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So it goes: A postmodernist reading of Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five

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The paper offers a postmodernist reading of Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five to verify the long-debated premise that postmodernism really departs from and even challenges the modernist philosophy. The state of epistemological skepticism that throws its shadows on our cognitive apparatus challenges the rationalist ideals; and the state of ontological uncertainty – both intratextually and extratextually – questions the claims of modernism as far as homogeneity, sound meaning and credible representation of the world are concerned. The focal point of this paper is examining Vonnegut’s concretization of the postmodernist theory in writing “an anti-war book” based on his personal experience as a prisoner of war in the second world war. Vonnegut has attempted to blend this serious theme in Slaughterhouse-Five with science fiction and humor. Through the choice of his protagonist – Billy Pilgrim – and the manipulation of various postmodernist techniques, Vonnegut exposes the atrocities of wars by uncovering the heroic façade by which nations mask their real intentions in launching wars, and manifests the moral vacuum that characterizes postwar western societies.

Key words: Postmodernism, American novel, anti-war literature, Vonnegut.

INTRODUCTION

The present paper seeks a thorough interpretation of Kurt Vonnegut’s novel Slaughterhouse-Five (1969) in the light of postmodernism. The major concern of the paper is to read Slaughterhouse-Five within the framework of postmodernist thought where the position of man in the world is questioned, his cognitive apparatus is subject to many challenges, and his ontological orientation is suffering a deadlock. The novel is studied as a text that unfolds back on itself and announces the death of its author in spite of the fact that an autobiographical element is striving hard to find its place. The text is further tackled as a network in which elements of contingency and indeterminacy pose a question mark for a long established modernist heritage.

Slaughterhouse-Five is not simply a fictional narrative created by its author; it is rather a representation of a real experience that Vonnegut had actually lived. Kurt Vonnegut belonged to an originally German family that had tried to maintain close ties to Germany. Following the First World War in which the United States allied itself with Britain against Germany, German Americans were asked to break their ties with Germany to prove their patriotism. This anti-German feeling bred in the United States after the First World War, dimmed the Vonnegut family’s business and pride as prominent members in the German
Indianapolis society. This sense of loss frequently appears in Vonnegut’s writing. He was then taken as a soldier in the Second World War, and during the battle of the bulge, which was the largest American defeat in the second world war, Vonnegut was captured by the Germans and taken as a prisoner of war. As a POW he was shipped to Dresden, a beautiful German city where he and his fellow prisoners were put in a slaughterhouse. On the night of 13 February, 1945 this beautiful city was completely destroyed leaving behind 135000 deaths to mark the largest massacre in European history, which was never declared as such. It was in 1969, 24 years after the Dresden massacre, and the year when the war in Vietnam reached its peak, that Kurt Vonnegut published Slaughterhouse-Five. He was disappointed to see his country as “a nation that has betrayed its founding principles of democracy, freedom, justice and opportunity for all” (Marvin, 2002), and got involved in such a bloody war that added to countless wars preceding and yet to come. This triggered him to publish “an anti-war book” (Slaughterhouse-Five, 3) based on his personal experience as a prisoner of war in the Second World War.

Slaughterhouse-Five is a magnification of the escalating inhuman cruelty that has spread in postwar Western societies, and the moral vacuum characterizing contemporary life. Through the choice of his protagonist and the manipulation of various postmodern techniques, Vonnegut exposes the atrocities of wars through exposing the heroic façade by which nations mask their real intensions in launching wars. Billy Pilgrim’s story is a parody of the sacredness associated with Pilgrimage. It is a non-heroic, meaningless pilgrimage that juxtaposes Western grand narratives in which wars have long been glorified. Through the historiographic metafiction presented in the narrative, Vonnegut shatters the continuum of history, the temporal and epistemological structures to recreate a long-last sense of the human. In other words, Vonnegut “shatters the teleology of narrative in order to emphasize the epistemic, ontological, and temporal rupture of warfare, simultaneously re-inventing narrative in order to re-invent the human” (Taylor, 2013).

Postmodernism: A continuum or a rupture

Postmodernism is a dominant philosophical approach that questions the totality and homogeneity of both rationalist and humanist doctrines. The primary concern of the rationalist philosophies and theories has been to establish the essentiality of the homogeneity of the ‘meaning’ delivered and a transcendental subject who is the producer of this homogeneous ‘meaning’. In this wide realm of thought, various attempts were made starting with the theological enterprise of the 15th century, passing through Descartes’ rationalist philosophy of the 17th century. With the advent of the 20th century and the fall of the idea of the ‘internal light of reason’, intellectual discontinuity and cultural ruptures began to dominate the intellectual arena and, further, to question the fake homogeneity that is the core of the rationalist enterprise.

Some critics as David Harvey argue that “there is more continuity than difference in the movement from modernism to postmodernism” (Hawthorn, 1992). A scrutinizing look at the postmodernist thought, however, marks the radical turn that took place in the human method of reasoning. Discontinuity has replaced the Hegelian totality, and dispersal of meaning among infinite possibilities has nullified the credibility of homogeneous meaning advocated by the structuralists. In the modernist philosophy, the central question is one of order, thus implying the repletion of grand narratives for the sake of establishing homogeneity and order. For the modernists, the individual is the unit of value; he is the autonomous rational "Subject" who is able to assert his freedom and individualism. This underlining idea of a Subject endowed with the ability to question by his intellectual faculties the previously proposed premises, emerged with the writings of Bacon, Decartes and Kant. Unlike modernism which finds ground in the totalizing theory, postmodernism bases its arguments on the insights of the chaos theory. It advocates heterogeneity and diversity rather than modernist homogeneity.

