

AN EVALUATION OF POSTMODERNIST AESTHETICS IN KURT VONNEGUT'S *SLAUGHTERHOUSE - FIVE*

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In his address at the Library of Congress in 1963, Saul Bellow, the celebrated American writer aptly commented on postmodernist American fiction: 'American novels are filled with complaints over the misfortune of the sovereign self '. It is true that the idea of the 'self' received a jolt with the two World Wars and the Russian Revolution of 1917. The horrendous German tragedy of 1939 saw the reduction of thousands of human beings into heaps of bones. The individual struggling hard to maintain his identity and the 'self' being asked to prepare itself for sacrifice are some of the salient features of the situation reflected in contemporary American fiction. The prefix 'post' doesn't imply a new era; rather, it indicates a reaction, in the wake of the Second World War, against absolute systems of knowledge and philosophical certainty which adorned the foundations of Modernism. Though postmodernist literature doesn't mention all genres of works written in the postmodern period, several post-war developments in literature such as the 'Theatre of the Absurd ', the 'Beat Generation' and 'Magic Realism' have close similarities. These developments are occasionally collectively referred to as 'postmodern'. Some key figures like Samuel Beckett, William S. Burroughs, Jorge Louis Borges, Julio Corta'zar and Gabriel Garcia Ma'rquez are cited as the most significant contributors to the postmodern aesthetic.

Modernist literature sees fragmentation and extreme subjectivity as an existential crisis or Freudian internal conflict, a problem that must be solved by the artist himself. Postmodernism demonstrates that this chaos is insurmountable. In their opinion, the artist is impotent and the only recourse against ruin is to 'play', within the chaos. With postmodernism, 'playfulness' becomes central. The postmodern condition involves "a dead space which will be marked by increasing and random outbursts of political violence, schizoid behavior and the implosion of all signs of communication, as Western culture runs down toward the brilliant illumination of a final burn out"(Kroker 17). The term 'Postmodern literature' is used to describe certain aspects of Post - War II literature relying heavily on fragmentation, paradox, allusions and references, technoculture and hyperreality, fabulation, paranoia, metafiction, temporal distortion, magic realism, intertextuality, pastiche, parody, irony, playfulness and blackhumour. This literature is also a reaction against Enlightenment ideas implicit in Modernist literature.

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse - Five* is a science fiction novel about World War II experiences and journeys through time of a soldier called Billy Pilgrim. Billy is a disoriented and fatalistic American soldier who is captured by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge (1944) and taken to a makeshift prison in a Dresden Slaughterhouse.

The Germans keep Billy and fellow prisoners in a disused Slaughterhouse although there are animal carcasses hanging in the underground shelter. Their building is known as 'Slaughterhouse number 5'. The POWs and German guards alike hide in a deep cellar. As it happens to be a safe hiding place, they are able to survive the firebombing of Dresden in World War II.

As a Postmodern novel relying on metafiction, the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse Five* is a writer's preface about how he came to write his novel. The writer apologizes because the novel is "so short, jumbled and jangled", because "there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre" (1). The actual story itself begins in chapter two, although one cannot presume that the first chapter is not fictional. Metafiction may also mean 'foregrounding the apparatus'. It is a strategy of making the artificiality of art or the fictionality of fiction apparent to the readers. Postmodernist writers employ this technique to undermine the existence of the narrative primacy within the text, the presence of a single all - powerful authority. For instance, the first sentence of the novel reads: "All this happened more or less" (1) The author later appears in Billy's World War II as another sick prisoner which the narrator notes by saying, "That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book" (1).

Though much of Vonnegut's novel deals with his own experiences during the firebombing of Dresden (Feb.1945), the novelist continually points out the fictionality of the central narrative arc which contains fictional elements such as extraterrestrial creatures and 'time travel'. The narrator of the novel reports that Billy Pilgrim has come "unstuck in time" on account of his traumatic experience in the wake of the Dresden air - raid. Billy undergoes the experiences of his life discontinuously (i.e., he experiences past and future events out of sequence and repetitively, following a non-linear narrative). Thus, the reader enjoys two narrative threads - Billy's experience of war which is mostly linear and his discontinuous pre-war and post-war events. Through 'time travel' as a device of plot, Vonnegut's novel explores fate, free will and the illogical nature of human beings. As Billy has come "unstuck in time", his life doesn't end with death; he re-lives his death, before its time, an experience often mingled with his other experiences.

