Kurt Vonnegut and postmodernism: An analysis

Sinoj Antony
Lovely Professional University Phagwara Punjab

Ishfaq Ahmad Tramboo
Lovely Professional University Phagwara Punjab.

Abstract

During the middle of the 20th century Kurt Vonnegut, his society as well as the entire humanity faced a lot of tensions and crises due to World Wars and other political issues. The advancement of science, as well as technology, brought a lot of changes in the existing world views; human existence and the meaning of life were seriously questioned and asked by many writers and thinkers. By that time many writers, architects, and designers started to bring new forms and styles in their works. Kurt Vonnegut has given great contributions to American novels as well as to postmodernism. He was a great fictional writer in modern times. His writings were related to human reality, feelings, experiences with certain postmodern elements. In this article, I focus on the postmodern fictional writings of Vonnegut, his writing career, major themes, styles, etc. He has written almost 150 works among them 14 are fictional novels. I have taken 3 major works; Player Piano, Cat's Cradle and Slaughterhouse-Five and discussing the postmodern approach of these fictional works.

Key Words: Kurt Vonnegut, Postmodernism, Player Piano, Cat's Cradle, Slaughterhouse-Five, Style, Theme, Global Village.

Introduction

Kurt Vonnegut is considered one of the best American Postmodern writers of the 20th century, his fictions can be classified as science fiction and postmodernism. All most all styles, themes and techniques of postmodernism can be seen in his fictional writings. He promoted and praised science and technology through his novels, short stories and plays. Today we are living in a world where there is an extraordinary influence of science and technology in every field of human life. The technological advancement led to social, political, cultural and religious changes across the world. While we go through the fictional works of Kurt Vonnegut, we will be able to know that he was a great promoter and champion of postmodernism. His writings always reflected ordinary people's feelings and emotions he always gave importance to human values and principles. Most of his characters were the representatives of the American society of that time. Postmodernism is also considered as a cultural movement that brought a lot of changes and progress in the world, along with postmodern views lot of cultural and social growth took place in almost all parts of the world. Through his writings, Kurt Vonnegut gave his contribution to the world and he was a great model to other postmodern writers of the century. The internet and other advancements in communication brought the term postmodernism in a wider and vast sense and it is benefitted to the majority of the people.
Kurt Vonnegut's forefathers were from Germany and later his family migrated to the United States in the middle of the 19th century. His father and grandfather were architects and designers of new building structures. His mother was from high-class society. Though his parents were German speakers, the first World War, the holocaust and Nazism of Germany led them to abandon German culture, identity, and affinity to show American patriotism hence they did not teach him German Language and culture. During the Great Depression in America, he lost his financial security and as a result, it affected their traditional architectural firm, due to the financial crisis his mother started to write short stories and sold it for remuneration. This strengthened the financial security of the family and he was motivated by the approach of his mother and her views later this attitude helped him to overcome his own personal and financial issues and problems. During World War II he did military service and witnessed the chaos and atrocities of the war and later it influenced greatly his writings and post-modernistic views. Later he was captured by German armed forces and was sent to Dresden, later Alliance power bombed the city and he was escaped from death. Later he returned to the US and continued his service in the Army, afterward he was discharged from the US Army and returned to his native place.

He struggled a lot during his early life, while he was serving in the Army, he witnessed the atrocities and calamities in the world, especially during the Second World War and the post-World War II. He realized human problems and tensions that are existing in the world and the absurdity of the traditional concepts and practices, this led to him think positively and with a point of view and his new attitude and concepts led him to promote and propagate postmodernism. His novels and short stories had been set in this context and he was revealing the true nature of man through his fictional writings.

He wrote his first novel Player Piano in the year 1952 and it was published by Scribner's. The novel was a fictional work with a post-third world war setting, there the factory workers have been replaced by machines. In this novel, he has used a lot of satirical usages and expressions. After this novel, he started to write short stories and sold them to various magazines. His writing helped his family to get some additional income and really, he assisted his family morally and financially. He had written a total of 14 novels, 123 short stories, 7 plays, and 3 other works. Among his all works Slaughterhouse-Five is considered as his masterpiece, this novel gave him more acceptance and popularity throughout the world. This novel was based on his own experiences and memories, the first chapter itself reveals his atrocities and difficulties during the wartime. This novel was released in 1969 and gave him good fame across the world. Later this book was included among the best sellers of the time. He earned some money through this publication and it helped the financial security of his professional career. He was placed as a hero of anti-war writers of the postmodern time. He participated in numerous rallies and college lectures across the county to promote anti-war awareness and this participation helped him to become a champion of postmodernism of his times.