The term ‘postmodernism’ emerged in the 1960s to cope with and reflect the radical changes which have been projected on the nature of knowledge since World War II. The importance of postmodernist studies lies in their role in directing our attention “to the changes, the major transformations, taking place in contemporary society and culture” (Sarup, 1993). Featherstone argues that postmodernism suggests “an epochal shift or break from modernity involving the emergence of a new social totality with its own distinct organizing principles” (1991). Postmodernism is a comprehensive philosophical and cultural movement that rejects the modernist philosophy fundamentally as a reaction to the paradox between its advocated premises and their cultural manifestations: “while the modern world continues to speak of reason, freedom and progress, its pathologies tell another story”(Hicks, 2004). Postmodernists repudiate the grand narratives of Hegel and Marx, and any form of universal or teleological philosophy. They believe that such a ‘holistic’ vision is unattainable and nonexistent. What characterizes the postmodern culture is fragmentation of all disciplines: fragmentation of language, discourse, time, space and the human subject itself. Hence, postmodernist characteristics include endless interpretation of all truths, skepticism and blurring of the lines of reality.
This anti-foundational approach has drawn its essence from the works of philosophers and thinkers such as Nietzsche, Foucault and Lyotard who radically vilify the western paradigm of thinking. Their anti-humanist philosophy fundamentally deconstructs western metaphysics that has long tended to pose generalizations, and presents a critique of the western culture that tries to pursue its role of being the unquestionable originator while clearly conscious of "its own cultural "relativization " (Young, 1993). Nietzschean philosophy highlights the fact that all western humanistic disciplines are victimized by their 'will to truth', arguing that truth - as corresponding to reality- is nonexistent; it is mere illusion created for maintaining stability among people. As for Foucault, his main concern is the marginalized groups who have been excluded from political power through a set of 'differences' that have long suppressed their right to freedom.

According to him, "history is not the progress of universal reason [but rather] the play of rituals of power, humanity advancing from one domination to another" (Dreyfus et al., 1982). It is with Lyotard's Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (1979) that the ways of legitimating knowledge in contemporary societies are examined. Legitimating knowledge in the Enlightenment was tied to what Lyotard calls 'grand narratives'. His attack on the 'grand narratives' lies in its essence on his belief that "we can no longer talk about a totalizing idea of reason for there is no reason, only reasons" (Sarup, 1993). Leotard thus refutes this form of narrative for being "the principle way in which a culture or collectivity legitimates itself in a demanding tautology" (Connor, 1997).

In the postmodern condition, "literature, art, and theory are all part of the same incoherence and meaninglessness" (Hogan, 2000). Postmodern literature is primarily an outcome and a reflection of the movement's ideologies and theories. It is a reaction against the Enlightenment and modernist approaches to literature, and is characterized by heavy reliance on techniques that reflect its ideological context like fragmentation, paradox and unreliable narrators. It is the outcome of the fall of metaphysics, the collapse of the system of morality, the death of man, the dispersal of meaning, and the destabilization of all structures from within themselves. These postmodernist characteristics will further unfold in the course of the analysis of the novel under study.

Hence, postmodernism is undeniably an outcome of modernism, but as a rejection of the modernist thought rather than a continuum. While in the modernist context, the individual is stuck amidst a totalizing web of social forces that tend to dichotomize roles and therefore is relegated to role-taking in this global homogeneity, in the postmodernist context, roles are never stable; they take the form of negative dialectics. The postmodern 'self' is a decentered entity left adrift in an ambivalent meaningless world. Studied against this background, Slaughterhouse-Five as a postmodernist novel presents man's dilemma within the postmodernist web. The characters presented, the techniques used and the issues dwelt upon, all shatter the modernist totalitarian argument. Vonnegut, as well as his protagonist, emblemsizes this postmodern 'decentered' self entangled in a chaotic, meaningless context. Drawing clear lines between modernism and postmodernism is thus, an essential importance when the latter is to be applied to literary texts.

All this happened, more or less: Slaughterhouse-Five as a historiographic metafiction

It is part of the postmodernist stand to confront the paradoxes of fictive/historical representation, the particular/the general, and the present/the past. And this confrontation is itself contradictory, for it refuses to recuperate or dissolve either side of the dichotomy, yet it is more than willing to exploit both (Hutcheon, 1996).

Writing about the past has been and will always remain a problematic issue, since the representation of history mainly depends on the perspective of the beholder. Therefore, historiography can never present a true or an original image of the past; but rather a copy. The term "historiographic metafiction" was introduced by Linda Hutcheon in her essay "historiographic metafiction: Parody and the intertexts of History" (1989). According to Hutcheon, postmodern fiction "suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present" (1996). Works of "historiographic metafiction" self-consciously "distort history" (Sim, 1998), by playing upon "the truth and lies of the historical record" (Hutcheon, 1996). Hutcheon's concept thus echoes Foucault who asserts that "the true historical sense confirms our existence among countless events, without a landmark or a point of reference" (Foucault, 1977).

