distance between oneself and feeling empathy or having any kind of moral understanding.

In an extension of this critique, Abdel Aziz's *The Queue* explores how technological domination is bureaucratic and authoritarian. There is an invisible entity known as the "Gate" that controls social life with a perpetual state of digital surveillance and imposition of requirements, hence illustrating the absence of individual will. People sit in interminable queues before her faceless presence seeking permissions that never materialize. That situation brings to mind Foucault's idea of the panopticon where visibility serves as a means of control — yet in this case it is heightened by the obscurity of digital authority. The appeal of the citizens to the Gate reveals how DeLillo's characters tend to yield to the white noise of consumer media, that is, they work within structures which shape and mold identity and action through imperceptible but pervasive influence.

In Rabie's *Otared*, digital alienation finds its roots in dystopian violence and the decay of the city. The protagonist is a vigilante marksman crawling through corruption and supervision in Cairo. In this narrative, technology does not function as an element of emancipation but rather division and suspicion. This loss of identity speaks very explicitly to Jack Gladney's existential angst in *White Noise* where individuality is always lost within perpetual external interferences. Both characters are quests for meaning in domains where human consciousness has been superseded by systems of information and power.

The potential implications of these resemblances are vast. Jameson reads postmodernism as a condition quite accurately represented in both American and Arabic settings—DeLillo pins it on consumer capitalism while Arab novelists reinterpret it via postcolonial and war-torn conditions. The result is fused literary conversation that mixes global postmodern angst with local stories of loss, occupation, and dispossession. The interplay of *White Noise* with these Arabic texts underscores a global condition of electronic estrangement. Yet both must confront the same ontological predicament, the problem of sustaining identity in a world where reality has become mediated and untrustworthy.

The study thus reveals that both literary traditions, emerging from rather opposing contexts, articulate supplementing vantage points of postmodern life. If "white noise" invades DeLillo's America and the "queue" dominates Abdel Aziz's dystopia — then they are not different but equal states in which technologic mediations replace real human life, this comparison establishes literature as a primary field for the discovery of the effects of digital modernity on humanity. Tracking cross-cultural patterns

of alienation and identity, this research validates that the quest for selfhood in the age of digitization is not a Western or Eastern issue but is rather a global one — a mutual literary contemplation of what it means to remain human in an ever-mechanized, mediated world.

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