Billy becomes a freed prisoner at the end of the German war, practices the role of an optometrist and corrects the defects in the visions of people by supplying proper lenses. At this point of his career, he is kidnapped by extraterrestrial aliens from the planet Tralfamadore. They teach Billy about time's relation to the world as fourth dimension, fate and death's indiscriminate nature. Significantly, they say that war is 'inevitable' and that the universe will be accidentally destroyed by one of their test pilots. As the protagonist Billy travels forward and backward in time, he spends time on Tralfamadore, in Dresden, in the war, walking in deep snow before his German capture, in his mundane post-war married life in the U.S.A. of the 50's and in the moment of his murder by lazzaro. He has so little control over his own life that he cannot even predict which part of it he will be living through from minute to minute.

In fact, Billy fits in well with Wylie Sypher's definition of the postmodern hero who feels like "a human something floating about in a universal culture medium. His existence is

negative because he has been completely available to others, to causes, to events and forces as if he were a kind of liquid capital" (10).

Ironically, after his Tralfamadorian experience, Billy sets out to correct the erroneous view of the Western man regarding the merit of the individual, free will, guilt etc. To the Tralfamadorians, everything simultaneously exists and therefore everyone is always alive: "All moments past, present and future have existed, always will exist" (25). The Tralfamadorians argue that they cannot choose to change anything about their fates but can choose to concentrate upon any moment in their lives. Describing his desperate attempt at scholarship, Vonnegut expounds his own position in chapter I. "Writing an anti-war book is like writing an anti-glacier book" (1). Since both phenomena are unstoppable, both end up being futile adventures. Vonnegut himself has argued that to human beings, ignoring a war is unacceptable especially when we have 'free will'. In this context, Vonnegut leaves open the possibility that he is really, ridiculing the concept of 'free will' and terming it as a product of human irrationality.

Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse - Five* has many instances to show how 'free will' functions as a product of human irrationality. One such instance relates to the summary execution of the elderly Edgar Derby by the German forces for looting a teapot from among the cinders of Dresden after the Allied fire-bombing of the city. Amid all that horror, death and destruction, *time* is taken to punish one individual. Another instance of human senselessness, as recorded in Vonnegut's novel, manifests itself in the aftermath of the Dresden firebombing which was 'utter destruction' and 'carnage unfathomable'. Vonnegut recalls that the remains of the city resembled the surface of the moon and that the Germans put the surviving POWs to work, breaking into basements and bomb shelters to gather bodies for burial, while German civilians cursed and threw rocks at them (9). Vonnegut further adds "There were too many corpses to bury. So instead the Germans sent in troops with flamethrowers, all these civilians' remains were burnt to ashes" (10). Billy thinks, that too much of emphasis upon 'time' and 'action' has led to disastrous consequences like bombing and mass killing of people in Concentration Camps. In Tralfamadore, time has lost its significance and man has no graded motives. Life itself is not real and everything is taken casually. For instance, Montana Wildhack, Billy's partner on Tralfamadore is shown as a model that stars in a film shown in a pornographic bookstore when Billy stops by to check out the Kilgore Trout novels. She is also abducted and placed in Billy's habitat on Tralfamadore, where they have sex and produce a child.

Billy's visit to Tralfamadore has brought about a change in his vision of life. His contention is that the erroneous interpretation of the concept of 'free will' results in the indiscriminate acceptance of everything. According to him, the Western man must abandon his ethical point of view and adopt a passive, guilt-free response to life and events of the world. 'Everything always is; there is no why' (56). Billy rejects the Western ethics and the concept 'free will' as they have not stopped the rise of war. To have rich ethical heritage and to fight a war is an example of contradictory ideology.