Slaughterhouse-Five is intentionally a fictional representation of a real historical event – the firebombing of Dresden by allied forces. The story of the Dresden massacre has been known for the world in the way it was documented; a way that would always glamorize the role played on behalf of the powerful. However, as a postmodernist author, Vonnegut writes the novel with the intention of uncovering the minor stories blurred through the discourse used in the process of historiographic representation, and hence deconstructing the façade masking many American institutions while reconstructing history. In his attempt to recapture this moment of 'rupture', Vonnegut applies Brechtian 'estrangement
effect' to defamiliarize the reader with the grand narrative and challenge him into a process of re-evaluation of the self, history, and the world. According to Brooker, this technique is used to "[strip] the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and [create] a sense of astonishment and curiosity" about it (1994). Vonnegut's motif is initially stated in the opening semi-autobiographic chapter of the novel:

All this happened, more or less, the war parts, anyway, are pretty much true. One guy I knew really was shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn't his. Another guy I knew really did threaten to have his personal enemies killed by hired gunmen after the war. And so on. I've changed all the names" (Slaughterhouse-Five, 1).

Throughout the novel, actual historical events are described while being problematized through the intrusion of science fiction, the self-conscious presence of the narrator and the use of nonlinear narration. The Tralfamadorians and their concept of time juxtapose both Pilgrim and Vonnegut's inability to tear themselves off the historical web. Both the author and his creation are unable to attain what Nietzsche has rejected and referred to as "amor fati". This concept of 'amor fati' resonates to the teleological view of history; historical events are inevitably true, but escaping them is possible. The great importance and magnification that is characteristic of dealing with such crucial world events is juxtaposed by highlighting the triviality of the cause if compared to its outcome.

The reader is taken into a historical tour that blends various seemingly-unrelated historical events together; the story of Adam and Eve, of Lot and his wife, the children's crusade (the subtitle of the novel), the world wars, and other incidents that are related to sin and resurrection. These all blend together to represent history as a non-chronological repetition of endless signifiers that lead to no signifieds. All human actions are related somehow and they all refer to and explain one another. Thus, Vonnegut's novel is an attempt to shake the totalizing grounds that hold history intact.

Slaughterhouse-Five furthermore underlines the crucial role played by fiction in the postmodern world. In a conversation between Pilgrim and Eliot Rosewater – Pilgrim's next-bed patient in the hospital - Vonnegut reveals the key concept of the novel: Both characters are victims of World War II, and both find solace outside the realm of historical reality. While Pilgrim resorts to time-travel as an unconscious means of refuting the teleological historical scheme, Rosewater finds his refuge in the literature of Kilgore Trout – a sci-fi author. In this concern, Rosewater suggests that fiction helps postmodern individuals to "re-invent themselves and their universe" (Slaughterhouse-Five, 82) in an attempt to create any meaning out of this chaotic meaninglessness.

Ontological uncertainty and the absence of textual autonomy

In postmodern literature, the text's self autonomy together with the author's assumed authority is deconstructed. These fixed notions are put 'under erasure'. The postmodernist author echoes the ontological uncertainty that pervades the postmodern context. He "distrusts the wholeness and completion associated with the traditional stories, and prefers to deal with other ways of structuring narrative" (Sim, 1998). A postmodern text never experiences "fictional [or] linguistic autonomy"; it rather reflects upon itself and its own "process of production" (Juan-Navarro, 2000). It is a 'text' that deconstructs itself. Slaughterhouse-Five initially opens with:

"All this happened more or less" (Slaughterhouse-Five, 1) to minimize the certainty of the narrated events, and to render the novel itself an embodiment of the age’s uncertainty and meaninglessness.

The self-conscious presence of Vonnegut himself in his own creation is meant to shatter the claim of the author's authority over his text. The author himself acts as "a transworld identity between the real world and the fictionalized" one (Hooti, 2011). As one of the prominent and prolific postmodernist writers, Vonnegut in Slaughterhouse-Five provides the reader with "plenty of clues about the connection between his life and work by weaving autobiographical details" with fictional ones (Marvin, 2002). Chapter one exists outside the central narrative, providing an autobiographical account of the origins of the text and the "process of [its] writing" (Marvin, 2002). This narrative technique adopted by Vonnegut intensifies the difficulty of reconstructing the history of this traumatic past.

Vonnegut's technique is emblematic of the postmodernist conception of the absent author. This mode of writing gives space for the reader to analyze and dissect the world in an attempt to reconstruct it. Undercutting his authority as the 'father' of the text, Vonnegut renders a demystification of a world void of meaning and homogeneity and at the same time distances himself from this Dresden massacre to enable himself to transfer his suffering into art. There are three major occurrences for Vonnegut in the novel; first, on the wedding day of Pilgrim's daughter, he answers the phone, and on the other side there appears a speaker who "Billy could almost smell his breath-mustard gas and roses" (Slaughterhouse-Five, 60). The second instance, when Pilgrim enters the latrine, he is described as standing next to an American man who "wailed that he has excreted everything but his brains…. That was I. That was
Death of the modernist subject

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the difference" (Slaughterhouse-Five, 50). The postmodern context has given birth to a lost postmodernist ‘self’ deprived and robbed of the free will to determine or rather to understand the nature of his position. Pippin describes this postmodern dilemma saying:

*We have degenerated into creatures who can will to do only what all others are willing to do, and this is primarily out of fear and a timid hesitation about the consequences of any full realization of the contingency and the plurality of human ends* (1999).

