

The Mysterious Mind of Uncertainty and Uncovered Secrets in Don DeLillo's *The Names*: A Complex Study

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Abstract: This study investigates Don DeLillo's *The Names* is a postmodern crime and detective novel that explores the subjects as mystery, fear, and suspense. James Axton is a narrator of the novel, who is a freelance writer and later becomes an associate director of risk analysis in the Middle East. Through Axton's perspective, the novel examines the connections between language, secrecy, and the unknown. Central to the plot is Axton's growing involvement with cult murders, which reflect broader anxieties about terrorism, death, and obscurity. Another key character, Frank Volterra, a film director, also investigates the cult with the intention of making a film about it. DeLillo uses recurring motifs but also challenges traditional storytelling through metanarrative and skepticism. *The Names* highlights the uncertainty within American intelligence and portrays terrorism not only as political violence but also as a form of cultural and linguistic enigma. The novel expands the discourse on terrorism while remaining one of DeLillo's most complex works.

Key words: Mysterious, Cult Murder, Central Intelligence Agency, Fear of Death, Uncovered Secrets.

1. INTRODUCTION

Donald Richard DeLillo is an American novelist, essayist, playwright, and short story writer. He was a broadcaster on the radio before he started his writing. He is widely recognized as one of the leading postmodern writers in contemporary American fiction. Often described as the father of postmodern "photogenic terror," DeLillo's works explore themes of violence, media, and cultural anxieties. Critic Harold Bloom places him alongside Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth, and Cormac McCarthy as one of the four major American novelists of his time. Don DeLillo's *The Names* published in 1982, which reflects the discourse of terrorism and cult murders within and beyond American borders. The title itself emphasizes the power of language, as the novel portrays a murder cult that matches the names of its victims with the names of the places where the killings occur. Through this, DeLillo underscores the tension between language, identity, and violence.

Don DeLillo, one of the most prominent contemporary American novelists, lived in Athens for nearly three years while writing *The Names*. The novel centres on James Axton, a risk analyst whose wife Kathryn is involved in an affair with one of her friends. Serving as the narrator, Axton describes his role in monitoring international trade and the shifting economic climates of countries such as Greece, Iran, Russia, and China. The narrative weaves together political tensions—most notably the Islamic Revolution in Iran—with local customs, travel, and family struggles, while also delving into the mysterious fear surrounding a secretive cult known as Ta Stomata ("The Names").

The novel highlights the activities of multinational businessmen working on various projects across Africa and Asia. James Axton, formerly a technical writer, is now an associate director of risk analysis for the Northeast Group in the Middle East. His work involves navigating volatile situations shaped by petroleum politics, the Iranian revolution, Greek-Turkish conflicts, and terrorism. Though professionally engaged with global politics, Axton accepts this role mainly to stay close to his estranged wife, Kathryn, and their nine-year-old son, Tap. Kathryn, an archaeologist from Toronto, joins an excavation in the Aegean. When she visits the island of Hours, Axton uncovers the brutal murder of an old man, an event tied to the mysterious cult.

Owen Brademas, the elderly supervisor of the excavation, provides Axton with further details about the cult's ritualistic killings. Both men become convinced that the murders follow a symbolic pattern linked to an esoteric ritual. Their search for answers takes them across the region—from the Peloponnese to Jerusalem and Lahore. *The Names* is one of the earliest American novels to explore the identity of Arab and Iranian terrorists, themes that have since become central to much popular fiction of the past few decades. Almost every character in the novel becomes entangled in its labyrinthine mysteries, struggling to interpret the enigmatic patterns before them. Kathryn and Owen, through their excavation work, also contribute to uncovering fragments of this larger puzzle.

Terrorism is a central motif in *The Names*, making it one of the most complex works in DeLillo's canon. Often regarded as a chronicler of media culture, DeLillo presents terrorism not merely as political violence but as a defining theme that shapes characters and narrative alike. His work marks the beginning of a neo-Orientalist trend in postmodern American fiction, one that portrays images of Arab and Iranian terrorists and anticipates future literary treatments of such themes. Although DeLillo's fiction is deeply concerned with language, critics like Peter Boxall (2006) note the novel's postcolonial undertones. Similarly, John H. Duvall (2008), in *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, observes that *The Names* is fundamentally about perception—"a matter of seeing what is there," recognizing patterns, and capturing fleeting moments in the flow of events.