Like all postmodernist novels, *Slaughterhouse - Five* resists a reader's meaningful recodification of itself. Terms like 'verification' and 'explanation' belong to the canon of modernist aesthetics and they manifest a reader's tendency to 'naturalize' the text. It is easy to see that as a fantasy, Vonnegut's novel defies verification and as a portrait of the horrors of war, it defies explanation. Since *Slaughterhouse - Five* registers the dissolution of the narrative, self and represented world, it takes after the 'apocalyptic' strain. For instance, the text in the beginning suggests that Billy had suffered a rupture in the skull in an aeroplane accident in 1968 and that he had been talking about the strange planet, Tralfamadore since then. After four pages, the reader's attempt at realism is blocked when the statement occurs that Billy became "unstuck in time", as early as in 1944, long before the accident or his alleged kidnapping by Tralfamadorians in 1967. This distortion in time is an essential feature of Vonnegut's non-linear novels.

As a postmodern novel, *Slaughterhouse - Five* repeatedly refers to real and fictional novels. Billy is shown reading the *Valley of the Dolls* (1966). Then, he skims a Tralfamadorian novel and participates in a radio talk show, part of a literary expert panel discussing "The Death of the Novel". Vonnegut's own novel is structured like a Tralfamadorian novel - the literature that Billy encounters on Tralfamadore. The text itself suggests the 'post - modern mode of reading'. When Billy asks his captors what they read, he is handed thin booklets with symbols. The Tralfamadorians tell him that the symbols represent pleasing thoughts and events. When they are all simultaneously read, as do the Tralfamadorians, it creates an emotion in the reader's mind. In the Tralfamadorian novel, "There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no cause, no effect" (62-63). It is interesting to see that such a postmodern novel represents a rejection of realism which embraces the notion that literature is a created work not bound by notions of mimesis and verisimilitude. This is how 'fabulation' challenges the traditional structure of a novel or the role of the narrator. According to Prof. A.S.D. Pillai, "the classification of postmodernist fictions into fabulation, reportage and the problematic novel proves tentative; for a good many of them can fit in into more than one category" (32).

Vonnegut's novel is not only a fabulation based on science fiction but it is also a collage of factual reporting and fantasy writing. As a fabulation, it seeks to satisfy our elementary appetites such as wonder, suspense and wish-fulfilment. It certainly feeds on popular myths and fantasies like *Voyage into Space* (Tralfamadore) and all forms of unconventional sex. As reportage, the story is told in short, declarative sentences that impress the sense of reading a report of facts. Like a true reporter, Vonnegut describes the firebombing of Dresden and the various incidents connected with this disaster. The story continually employs the refrain "so it goes", when death, dying and mortality occur, as a narrative transition to another subject, as a *memento mori*, as comic relief and to explain 'the unexplained'. Its combination of simplicity, irony and rue is very much in the Vonnegut vein.

Since, postmodernism represents a 'decentred' concept of the universe in which individual works are not isolated creations; the main focus in the study of postmodern literature is on 'intertextuality'. Intertextuality can also be a reference or parallel to another literary work, an extended discussion of a work or the adoption of a style. In Vonnegut's

Slaughterhouse - Five, as in other postmodern works, certain characters cross over from other stories, making cameo appearances, connecting the discrete novels as a greater opus. For instance, science fiction novelist Kilgore Trout, often an important character in other novels is shown as a social commentator and a friend to Billy Pilgrim. Other crossover characters are Eliot Rosewater from *God Bless you, Mr. Rosewater*, Howard W. Campbell from *Mother Night* and Bertram Copeland Rumfoord, relative of Winston Niles Rumfoord from *The Sirens of Titan* (1959). Mr. Rosewater says that Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* contains 'everything there was to know about life'. The fact that Billy reads *The Valley of the Dolls* (1966) and participates in a radio talk show on 'The Death of the Novel' underlines the deliberate proliferation of texts within the main text, otherwise known, as 'inter-textuality'. It is an important postmodern device by which Vonnegut brings into question 'the authenticity' of the text.