In his Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Nietzsche announces the advent of the age of the last man. This last man is the postmodern ‘self’ that is “paralyzed by [the] recognition of the contingency of all beliefs” (Levine, 1995). He is ontologically uncertain, and is constantly subject to ambivalent events that shake the whole corpus of moral values he believes in and abides by. As for Foucault, the postmodern man is no more the transcendental subject that can induce a change depending on the power of his intellect, but rather a powerless ‘self’ that is constantly open to transformation by other forces.

Slaughterhouse-Five materializes the postmodernist attempt at and failure to grasp a meaning in the uncertain and incomprehensible twentieth century context. Billy Pilgrim can be viewed as an absurd character portrayed as an “isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe”; into the ambiguous human life “as it moves from the nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end” (Abrams, 1988). The novel emblematizes Vonnegut’s own doubt in free will. In the framing arc of Pilgrim’s story, Vonnegut expresses his own dilemma as a postmodernist ‘self’ who is stuck within the meaningless, fake western life on one side and his inerasable memories on the other. His war memories never leave him. Through these memories the hidden traumas of life are constantly revealed to him despite his inability to reveal them to others. This causes him a partial loss of contact with reality. Vonnegut reveals himself as being trapped within the Western grand narratives and the fake claims of possessing free will and rightful causes. Taking part in the war has placed him within the postmodernist dilemma that deprives the individual of possessing a coherent sense of self.

Billy Pilgrim – like the era he represents – suffers paranoid anxieties, which include “the distrust of fixity, of being circumscribed to any one particular place or identity, the conviction that society is conspiring against the individual, and the multiplication of self-made plots to counter the scheming of others” (Sim, 1998). He is emblematic of the postmodernist ‘will to power’ and is deprived of the power to choose. Pilgrim’s actions are always reactions to the pressures the outside world poses upon him. Throughout his life, Pilgrim is unwillingly forced into roles that he does not choose: a soldier, a husband to a wife he does not love, an employer,…etc. in spite of being neither mentally nor physically fit to be a soldier, Pilgrim finds himself “drafted for military service in the Second World War” (Slaughterhouse-Five, 19), taken as a POW, and witnessing a massacre that leads him to a partial loss of control over his mind. More tragically, Billy Pilgrim is not only deprived of the ability to decide the course of his life, he is even unable to predict which part of it he will be living next:

“He is in a constant state of stage fright, he says, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next” (Slaughterhouse-Five, 19).

Billy Pilgrim will end his life without reaching any answers. In a conversation between him and a Tralfamadorian, the Tralfamadorian dwells upon this issue of free will, saying:

*If I hadn’t spent so much time studying Earthlings…I wouldn’t have any idea what was meant by ‘free will’. I’ve visited thirty-one inhabited planets in the universe, and I have studied reports on one hundred more. Only on Earth is there any talk of free will* (Slaughterhouse-Five, 70).

Billy Pilgrim’s name is itself an allegoric reflection on the postmodernist “pilgrimage through the meaninglessness of life, the randomness of existence, the chaos that symbolizes the unknown” (Sieber, 2000). Billy Pilgrim is essentially an overt parody of John Bunyan’s Christian in Pilgrim’s progress. The novel is a “pilgrim progress turned around, in which… Billy Pilgrim does not move
toward heaven. Instead, [he] loses his soul, his innocence, his psychic balance" (McKean, 1969). This grand narrative—the choice of Billy Pilgrim’s name—is deconstructed and questioned by Vonnegut. The Western legacy of man’s ability to attain salvation is ‘put under erasure’ in such a bare postmodern wasteland in which the individual’s pilgrimage is towards nothingness and chaos.

Pilgrim’s powerlessness to control his world or rather his own life is projected in various ways in Slaughterhouse-Five. One of these ways is the juxtaposition established between this lack of control and the ‘serenity prayer’ which is hung on his office wall and worn by his Earthly mate:

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the difference” (Slaughterhouse-Five, 50).

Paradoxically, Billy Pilgrim is deprived of possessing a self; for as being “a bug trapped in amber” (Slaughterhouse-Five, 63), he is forcibly bound to history and time. Billy Pilgrim is in a constant attempt to create a shield; a different world rather than the lived one. This shield is his battered mind which is his only way out. The catastrophe Pilgrim has experienced in Dresden has violently destroyed his ability to understand the world, truth and his own self rendering him emblematic of the postmodernist distorted ‘self’. His story is particularly manipulated by Vonnegut to echo his view of the postmodernist distorted ‘self’. His story is particularly manipulated by Vonnegut to echo his view of the postmodernist distorted ‘self’. His story is particularly manipulated by Vonnegut to echo his view of the postmodernist distorted ‘self’. His story is particularly manipulated by Vonnegut to echo his view of the postmodernist distorted ‘self’. His story is particularly manipulated by Vonnegut to echo his view of the postmodernist distorted ‘self’. His story is particularly manipulated by Vonnegut to echo his view of the postmodernist distorted ‘self’. His story is particularly manipulated by Vonnegut to echo his view of the postmodernist distorted ‘self’. His story is particularly manipulated by Vonnegut to echo his view of the postmodernist distorted ‘self’. His story is particularly manipulated by Vonnegut to echo his view of the postmodernist distorted ‘self’. His story is particularly manipulated by Vonnegut to echo his view of the postmodernist distorted ‘self’. His story is particularly manipulated by Vonnegut to echo his view of the postmodernist distorted ‘self’. His story is particularly manipulated by Vonnegut to echo his view of the postmodernist distorted ‘self'.

