



International Journal of Economic Research

ISSN : 0972-9380

available at <http://www.serialsjournals.com>

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Volume 14 • Number 20 • 2017

Consciousness of War and Fear for Survival: A Post - Colonial Reading of 'Slaughterhouse – Five' and 'Player Piano' by Kurt Vonnegut

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ABSTRACT

In the present research paper entitled “*Consciousness of War and Fear for Survival: A Post- Colonial Reading of Slaughterhouse-Five of Kurt Vonnegut*” the researcher has explored the growing war psychosis of the people of America and their anxieties to survive in a harsh war ridden society depicted in o *Slaughterhouse-Five* of Kurt Vonnegut. In the post –war America emerged as a super power after the war. The capitalist economy grew stronger and the American Dream collapsed since dollar became the God and there was a rat race in America to become rich overnight. Women turned flappers and smoking; dancing in the clubs became a normal routine in American society. Kurt Vonnegut and Hemingway observed all these drastic changes of society and wrote novels to depict the growing nihilism and skepticism of the American people after the war. The novels of Kurt Vonnegut depicted the growing war psychosis of the people of America and their anxieties to survive in a harsh war ridden society. Vonnegut’s novels *Slaughterhouse –Five* and *Player Piano* focused on the themes of consciousness of war and the fear of survival of the American people.

Keywords: Consciousness, Anxieties, Nihilism, Skepticism, Flappers, Collapsed, Survival, American Dream.

Kurt Vonnegut had participated in the World War and to fight with the Germans. In Dresden battle he was taken as a prisoner and was imprisoned in a meat locker of the slaughterhouse. The memories of the Dresden firebombing haunted Vonnegut day and night. Vonnegut realized that the best way to get release from the tensions and anxieties was to use writing as a safety valve and he articulated all his harrowing experiences of Dresden bombing. Vonnegut created sensation in the American scene and no wonder *Slaughterhouse-Five* was rated as the bestseller of the year. He had witnessed the barbarities of the war mongers of the Germans and depicted the heartrending scenes of death and destruction. He used the creative potential

to explore the depression, neurosis and anxieties of the Americans trapped in war. He pointed out that “Americans are in the midst of a moral and spiritual crisis; the horrors of war has debilitated the senility of the American people. Charles Shields (2011) in his *And So It Goes: Kurt Vonnegut: A Life* observes thus his vision of life and objective of writing:

In my writing mood I never intend to write in a non-serious manner but I always I want to write about the whole damned planet, the whole society. I try to discuss our whole planet in human terms. (Shields, 162).

Like Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, Kurt Vonnegut articulates his anti-war sentiments and uses all the tenets of post-colonial fiction. Vonnegut argues that history is progressive, that knowledge can liberate people. War consciousness is not a new feeling but it is prevalent in each society and since antiquity people have been haunted by the war psychosis. Hemingway depicts the destructive realities of war in his novels but Vonnegut uses the metaphor of war in broader perspective. War is inevitable and inescapable and the fear for survival of people is universal. He has used the historical event of bombing of Dresden in a metaphysical manner; each individual struggles to explore the meaning of life in the war ridden society. Vonnegut was influenced by Dostoevsky and Proust; he rejected the traditional forms of writing in his *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The plot is fragmentary; unconventional and formless. He emerged as a man of ideas seriously concerned with the menace of war and the problem of survival confronted by the people. He presents serious social problems in his novels and expresses his concern to find answers. In *Player Piano* (1952); he challenges humanity’s headlong craze for replacing individuals with machines.

Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* depicts the war consciousness of the people and their fear of survival in the war-ridden society. Billy Pilgrim is the main protagonist who explores various themes about life and war. Vonnegut has used all the Post-colonial devices to create a meta-narrative. Vonnegut’s Billy Pilgrim is depicted as a character “unstuck in time.” Time is under his control; he moves from one place to another covering the entire planet from the earth he shifts to the paradise of the aliens. The plot of the novel ceases to be natural but becomes linear as there is no chronological order of events as we find in the fiction of the Victorians. He plays and lives like a shuttle cock; jumping from past to the present and getting lost in the future. Vonnegut has structured the plot in an unconventional style; he writes small sections and makes Billy to deliver long speeches articulating his various moments of his turbulent life. Billy was born in Ilium in 1922 in New York. His profile is very ridiculous; he looks funny and weak in body. He did well in his high school and even joined night classes at the Ilium School of Optometry. Soon he joined the army and was deployed to fight the Germans during World War II. Vonnegut has dramatized his autobiographical elements in the plot of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The first stroke of Billy’s ill luck is described by the way of his father’s death. The tragic accident of his father sent shock waves to the family and at that time Billy was on his way to his voyage to Luxembourg. Soon Billy is pumped into the famous Battle of the Bulge in Belgium to fight with the Germans. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* the main concern of Vonnegut is to evoke the consciousness of war and to depict the struggles of the people to survive in barbaric society. The struggle for survival is the main issue of the plot and interestingly Vonnegut’s personal experiences are connected with the tragic life of Billy. Vonnegut articulates his anti-war vision of war like Hemingway through the characters in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. From the first page to the last page of the novel Billy acts as a mouthpiece of Vonnegut; dominates the entire novel. Vonnegut has made many innovations in the plot; he uses the metaphysical ideas such as free will and predestination. Billy plays vital role in the novel; he