All postmodern writings make allusions which range from history to scientific works. Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse - Five* speaks of the firebombing of Dresden in World War II and refers to the Battle of the Bulge, the Vietnam War, and the Black anti-poverty racial riots in American cities in the 1960s. Billy's wife Valencia Merble wears a 'Reagan for President!' bumper sticker on her car, referring to Reagan's failed 1968 Republican Presidential nomination campaign. These allusions bring into focus the "relativisation of styles which throws into doubt the claims of any one discourse or story to be offering the 'truth' about the world or an authoritative version of the real." (Rice 308). Another recurring postmodern theme is the sense of 'paranoia', the conviction that there is an ordering system behind the chaos of the world. For the postmodernist, no such system exists and therefore the search for order and meaning becomes fruitless and absurd.

Billy's Dresden experience has proved so traumatic that he becomes 'unstuck in time'. His search for distinction among the past, present and future or between the living and the dead proves fruitless. Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot* underlines the futility of Oedipa's search: "Oedipa's quest it would seem now is not for Inveracity's estate but for meaning in a text, for Meaning in a world where Meaning is so difficult to come by ..." (81).

It is a truth that in postmodernity, people are inundated with information and technology has become a central focus in many lives. In such a context, our understanding of the real is mediated by 'simulations' of the real. Jean Baudrillard's definition of postmodernity dealing with this shift into 'hyperreality' accords well with this situation. In the words of Peter Barry, "Within postmodernism, the distinction between what is real and what is simulated collapses; everything is a model or an image, all is surface without depth; this is hyper real, as Baudrillard calls it" (Barry 89). In Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse - Five* Eliot Rosewater, like Billy, has experienced a horrifying event in Dresden air-raids. Both Rosewater and Billy create a fantasy universe built around the Kilgore Trout novels they read. This provides them with a therapeutic value and enables them to get through the grief of World War II. Incidentally, the cyberpunk fictions of William Gibson and Neal Stephenson also employ science fiction techniques to address the hyperreal 'information bombardment'. Interestingly, in Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), the character Dwayne Hoover becomes violent when he is convinced that everyone else in the world is a

robot and he is the only human (32). Thus, a possible interpretation of Vonnegut's novels coincides with the theme of hyper reality and techno culture.

Closely related to postmodern intertextuality is the term 'pastiche' which means to combine or 'paste' together various elements. In postmodernist literature, this can be either an homage to or a parody of past styles. Sometimes, it can be a combination of songs or pop-culture references (as in Thomas Pynchon) or a mixture of well-known, obscure and fictional history, culture and concepts. Vonnegut uses fictional elements such as 'aliens', 'time travel' and the supportive myth of unconventional sex in the central narrative arc to drive home his message. An interesting information regarding 'pastiche' relates to the fact that B.S.Johnson's 1969 novel *The Unfortunates* was released in a box with no binding so that the readers could assemble it however they chose. In *Slaughterhouse - Five*, Vonnegut explores the possibility that salvation can only come through modes of consciousness radically different from those which have structured the politics of the West. In this respect, his novel shares a common platform with Dorris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974). Lessing's novel explains how people construct a version of the 'real' through communication, listening, sharing, empathizing, and reassuring each other. In her novel, 'Listening' as a suspension of the conventional expectations and modes of thought of Western political economies, "becomes the vehicle through which she explores alternative aesthetic forms of consciousness to offer an implicit critique of those which are in collapse (15-16). Vonnegut makes recourse to 'fantasizing' as an antidote to the horrors of war and the utter valuelessness of the individual. Both Vonnegut and Lessing explicitly allow their respective 'modes', an authenticity not given to the so-called "instrumentality of the enlightened rationalist discourses of modern liberalism" (Waugh 85).

By naming the disoriented and unheroic hero Billy Pilgrim, Vonnegut seems to contrast John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* with Billy's story. In the words of the critic Wilfred Sheed, Billy's solution to the problems of the modern world is to invent a heaven, out of 20th century materials, where Good Technology triumphs over Bad Technology. His scripture is Science Fiction, 'Man's last, good fantasy'. This fantasy is essential, especially, for one stuck in an inescapable situation attempting impotently to communicate and whose only recourse is to play, to make the best of what he has!

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**“Literature is the thought of
thinking souls”.**

- Thomas Carlyle