Through constructing his protagonist as such, Vonnegut thus argues that the western man must abandon his belief in free will and adopt a passive response to world events.

Coming unstuck in time: Spatio-temporal uncertainty

The time would not pass. Somebody was playing with the clocks, and not only with the electric clocks, but the wind-up kind too. The second hand on my watch would twitch once, and a year would pass, and then it would twitch again. There was nothing I could do about it. As an earthling, I had to believe whatever clocks said — and calendars” (Slaughterhouse-Five, 17).

In the postmodern context, “all history awaits repetition in the future: all existence is —as-it-was-and-is-supposed-to-become; all moments exist simultaneously” (Leeds, 1996). The postmodern world is a fragmented world; a world of cut-pastes that lead to no significant meaning. Therefore, a linear history which supposes that chronological events conform to a rational ending no longer exists in a postmodern context. In Slaughterhouse-Five Vonnegut utilizes the non-linear structure related to the chaos theory to underline the postmodernist trauma, and to render the post World War Western world a world where nothingness prevails; a world bereft of design. He attempts to “escape the linear progression of fiction by giving us, as nearly as he can, all the moments of Billy Pilgrim’s life at once” (McKean, 1969). This use of non-linearity reflects Nietzsche’s doctrine of “eternal recurrence” which is “the ultimate denial of meaning and purpose” (Poole, 1991). This doctrine is exemplified in the novel through the Tralfamadorians and Billy Pilgrim's time-travels which deconstruct the modernist linear and teleological occurrence and underline the “Schizophrenia of contemporary American consciousness” (Taylor, 2013).

Vonnegut reflects on the insignificance of time for him - the growing man who has experienced a severe disillusionment in the Western long-advocated moral claims- in the opening chapter of the novel through highlighting his sense of time as opposed to his wife’s: “Sooner or later I go to bed, and my wife asks me what time it is. She always has to know the time. Sometimes I don’t know, and I say, ‘search me!’” (Slaughterhouse-Five, 6). This sense of loss and the incompatibility of time as it seems and time as it really is finds best manifestation in the character of Billy Pilgrim as well as the Tralfamadorians’ concept of time. Pilgrim is introduced as becoming unstuck in time. Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He had walked through a door in 1955 and come out another one in 1941. He has gone back through that door to find himself in 1963. He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all events in between (Slaughterhouse-Five, 37).

This opening piece of information the reader receives about Pilgrim frees Vonnegut from any chronological obligation. By using this technique, the author is capable of placing his character within any time frame. The novel is constructed in fragments which are linked through the technique of time-travel. Dresden itself is a moment of rupture, which implies the impossibility of linearity. It is an event that cuts the homogeneous web of American morality; an “epistemic and existential tear in the fabric of experience” (Taylor, 2013). That’s why Vonnegut has chosen to use this non-linear narrative structure to focus on and revolve around this crucial moment. That is, time fragmentation is used to keep the key event – the Dresden bombing – fresh in the reader’s mind.

Furthermore, the science fiction section is inserted in the story to unfold the postmodernist argument concerning time. For the Tralfamadorians. When a person dies he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past…. All moments, past, present and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadorians...
can see how permanent all the moments are" (Slaughterhouse-Five, 22). The Tralfamadorians teach Pilgrim how to view his life as a long line or rather a circular structure of events, the thing that leads the “generic imprint of these moments to always express themselves in the same way” (Sieber, 2000). The moment of Billy Pilgrim’s death is the moment in which Vonnegut exhibits most the postmodernist spatio-temporal distortion. Pilgrim has left his will together with a tape recorder in which he has described his death: “I, Billy Pilgrim, the tape begins, will die, have died and always will die on February thirteenth, 1976” (Slaughterhouse-Five, 116). While he is addressing a large crowd in Chicago on the issue of flying saucers and the nature of time, Pilgrim predicts his own death within an hour, and closes his speech with these words:

“Farewell, hello, farewell, hello” (Slaughterhouse-Five, 117).

Billy Pilgrim is actually shot, and the reader expects it to be the closure of the story – at least his story. However, it is neither the story’s closure nor that of Pilgrim’s life. After describing Pilgrim’s death, Vonnegut pursues his narrative:

“So Billy experiences death for a while. It is simply violet light and a hum. There isn’t anybody else there. Not even Billy Pilgrim is there. Then he swings back into life again” (Slaughterhouse-Five, 117).