has to play multiple roles to depict the plight of the millions of people who suffer because of the senseless wars. Vonnegut uses all tools of comedy and black humour to portray the farcical character of Billy. He is depicted as a ridiculous character “empty-handed, bleakly ready for death” (26). Vonnegut uses the adjective “preposterous” for Billy “six feet and three inches tall, with a chest and shoulders like a box of kitchen matches” (26). In the battle field Billy didn't look like a serious soldier but “like a filthy flamingo:” (27). He was shot but the shot missed Billy's knee caps by inches and he survived” (27). His friend Weary cried: “Saved your life again, you dumb bastard (28). Billy didn't want to continue in the army and always wished to quit since he was cold; incompetent and non-serious. He had no knowledge about the trench knife kept by Weary. His friend Weary was shocked to know about the poor practical knowledge of Billy:” What the hell they teach in college?” (30). Vonnegut uses Billy who is desperately struggling to survive in a harsh world. Billy lives in Hobbesian society where the laws of the jungle prevails and where might is the right. In mad race for man has thrown all values in the winds. In his conversation with O'Hare in the very first chapter Vonnegut comments thus: “there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre” (Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 19). Coe observes that the plot of the novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* is about the pessimistic vision of Vonnegut. “Vonnegut has only one purpose in his mind to raise the cry of the people against war psychosis.

Vonnegut created Billy Pilgrim as an image of humanity; he is not a commonplace character but he is Everyman of Vonnegut representing the entire humanity suffering from the horrors of war. Billy journey of life is symbolic in the novel and his war experiences are historical with wider ramifications. Billy's expresses his vision of life of Vonnegut telling the world that war is not the solution of life. Billy conveys the idea that “war is not a heroic contest between the forces of good and evil but a senseless slaughter perpetrated on the innocent people” Vonnegut doesn't narrate the crude historical events in the novel but portrays the characters living with anxieties and depressions. Billy's experiences in the war are so horrible and threatening that he becomes speechless when he returns from the war. He doesn't talk to anyone and remains lonely and desperate. He becomes an escapist and his deviant behavior is a matter of concern for all. He looks battered and broken in the family. Ironically, Billy makes a neurotic experiment; he becomes an escapist and decides to spend the rest of his life like a broken statue. He uses life to escape from the terrors of war as he used war to escape from death. Billy responds with little care when Weary tries to save his life from death in the battle field: “You guys go on without me. I'm all right” (Vonnegut 47).

There are two big enemies of man; war and machine. War is destructive and machine deadens the spirit of man enslaving him. Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* depicts the degradation of a civilized society of America. Machine dehumanizes man; war kills his conscience and spirit. Vonnegut comments: “A guy's got to have kicks in the society and the machine enslaves all human beings' sooner or later” (Vonnegut, *player Piano* 162). *Player Piano*, which purports to be “not a book about what is, but a book about what could be,” Kurt lashes at the growing trends of a totalitarian society. Vonnegut has explored man's relationship to the machine and the eventual slavery of man and the loss of human values. He opines that man invents machines for his comfort and luxury but soon men become worthless and unemployed. Art disappears from the world and man's originality is lost in the machine world. In his novel *Player Piano* he has lashed at the growing machine age depicting the plight of people trapped in the vicious cycle of machines. After the war the business flourished and the Americans resorted to smuggling of liquor to make money. Paul Proteus is highly disturbed to find out the rotten way of American society. The plot of the *Player Piano* reveals the truth that “once the surface is scraped away, is rotten to the core” *Player Piano* envisions a dismal

