

Kurt Vonnegut and Slaughterhouse-Five: A Pacifistic Study

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Abstract

Kurt Vonnegut is considered as one of the champion fictional writers of postmodern literature from America. Though he had written a total of 14 novels, Slaughterhouse-Five published on 31 March 1969 is regarded as his masterpiece, because of its anti-war narration and pacifistic approach. He is a great philanthropist and anti-war writer of the 20th century. This novel depicts his own war experiences and memoirs during World War II and received good acceptance across the world. Human history had been shaped through war and its atrocities. Various wars and conflicts formed humanity with certain values and ethics. Pacifism is such a quality that opposes war and always promote peace among people and nations. The novel Slaughterhouse-Five depicts the war's absurdities and atrocities. The major victims of any war are the soldiers, they often suffer a lot during the outbreak of war. This paper mainly focuses on the pacifist approach of the novel Slaughterhouse-Five. Throughout the novel, Vonnegut mocks the stupidities of human beings who are crazy in war. The ultimate result of any war is destruction, and human suffering, Vonnegut does not directly promote and exhorts pacifism in this novel instead he is revealing the stupidities of the war with humour and heartfelt narration.

Key Words: Kurt Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse-Five, Pacifism, Anti-war, Postmodernism, POW.

Pacifism is originated from the Latin word "pacific" which means "peace-making". From the historical root, pacifism can be identified closely with religious ideologies. Jesus the founder of Christianity advocated pacifism through his Beatitudes, Buddhism is highly advocating pacifist values and ideas. Pacifism is promoting anti-war concepts; this view says that war and violence cannot be justified since it is against humanitarianism, and all disputes should settle down with peaceful means and methods. Vonnegut was Pacifism is a kind of Non-violence; it promotes peace and harmony among nations. This view is against any type of force and dispute, and it advocates peaceful settle downs. During modern times writers like Leo Tolstoy, M.K Gandhi, James Lawson promoted pacifism among their readers, many people believed peace and harmony are better than violence and bloodshed for the entire world. Kurt Vonnegut, particularly through his fictional works, promoted this ideology, and most of his characters were the advocates of pacifism. Some writers and artists tried to glorify the war, but Vonnegut was strongly opposing it, he approached the topic of war with humor and motivated millions of his readers with anti-war sense.

Slaughterhouse-Five is considered one of the best anti-war novels of all time. Slaughterhouse-Five is dealing with World War II, particularly revealing people's feelings, experiences, and atrocities during and after wartime. The readers of this novel are also going in such a feeling that they are anticipating another war in near future; hence the pacifist approach of this novel is quite relevant to the post-war period. Billy Pilgrim the protagonist of the novel was an American soldier who was a prisoner of war, optometrist, time traveller, and a pacifist. "BILLY PILGRIM has come unstuck in time" (Vonnegut 19). The novel reveals the war experience of the protagonist and the firebombing of Dresden, a German city, during the Second World War.

Edelstein in "Slaughterhouse-Five: Timeout of Joint" (1974) narrates Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five is a satirical account of American life during the 1950s and 60s, this fiction gives the account of the post-war period of American life. Man's existential conditions and human moralities are deeply depicted here.

Berryman in "After the Fall: Kurt Vonnegut" (1985) views that through fictional work, Slaughterhouse-Five Vonnegut tries to produce his hunted memories. He was brutally affected by war issues both during and after war periods. The war survival characters of Vonnegut give their

war accounts to the world so that pacifistic views can be promoted to the people.

Smith in "Kurt Vonnegut, Novelist Who Caught the Imagination of His Age, Is Dead at 84" (2007) considers *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a perfect postmodern war narrative. This novel highly reveals the social and cultural changes of American society after the wartime.

Kunze in his article "For the Boys: Masculinity, Gray Comedy, and the Vietnam War in 'Slaughterhouse-Five.'" (2012) criticises that the black humour does not suit to Vonnegut, human indifference is highly executed in this novel and Vonnegut mainly attracts youth and teenage readers. He again states that this novel is primarily a masculine effort.

In the introductory chapter of this novel Vonnegut quote Charles Mackay to reveal the brutality of war in history, especially during the time of Crusades, Children's Crusade:

History in her solemn page informs us that the crusaders were but ignorant and savage men that their motives were those of bigotry unmitigated, and that their pathway was one of blood and tears. Romance, on the other hand, dilates upon their piety and heroism, and portrays, in her most glowing and impassioned hues, their virtue and magnanimity, the imperishable honour they acquired for themselves, and the great services they rendered to Christianity (13).