Neurosis, the modern dilemma, and the moment of apocalypse

Nietzsche’s last completed work before his final collapse - Ecco homo: How one becomes what one is - refers to his project of “remaking the self” (Poole, 1991). Nietzsche’s dramatic end in an asylum is no doubt emblematic of a postmodernist “desperate, but futile act of defiance” (Poole, 1991) that has faced disillusionment and the incapability of reconstruction, and a result of his inability to solve the “ills of modernity” (Poole, 1991). Slaughterhouse-Five is a seemingly autobiographical statement that puts the American morality ‘under erasure’. The novel alludes to these postmodern feelings of existential uncertainty, fear and guilt and reflects “the terror of human indeterminacy amidst the incommensurate seas of history, time, fate, and circumstance” (Taylor, 2013).

Through a variety of elements and especially the character of the protagonist, Vonnegut unmarks the postmodern – especially the American – morality which has proved to be a mere facet covering endless layers of absurdity and cruelty. Vonnegut bases his narrative on the juxtaposition between stressing the inevitability of the occurrence of the apocalyptic moment and between the suggestion that the world is apt to experience eternity. Pilgrim’s insanity implies Vonnegut’s inherent message that “the restoration of a real order in modern society…will occur not by blind obedience to totalitarian systems but as a result of challenges to the bureaucratic institutions” (Lupack, 1995). The text’s title is Vonnegut’s initial attempt to deconstruct the romantic facet of the traumatic effects of wars rather than merely glamorizing them. Billy Pilgrim is exemplary of those children crusaders. In the opening chapter of the novel, Vonnegut openly declares this idea: “We had been foolish virgins in the war, right at the end of childhood” (Slaughterhouse-Five, 12).

This idea is recurrently echoed throughout the novel where there are several incidents highlighting – whether directly or indirectly – Vonnegut’s aim. Vonnegut’s chosen characters as well tend to unveil the fake postmodern American pretences. Billy Pilgrim, Edgar Derby, Rosewater, as well as the extraterrestrial Tralfamadorians all help in pinpointing Vonnegut’s claim. Billy Pilgrim’s life is a parody of the American dream; he is a representative of the postmodern America and a victim of the American myth. Pilgrim’s life represents the facet of the American dream; whereas his “underside follows the other formula of our time: mental breakdown, shock therapy, emptiness” (Giannone, 1977).

Ironically, Pilgrim is supposed to have survived the war and to have witnessed the American victory. On the surface, Pilgrim is part of those allied forces that have conquered their German enemy; however, in reality, he returns as a “shell-shocked victim” who suffers from disillusionment and depression” (Lupack, 1995). After his supposed triumph and survival, Pilgrim returns home, constructs an optometric business, and makes a family; that means achieving the constituents of the American dream. Nevertheless, after the experience he has passed through, Pilgrim loses his faith in this totalitarian image of the American morality, but is unable to project this growing sense of fear and disillusionment. Therefore, he turns into an escapist who finds no way out except creating his own Utopia; a world which calls for eternity and humanism.

Pilgrim is not a single case; on the contrary, this same experience is shared on behalf of other characters as well. Eliot Rosewater – Pilgrim’s chamber mate in the veteran’s hospital - has been a captain in World War II and has had terrible experiences in the war that have led him to resort to drinking and reading science fiction stories. He shares with Pilgrim the postmodern self’s distrust in a world controlled by a strive for destruction which is often advocated for and protected by the nations’ leaders. The victims of these destructive schemes are not
only the soldiers who get murdered or imprisoned in the battlefields; the victims are all citizens from all parties who find the world they live in a bare man-made dystopia which renders the individual’s life empty and vague. Vonnegut’s doubt in and re-evaluation of American morality is further manifested through the character of Edgar Derby. A middle-aged school teacher who volunteers for the war, Derby is presented as the American patriot who idealizes the American values. His stand is not intended to be ironic; on the contrary, it reveals the conflict within Vonnegut himself. The nature of Derby’s death accentuates the postmodern traumatic loss. Derby is not killed in the war; he is rather executed for stealing a teapot. This trivial accident brings the end to this sole idealist putting ‘under erasure’ the role of heroes in the contemporary world.

Ronald Weary is an American figure further structured by Vonnegut as a cry against American morality. Weary is an 18-year-old American who is described as being “at the end of an unhappy childhood” (Slaughterhouse-Five, 28). Weary fanaticizes that the part he plays in the war is that of “The three musketeers” who were thought of as elite people who have served Christianity greatly. The other two ‘musketeers’ are skilled scouts. The three are used by Vonnegut as a parody of the ‘The three musketeers’ for the reason of showing their heroic story as fake as that of the Children’s Crusade. Weary’s own imaginary version of the war story goes as such:

There was a big German attack, and Weary and his antitank buddies fought like hell until everybody was killed but Weary. So it goes. And then Weary tied in with two scouts, and they became close friends immediately. They shook hands all around. They called themselves ‘The Three Musketeers’ (Slaughterhouse-Five, 34).

Vonnegut’s three musketeers do not conform to the unity they need to fulfill their mission. Their fantastical belief in their heroic role in the war is not less an escapist attempt from reality than that of Billy Pilgrim. Deconstructing the importance of the three musketeers is further achieved by giving their name to the candy bar Valencia is constantly chewing, hence degrading their significance as well as questioning the authenticity of any grand heroic narrative. Vonnegut’s exhibition of these characters exemplifying the postmodern traumatic present, predicts an apocalyptic future and attempts at creating a new world by going back to early moments of creation. The Tralfamadorians are apt to destroy the earth and its inhabitants to create a new life based on their concepts of continuity and non-linearity.