The first of the air booms came rolling across the afternoon, waves from some distant violence, making the floor tremble slightly, window frames creak, causing plaster dust to trickle between abutting walls with an anxious whispering sound. Men were using dynamite to fish. The light was surgical, it was binding. It fixed the scene before me as a moment in a dream. All is foreground, wordless and bright (*TN* 10).

Boxall (2006) argues that the CIA's presence in the Middle East reflects a kind of egotistical desire on the part of the United States. This conflict highlights the complex relationship between words and actions, a theme that resonates throughout the novel. Even the title *The Names* conveys a similar idea, suggesting the author's intention to emphasize the significance and power of language. Within the story, the title refers to a cult whose members attempt to link the names of their victims with the names of the places where the murders occur. According to Boxall (2006), this symbolic act mirrors America's own quest for control and meaning, captured in his observation: "the journey is a muted pause between the noise of Athens and the rolling voice of Bombay" (107). DeLillo further develops this idea through his portrayal of terrorism as an "Orientalized" reality.

The title *The Names* also underscores the cult's enigmatic killings, where victims' identities are matched with locations in a ritualistic pattern. As noted in the novel, "The murder on Donoussa was a year ago" (107). The risk analysts attempt to uncover these unidentified bodies, discovering that the victims are linked to a group of terrorists. Almost every character in *The Names* becomes entangled in the labyrinthine plot, struggling to interpret fragments of evidence and make sense of the enigma. James Axton, first introduced as a freelance writer and later as an associate director of risk analysis in the Middle East, is drawn deeply into the investigation of these cult murders. Similarly, Frank Volterra, once a renowned filmmaker, pursues the same mystery with the ambition of documenting the cult in film.

The Names stands out as one of DeLillo's most complex psychological thrillers. Largely set in Greece, the novel interweaves a network of characters with a plot centered on a mysterious "language cult" responsible for a series of unexplained murders. In doing so, it explores the intricate connections between language, culture, and violence, making it one of DeLillo's most significant contributions to postmodern fiction.

Two blood-covered stones were found near the body on the outskirts of the fifteenth century town, at first light, by a woman fetching water or by boys on their way to the fields. By this time three men would be trekking west, leaving behind a comatose woman and two other men, one dead, one merely sitting still. Eventually a constable would make his way along the rough path to the storage bins, and then a subdivisional officer, to question the conscious person. He would probably try to speak to them in some dialect of northwest Iran. The trekkers dispersed without a word in the wild country before the border. The one in western clothes, carrying a small pack, had imprinted in his passport a visa which would not expire for some months. It included the stamp of the second secretary, Embassy of Pakistan, Athens, Greece, and carried above the stamp an example of this gentleman's handsomely scripted initials. (370)

In *The Names*, Don DeLillo presents American culture through both internal and external perspectives, situating it within the contrast between suburban ideals and global complexities. The central figure, James Axton, is employed part-time as a "risk analyst" for a mysterious conglomerate in Athens that deals with political-risk insurance. His position symbolizes the fears of multinational corporations facing instability in regions such as Iran. On a personal level, Axton's life is fractured—he lives apart from his wife, Kathryn, and is emotionally distant from their son, Tap.

Within this atmosphere of uncertainty, Axton engages in ethically questionable behavior. In one instance, he pursues Janet Ruffing, the young wife of a corporate associate, directly after she performs an innocent yet suggestive belly dance at a party. His forceful sexual advance borders on coercion, revealing the

darker, more aggressive side of his personality. This incident also raises interpretive questions about Axton's dual role as both narrator and character, complicating the reader's perception of him. The narrative tension between his detached voice and his flawed actions underscores the ambiguity of his character. Although his behavior is troubling, DeLillo occasionally offers subtle glimpses of sympathy toward Janet, using her experience to critique broader issues of gender, power, and cultural influence within corporate and social contexts.

CONCLUSION

The Names is a postmodern American tragedy-comedy thriller written by Don DeLillo. The cult murder occurs in a new setting, such as a movie theatre. It sheds light on several topics, including corporate trade between China, Russia, Iran, and the United States, as well as terrorism, cult murder, and mystery. James Axton, however, ultimately investigates a cult murder that claims several victims across Greece, Jordan, and India, alongside a film-director friend character who adds little to the story. He confronts a cult, whose initials match those inscribed on a sacred stone, and proceeds to rape and kill each member individually. This harrowing journey forces Axton to grapple with the moral implications of his actions, as well as the dark undercurrents of human nature that drive individuals to such extremes. As he searches for the cult's secrets, he uncovers a web of deception that challenges his understanding of loyalty and betrayal.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The Authors have declared that no competing interest for this work.

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