The result of these Crusades was only tragic, no one got any benefit out of these bloody wars; "Europe expended millions of her treasures, and the blood of two million of her people; and a handful of quarrelsome knights retained possession of Palestine or about one hundred years!" (13). Vonnegut mocks the war and war enthusiasts in his novel and criticizes the military operation led by Germans under Hitler:

THE GERMANS AND the dog were engaged in a military operation which had an amusingly self-explanatory name, a human enterprise which is seldom described in detail, whose name alone when reported as news or history, gives many war enthusiasts a sort of post-coital satisfaction. It is, in the imagination of combat's fans, the divinely listless love play that follows the orgasm of victory. It is called 'mopping up' (43).

The prisoners of the war are the major victims of any war, once they were soldiers and zealously fighting for their country and later, they became the foremost fatalities of the war, their frustration and distresses are always visible throughout the history, "Nobody talked. Nobody had any good war stories to tell" (46). War is always taking away the happiness of humanity and it leads the people to utter chaos and dilemmas.

The atrocities of the Vietnam War by Americans are also discussed in this novel, and it popularised the acceptance of Kurt Vonnegut as a post-world war novelist. He contemns the military force of America in Vietnam particularly the orders of marine major:

He said that Americans had no choice but to keep fighting in Vietnam until they achieved victory or until the Communists realized that they could not force their way of life on weak countries. The major had been there on two separate tours of duty. He told of many terrible and many wonderful things he had seen. He was in favour of increased bombings, of bombing North Vietnam back into the Stone Age, if it refused to see reason (49).

War is always taking away the happiness of humanity. The result of war is nihilism and nothingness. Every war has been taken away the lives of innocent people. War brings loss to people in many ways sometimes the dear and near ones become the victims of war, in the same family some people survive the war, and some people suffer it. The life of man is given by God and no one has the right to take the life of others. According to Christianity human body is considered as the temple of God and God dwells in it, but the war destroys the human body, which is considered as sacred: "Derby's son would survive the war. Derby wouldn't. That good body of his would be filled with holes by firing squad in Dresden in sixty-eight days. So, it goes" (68).

War brings loneliness and frustration to the people who are affected by it, particularly soldiers. The prisoners of war are suffering a lot during their imprisonment. War is always depriving of the freedom of human beings. In a peaceful state, people are free to lead a pleasant social and family life, but during war, the prisoners of the war cannot lead a normal life, even they are denied all sorts of human rights and needs, the novel reveals; "They had not seen a woman or child for four years or more. They had not seen any birds, either. Not even sparrows would come into the camp" (76). Vonnegut wrote it from his own experience during Second World War, a

reader of the novel would be able to understand the injustice of the war to humanity, war is not only affecting the human world, but it affects the whole nature, hence the violence of the war can be seen in this anti-war novel. While Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist of the novel was taken to the hospital, meets a former infantry captain named Eliot Rosewater, both of them discuss the absurdities of the war and also the atrocities:

Rosewater was twice as smart as Billy, but he and Billy were dealing with similar cries in similar ways. They have both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in ear. Rosewater, for instance, had shot a fourteen-year-old fireman, mistaking him for a German soldier. So it goes. And Billy had seen the greatest massacre in European history, which was the fire-bombing of Dresden. So, it goes (82).

The term pacifism is more related to Christianity and Christian values. Most of the Europeans were Christians but as a contradiction to it, World War Two had been affected all European countries. Jesus Christ was an advocate of peace and brotherhood, but his followers are not following his teachings and qualities. Vonnegut criticizes the religious views of people, particularly the Christian perspectives, mainly because the teachings of Christ or Christianity could not prevent the World War, instead, it promoted the concepts of war the novel ridicules; "The visitor from outer space made a serious study of Christianity, to learn if he could, why Christians found it so easy to be cruel. He concluded that at least part of the trouble was slipshod storytelling in the New Testament. He supposed that the intent of the Gospels was to teach people, among other things, to be merciful, even to the lowest of the low" (89).

Billy was taken to the planet Talfamador and somebody asked him what he had learned from that planet, here Vonnegut advocates peace and harmony through Billy: these two qualities are essential for the world and not the war, the horror of the war is enigmatic. War is a major threat to humanity and human progress, the peaceful settle down of the war is advisable, this truth is visible from the very beginning of human history:

How the inhabitants of a whole planet can live in peace! As you know, I am from a planet that has been engaged in senseless slaughter since the beginning of time. I myself have seen the bodies of schoolgirls who were boiled alive in a water tower by my own countrymen, who were proud of fighting pure evil at the time. 'This was true. Billy saw the boiled bodies in Dresden. 'And I have lit my way in a prison at night with candles from the fat of human beings who were butchered by the brothers and fathers of those schoolgirls who were boiled. Earthlings must be the terrors of the Universe! If other planets aren't now in danger from Earth, they soon will be. So, tell me the secret so I can take it back to Earth and save us all: How can a planet live at peace? (95).