Michael D. Sharp states in his book Popular Contemporary Writers that "Vonnegut's linguistic style as straight forward; his sentences concise, his language simple, his paragraph brief and his ordinary tone conversational" (1364). Kurt Vonnegut always used simple style to be read easily and naturally by the readers. He always highlighted scientific themes and tempers in his fictional writings. His works have been
categorized as science fiction, satire and postmodern. Alien societies and civilization are certain imaginative themes of Vonnegut and this style strengthened his fictional works and concepts. He used fictional narratives and techniques to exaggerate the absurdities and idiosyncrasies in the postmodern world.

Vonnegut was an oral critic of the society where he lived; he was a keen observer of social, political, religious and cultural ideologies of the time and questioned certain stupidities that prevailed in the society through his writings. The lack of wealth and unequal distribution of money in the society was always being questioned by him. He continuously criticized the political, social and religious uncertainty through his writings hence he had many friends and foes in his career. Soon after World War II, many Americans were struggling to lead a good social and economic life. Some families were accumulating wealth and there was no proper distribution in the power and wealth among the people. He was often lamenting on the social Darwinism, 'Survival of the Fittest' view of the society. The might is the right concept that had been dominating the society during those days. According to him, social Darwinism will lead to social anarchy and some people have to have struggled for this fate. These people do not have any choice instead they are struggling in this world on their fate and in such a situation there is no social justice. In *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Timequake* the characters have no choice in what they do, they do not have the notion of free will, they are bound to fate. The majority of the characters are ordinary people with normal feelings coming from common families with certain ambitions and desires, mainly they are looking for the betterment in their personal and social life.

Fear of the loss of one's purpose in life is another theme in his works. He witnessed the devastation and loss of jobs and social security during the Great Depression across the United States. The Industrial Revolution also caused various technological changes, especially the machines started to take the role of human beings or human beings were replaced by machines in factories and industries. These circumstances were also certain themes in his fictional writings. He was aware of the growing numbers of automation and how does it affect the ordinary lives of people and society. His first novel *Player Piano* depicts the struggle of the people, where humans are being replaced by the machines in workplaces and institutions, this resulted from human struggles and identity crisis for many of the people around the world and it severely affects their day to day life in every area of social, political, cultural and religious realms.

Suicide by fire is another common theme in his works it is based on the environmental destruction and manmade causalities by the dangerous weapons. With the development of science and technology mankind invented nuclear weapons and they use it against his kind, this is a great threat to the entire humanity and the universe.

The meaning and existence of life are also being discussed in his works. Human existence, destiny, fate and the end of man are deeply discussed through his major characters. The purpose of life has been a major philosophical discourse throughout the centuries. He pointed out that man is the constructor and destructor of his fate and do not drag God or religion to it, religion is a systematic lie and the belief does not give any progress to the society. He gave more importance to humanity and human values therefore the traditional
concepts of faith, metaphysics, and divine narratives were not his subject matters to be written down. The entire works, themes, and styles of Vonnegut do justice to postmodernism.

Postmodernism is an intellectual concept and a mode of discourse that rejects the possibility of reliable knowledge or the existing ideas over a particular period. Postmodernism denies the existence of universal, stable reality and gives importance to aesthetics and beauty discourses. It is a reaction against scientific attempts to explain reality with objective certainty. It gives more importance to personal experiences and views than collective interests and also deals with knowledge and skepticism. Postmodernism developed in the mid- to late-twentieth century across philosophy, the arts, architecture, and criticism as a departure or rejection of modernism.

Postmodernism is an intellectual concept and a mode of discourse that rejects the possibility of reliable knowledge or the existing ideas over a particular period. Postmodernism denies the existence of universal, stable reality and gives importance to aesthetics and beauty discourses. It is a reaction against scientific attempts to explain reality with objective certainty. It gives more importance to personal experiences and views than collective interests and also deals with knowledge and skepticism. Postmodernism developed in the mid- to late-twentieth century across philosophy, the arts, architecture, and criticism as a departure or rejection of modernism.