future as the oppression of the capitalism is exposed by Vonnegut. Humans beings are portrayed as messy, inefficient, and irrational distractions. The war was horrible but more horrible is the machines that has dehumanized the Americans after the war. The shining nature of machines has made humanity superfluous, sucked all meaning out of the world. The Americans are living in a valueless society; Vonnegut dreams of a new callous society ruled by the laws of efficiency; economy and quality. Man's inner spirit has become rotten. Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* is about the horrors of war and his *Player Piano* is about the repressive nature of machines. Vonnegut's vision in both the novels is dark and pessimistic. Paul Proteus expresses and ridicules the growth of science and technology; man is growing in terms of money but values are eroding every day. "Every new piece of scientific knowledge is a good thing for humanity" Man inverted machine and the machine age brought social revolution and promoted hatred; jealousy and neck to neck competition in the society. Man becomes just a slave of the machines as in 270 pages of the novel *Player Piano* Vonnegut lashes at the growth of machines in America. Vonnegut is seriously concerned with people who are afflicted with the fear of war and alienation and absurdity of life. The characters of Vonnegut live alone as they are cut off from their friends and relatives. Paul Proteus feels disconnected with his society; he fails to communicate even with his friend Ed Finnerty. Kurt Vonnegut depicts the theme of survival; fear and alienation in his novels. He is considered one of the leading American novelists who "enjoys the largest general readership" (Harris, 51) He was greatly impacted by the ideas and style of Dostoevsky and there is memorable passage in his novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* when Eliot Rosewater says to Billy Pilgrim in the mental hospital: "The novel 'The Brothers Karamazov' seriously depicts the vision of life in the best possible manner" (Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five* 2). His novels *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* were translated into Russian in 1970. In any case, Vonnegut certainly had read Dostoevsky and Gogol who were the prominent Russian writers. The critics observe that in the novels of Kurt Vonnegut there are innumerable elements of farce and black comedy and other Russian elements of black humour and parody. It remains a mystery that Vonnegut ever met Dostoevsky at all. But he imitated the Russian elements in his fiction. Kurt Vonnegut used his poetic powers to depict the plight of the millions of people haunted by the fear and threats of war. His experiences during the World War II greatly impacted his mind and sensibility; he evolved a new vision of life and like Hemingway dedicated his writings to depict the anti-war sentiments. War is not a solution and the evolution of a civilized society is unconceivable with the increase of lethal weapons in the world. Dresden bombing is just one event and through this event Vonnegut describes the dismal future of society. Vonnegut has evolves his own humorous and comical style to expose and ridicule the complacent nature of the Americans. He wants the Americans to cope with the absurdities and uncertainties of life. Kurt Vonnegut published his *Cat's Cradle* in 1963, after twenty years of the Nuclear Holocaust of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Vonnegut depicts, Jonah is the main narrator in the novel who gives a concrete and realistic account of the action of the Americans and the feeling of destruction that engulfed millions of people when the first atomic bomb was dropped" (Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* 1). The main focus in the novel is to highlight the horrors of war in a unique surrealistic and absurd style. The main features of all his novels are the role of chance and accidents, frequent reversals and frequent reversals of fortunes. Vonnegut creates a random world in which his characters are trapped in the web of absurdity as he avers that people are powerless to control wars. Paul Proteus of *Player Piano* is also helpless as the machines mutilate his individuality.

Describe the dawn of automation after the war. War machine is over that killed millions of people in the World War. Now the machines of the industry have taken over to dehumanize and enslave the middle

class Americans. The Americans have been reduced to IBM cards as they have lost their individuality and identity. They are seen running in the morning to punch their cards and to mark their presence in the big offices of the companies and in industrial establishments. The same mechanical scene is depicted by T.S. Eliot in his famous *Waste Land*. The large numbers of the worker are seen passing from the London bridge; everyone is in a hurry in a mechanical manner. The people have limited options left in American society; either they can join army or lead a life of insensitive robots. Most of the time of the people after the war is spent in car payment; furniture payment; rent or they remain burdened to pay their insurance installments. Their life has become mechanical and artificial and their jobs consist of menial busywork. Men are busy in performing their meaningless jobs and women are stuck in their offices like robots. They produce finished product and takes pride in their production. In fact the entire life is measured in terms of money and values have been scrapped since money has become the god. The growth of the materialistic production has brought about unrest in the worker as they are oppressed by the growing capitalist system and machines are dominating them in every walk of life. Even the learned Ph. D holding the managerial position are thrown away from their jobs by the capitalists. The new machines result into the mass unemployment in America. The New machines invented by the American engineers and scientists are oppressive and dehumanizing. Vonnegut depicts the cruelty of the machines that kill their own creators. In Chapter eight, Paul Proteus is shocked to listen to the complains of Bud:

“Ah haven’t got a job anymore,” said Bud. “Canned.”

Paul was amazed. “Really? What on earth for? Moral turpitude? What about the gadget you invented for—”

“And so you’re out of a job.”

“Seventy-two of us are out of jobs,” said Bud (Kurt Vonnegut, *Player Piano* 63).

To conclude, Vonnegut’s novels *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Player Piano* are about the loss of individuality and identity of the Americans. War machines killed many people and the automatic machines killed the conscience and originality of the Americans.

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