Some people consider that war is necessary to humanity because war can bring some law and order in the world. It is an inevitable part of human history. Creating war is the need of politicians and dictators of all times, but we must prevent them with our capabilities and possibilities, by avoiding war we can create pleasant moments for humanity. War creates unpleasant situations and orders, but we must overcome them with peaceful settle downs; "That's one thing Earthlings might learn to do if they tried hard enough: Ignore the awful times and concentrate on the good ones" (96).

War is always giving panic situations to the world; it does not soothe or comfort anyone instead it creates confusion and chaos to the entire humanity. It destroys human constructions as well as civilizations, it spoils world order and peace of humanity. War is not only a threat to humanity but also it destroys the animals as well as our nature, hence it is against human progress and development, it is not only affecting a particular city or country, but the dangers of war is being affected to the entire world: "Every other big city in Germany had been bombed and burned ferociously. Dresden had not suffered so much as a cracked windowpane. Sirens went off every day, screamed like hell, and people went down into cellars and listened to radios there. The planes were always bound for someplace else- Leipzig, Chemnitz. Plauen, places like that. So, it goes" (122). The prisoners of the war are major victims of any war, they are suffering a lot during their imprisonment all the human rights are denied to them, many prisoners have lost their health even they have become handicapped, but they are not getting any mercy from their opponents. Most of the prisoners are soldiers and they are kept in dirty places during their capture. POWs are helpless

people; they are the true strangers in a strange place. The novel as its name reveals a place where these prisoners are kept, the name itself shows the severity of the war and the treatment of POW: "The slaughterhouse wasn't a busy place anymore. Almost all the hooved animals in Germany had been killed and eaten and excreted by human beings, mostly soldiers. So, it goes" (125).

The name 'Slaughterhouse' itself reveals the cruelties and brutalities of the war, any war considers human beings as inferior even to animals, and the prisoners of the war are treated the same as the livestock animals, they are often slaughtered by their enemies. The title itself is revealing the pacifist approach and promote anti-war awareness to the readers:

The Americans were taken to the fifth building inside the gate. It was a one-story cement-block cube with sliding doors in front and back. It had been built as a shelter for pigs about to be butchered. Now it was going to serve as a home away from home for one hundred American prisoners of war. There were bunks in there, and two potbellied stoves and a water tap. Behind it was a latrine, which was a one-rail fence with buckets under it (125).

War is not giving proper identity to human beings instead it deprives the identity of them.

War should be prevented at any cost so that we can make this earth a peaceful place to live as genuine human beings. The wartime atmosphere is a danger to all Vonnegut explains: "It wasn't safe to come out of the shelter until noon the next day. When the Americans and their guards did come out, the sky was black with smoke. The sun was an angry little pinhead. Dresden was like the moon now, nothing but minerals. The stones were hot. Everybody else in the neighbourhood was dead" (146). The bombing at Dresden was a tragic event and the novels reveal the aftermath of the bombing: "Prisoners of war from many lands came together that morning at such and such a place in Dresden. It had been decreed that here was where the digging for bodies was to begin. So, the digging began" (175).

Most human beings are lovers of peace and they are against war and riots, but at the same time, we can see some leaders and groups are promoting war and conducting various attacks on humanity. People create carnages in the world for their selfish motives. Ideologies, beliefs, religions, powers, etc. are some of the motives behind these wars and tensions. War affects individually as well as collectively, after the World Wars the entire world witnessed the horror of the war.

Kurt Vonnegut exhorted the readers about the need for peace and harmony in our society. Slaughterhouse-Five highly influenced the readers to know the brutalities of the war during modern times. War is equal to death and those who are the supporters of the war are the advocators of death. The novel Slaughterhouse-Five is depicting the danger of war hence we can say that Vonnegut advocates pacifism through his fictional writing, therefore, he is regarded as a champion of anti-war writing during the postmodern period. While we hate others, we do hate ourselves, the entire humanity is alike hence other people's problems are our problems, this truth can find out in the writings of Vonnegut. Good literature always promotes human values and fraternity, Vonnegut a victim, as well as a participant of the war, motivates his readers to follow good human values like pacifism and to promote it among our society. In a nutshell we can say that this novel will be always on the top of anti-war fictional writings.

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