Postmodernism deals with the idea of representation, experimentation, stylistics, form, and content. Postmodernism accepted pluralism, as a result, it includes every culture and social norm as equal and it does not give any superiority to a particular culture or ideology. Postmodernism rejects modernist thoughts and views to a certain extent and gives ways to new development and ideologies. It emphasizes multiple truths, stories, and points of view and gives more importance to real-life situations and experiences.

His entire works cannot be discussed in this article hence I go through three of his novels that were written during a different span of his writing career.

*Player Piano* (1952) the first novel of Kurt Vonnegut depicts the postmodern styles and narratives. We can consider it as his first step and approach towards postmodernism. During the initial period of this novel, many critics and scholars considered it as mere science fiction and there is nothing special to this novel. Firstly, the novel was considered as writing related to science and technology but later, he succeeded to express the feelings and views of the post-war period. Three kinds of people can be seen in this novel; modern, postmodern and quasi-object, among these people the postmodern people are always filled with horror, chaos and death fear. American Capitalism is being questioned through these postmodern characters and also a certain communist approach of these characters is seen in this novel. *Player Piano* is about a piano that is automatically played; it is a depiction of technological advancement and also the development of automation that is being implemented in many institutions. This automation can replace human labor and machines can replace human beings in every walk of life. Manmade and mission made elements are used as a technique throughout this novel, fictional characteristics play a major role in his first novel.

*Cat's Cradle* (1963) is another fictional work of Kurt Vonnegut and deals with the second phase of postmodernism. This novel was set after the Second World War context hence, the worldwide crisis and human fears are being highlighted in this novel. Postmodern themes such as social, political, economic and cultural aspects are deeply depicted in this novel mainly based on the American atmosphere, this novel is a good satire on religious ideas and views, mainly this novel satirizes Christianity. Bokonon a major character brings a new religious view known as Bokononism brings in this novel and later the founder himself makes a statement that "I agree that all religions including Bokononism, are nothing but lies" (p103). During modernism religion and religious views, especially the Christian concepts were major themes but, in the
postmodernism, many religious views and beliefs were questioned by many writers, Vonnegut was a major writer in this discipline. The fictional writings were based on people's hobbies, interests, future of mankind, technological outbreaks, etc. Scientific investigation and new technologies were also major themes in the postmodern writing of this novel. This novel depicts the men as machines or they are similar to machines. How the technological changes affected the thinking pattern and imagination of human beings are depicted throughout this novel.

According to Kurt Vonnegut, this novel does not give any meaning and it is full of lies, hence he introduces one of the postmodern ideas that the world can be known by language. Language plays a major role in human civilization and progress. We can understand the world with our language, language helps to discover the world and its changing views. This novel is an example of apocalyptic fiction. The meaningless and absurdity of life is also highlighted in this fictional work. The existence of God, life after death, the crisis between good and evil, ethics and morality are also included as certain major topics in this novel.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) is a typical example of postmodern fiction, by this time the concept of postmodernism reached its peak and became a popular style in various fields, therefore all the elements of postmodernism can be seen in this fictional writing. The communication technologies and media brought the world closer and together hence, the term global village has been introduced by this time. The fictional writings got a wide acceptance by many of the readers and critics by this time. This novel takes the readers to an imaginative world, where they can experience certain aesthetic and artistic values.

This novel is different from the traditional way of writing and provides a lot of postmodern narrative techniques and styles. During wartime, he has suffered in many ways. The World Wars created a lot of existential questions in the minds of people. The central character Billy Pilgrim conducts certain traveling and he meets different people, their views and culture across the country. While we go through the postmodern theory the acceptance of various cultures and their synthesis is a common phenomenon, he has used this technique in this fictional writing. The flashbacks and the memories are also highly used in this fictional writing and these features make the artistic value of this narration more pleasurable. Personal feelings and experiences have a major role here.

**Conclusion**

While we go through the fictional writings of Kurt Vonnegut it is obvious that he has given more importance to social, cultural and political conditions of the present world. With the help of fictional narration and writing, he succeeded to convey the ordinary human feelings and emotions to the readers. Literature and literary works have a great influence on human and social life, in a way literature is the reflection of the social and cultural life of the various societies. The history of literature and culture witnessed a lot of change during these years; various concepts and ideologies were being emerged in different periods. These ideologies and concepts have a great impact on man's social-political, cultural and religious views. As a postmodern writer, Vonnegut has given great mileage to this new ideology and style all of his fictional works underline this fact.
References