However, they are advocates of eternity. Pilgrim is tempted by the glory of the American dream, but his participating in the war leads to his mental fall and collapse. He loses his illusionary paradise and faces the real world full of hatred and murder. He witnesses fellow creatures destroying one another exactly as Adam’s sons fought over worldly matters. Moreover, the concept of the circular nature of time refers to the no-end of the world. The world is eternal, and whatever end we meet leads to new beginnings in an endless chain of causes and effects. Pilgrim’s self-created pilgrimage to Tralfamadore juxtaposes his forced pilgrimage to the battlefield and enhances Vonnegut’s own predicament. Billy Pilgrim is a typical first man in Tralfamadore, and lives with his own Eve in this regained paradise. In spite of being watched by the alien Tralfamadores, he at last experiences privacy and relief. This is Vonnegut’s final message: the postmodern world is no more a world of freedom and morality; it is a world of totalitarian fatalism that must be checked and rejected.

The postmodern cruelty presented by Vonnegut is culminated by the fact that this slaughterhouse is not a fictional setting created to achieve this traumatic effect; it is rather the real setting of Vonnegut’s own experience in the war. Vonnegut – and similarly Pilgrim – together with other POWs are being captives in a slaughterhouse, the thing that implies that in the postmodern context, the individual is deprived of his ‘will’ to be; he is even dehumanized into a mere animal used to fuel the war machine:

The slaughterhouse where Billy is kept as a prisoner in Dresden becomes more than a grotesque naturalistic image of human beings dehumanized by war, hanging like butchered animals on hooks. It becomes an all-encompassing metaphor for human existence in which suffering and death are commonplace (Broer, 1994).

Slaughterhouse-Five thus advocates for a final apocalyptic – both moral and physical - referred to through the countless deaths that prevail in the novel. Broer argues that in the novel we – as readers - encounter death by starvation, rotting, incineration, squashing, gassing, shooting, poisoning, bombing, torturing, hanging, and relatively routine death by disease. We get the deaths of dogs, horses, pigs, Vietnamese soldiers, crusaders, hunters, priests, officers, hobos, actresses, prison guards, a slave laborer, a suffragette, Jesus Christ, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Billy Pilgrim’s mother and father, his wife, Edgar Derby, Ronald Weary, the regimental chaplain’s assistant, Paul Lazzaro, Colonel Wild Bob; we get the deaths of a bottle of champagne, billions of body ice, bacteria, and fleas; the novel; entire towns, and finally the universe (1994).

CONCLUSION

Hence, reading Slaughterhouse-Five within the frame of
postmodernist philosophy, renders the novel a reflection of the postmodernist context and an expression of the postmodernist dilemma. The novel is exemplary of the state of the postmodernist epistemological skepticism that throws its shadows on our cognitive apparatus and challenges the rationalist ideals; and of the state of ontological uncertainty – both intratextually and extratextually – that questions the claims of modernism as far as homogeneity, sound meaning and credible representation of the world are concerned. The novel is an indicator of the death of the world; a world lacking any sense or meaning; a chaotic world that entombs under its surface countless sufferings, deaths and moral decay. The text verbalizes Vonnegut’s immersion in the absurdity of history through offering a narrative that embodies the dilemma of the postwar generation. Deconstructing history in order to reconstruct it is Vonnegut’s tool to revive the human trapped within the amber of historical turmoil. Portraying a world that is falling into pieces, Vonnegut renders the whole system of representation nothing but a signifier which refers to another signifier, leading to no signifieds. The linguistic input of the text thus serves to shatter the system of representation, yielding many interpretations for the same phenomenon and asserting the fact that there is no single ‘Truth’, but rather a multiplicity of ‘Truths’.

Conflict of Interests

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The Seeds of communism in christianity: Reality and limitations

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The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness.» Karl Marx. Communism, in its chauvinistic fervor, often takes the form of a religious section not to say an orthodoxy in its own right. Paradoxically enough, in communism, the world is not there save as a mass of materials and it is for this reason in particular that it offers no room for deity at once. All deities, in its philosophy are considered as a means for the rulers to manipulate the masses. In view of its radical annihilation of the principle of hierarchy known to monotheistic religions, communism has been set to rival with all religions at once and with Christianity in particular, due to the social and cultural environment where they were both vying for popularity: namely the West. From a communist point of view, man is held as the sole responsible for his own deeds and it is only by reference to those deeds that he shall go «up» or «down» in the eyes of his immediate social surrounding. And yet, unconsciously, communism seems to have been perpetrating a lie that has grown into something self-induced.

Key words: Christianity, communism, communists and humanism and Man.

INTRODUCTION

Under communism, man is no master over his own destiny; instead, he is enthralled by the chimera of «society»: that the latter is blessing and that man can thrive only within the stifling agglomerations of fellow partisans to the communist state. In the light of this, my line of thought starts off by an attempt to qualify the relationship between communism and Christianity. Communism has been long struggling to keep us under the illusion that man is afforded full and absolute autonomy for his deeds for the mere idea that there is no deity at the back of its references and more autonomy, indeed, once unchained from class struggle: a claim which hardly escapes criticism.

From a psychological point of view, and in Freud’s reading, this is an instance of displacement. It can be read consequently as an outlet for the pent-up resentments of those communist «Individuals» against their personal failures or simply against their bitter incapacity to adjust to or to fit in the mould of capitalism. What they are antagonizing is precisely the notion of competition. They are aspiring to institutionalize a moneyless, class-less state whereby there should be no one «individual» to be set as a model to follow. There will be only the «State»: that abstract ghoul which literally drains the riches of people to stand out as a contrived representation of the well-being of the community. Communism
in the light of this and from a Freudian perspective reveals itself as a defence mechanism according to which the ills of the self are all dumped onto an outsider: stigmatized as the bearer of our own imperfections. This outsider for the communists is the non-communist.

Paradoxically enough, and more alarmingly, the subject of the projection can be pointed as the fellow Communists themselves who have to bear on their shoulders all the incapacities of people from their own party.

So, if the communists do not feel they are likely to be in assonance with the capitalists, then, they have to unconsciously indict every single member of their party and consequently turn away from them and hail the State as their god. Those latent motivations can yet be read in the followers of Christ who chose to renounce all property and devote their beings to worship. Again, a disdain for individuality in the Christian faith itself can be the unacknowledged reference to that fervent devotion and sacrificial inclination either of the Lord or of his disciples.

*He who trusts in himself is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom is kept safe*¹

Still, this very same issue of projection can be the guiding star in our reading of the notion of monotheistic religion in the several manifestations it has taken throughout history.

Communism was so impulsive and radical a movement that its leaders felt it vital for them to sweep away a wide array of long-praised certainties in order to find a locus for their own dogmas within the minds of people. And yet, the basic tare for communism was that it unconsciously structured itself as the antithesis of Christianity in a number of its aspects.

Christianity was built on an idealistic form of Humanism. The latter could be traced back to the Platonic view of the world as a great chain of being: one in which every single creature is assigned a place in the universe, whereby man was favored as the very magnetic centre of that paradigm. In this philosophy adopted by Christianity, man’s existence is not subject to economic conjectures nor to the workings of class struggle. Its mechanism rather follows the will of a God, full of grace and mercy who guarantees the salvation of his men. However, even the Christian dogma itself has a range of limitations to its vociferous claim for the Chain of Being as a fixed and unaltered temple for the universe.

Man has been endowed with a will and made to the image of God, which bestows upon him the quality of a rational being who is able to shift sites within the paradigm of the Holy chain of being by virtue of his mind. Still, man is held responsible, again, about his destiny for it is up to him that he shall dwell in heaven or in hell. We notice that two strong ideas – antagonistic in nature – make opposite poles for Christianity: an instance of self-contradiction or duplicity in both logic and discourse inherent to this monotheistic religions along with others.

Coming now to the problem of communism, we notice that it has been struggling to be what Christianity was not (or did not allow, in its basic teachings). Communism has gone in its principles for the other extreme of the humanistic teachings of Christianity. Communism arose as the very negative edge in the image of man made for him by Christ. It adopts an ideology which abides by no ethical absolutes and nullifies any glory achieved for or by man before the moment he was proclaimed a communist. All highness or transcendent image allotted to man by Christianity was at once erased to be taken over by party allegiance. Man, was left as little more than a puppet in the hands of his governor, or even less. Any “thing” - be it religious, political, or even related to personal thinking of the individual - that is not concerned with the amassing of materials and the crippling social and economic conditions was hailed by Marxists as « the opium of the people ». However, we are bound to see communism as an opium, too, for a number of reasons.

Communism chose for itself the antithesis of the portrait of the ideal man depicted by Christianity, thus endowing man with a character wholly in service of the State. The latter is the surrogate figure of the omnipresent god of Christianity; however, it pays no heed to whether his subjects are made to his own image or not. This god-like figure for the communists: the state, has run miles away from the idea of ethical absolutes so much so that it holds faith in only « the end justifies the means »: the Faustian principle that has long stood as the curse awaiting any disobedient slave of God. *Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Defraud not, Honour thy fahter and mother;* these were among the commandments that established the ideological underpinnings of Christianity. For communism, however, every agreed-upon ethical absolute can be reconsidered if it is expedient to do so (including the commonsensical discrepancy between good and evil in its most blatant manifestations). A quick glance at the words of Lenin can only hold a true mirror to the figure of the overreach by the tacticians of the communist party for their subjects:

« We must display determination, endurance, firmness and unanimity. We must stop at nothing. Everybody and everything must be used to save the rule of the workers and peasants, to save communism»²

Set in contrast to this overriding, Faustian tone is the notion of love which is the corner-stone of the Christian

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¹ Providence 28:26.

² (Speech to Third All-Russia Congress of Textile Workers (1920))
faith. The law of love is established as the engine and the raison d’être for all human action so much so that he can forgive those who do him wrong. For communist thinking, the socio-economic surroundings of the community (not the individual) vitally determine their social interactions with one another. No room is left for love or any other human feeling and the integrity of man’s emotions is all directed towards the emergence of a classless society! In the meantime, allegiance to the state (no matter how transient the latter could be in its history) remains an end in itself. Man is divested of his individuality and turned into a trifle, a slave to the state. The latter is now deified and used in turn as a powerful means to subjugate the masses but under the cloak of legitimacy: something which at first glance, does set it apart from religious faith. However, they both remain fundamentally and principally identical. Their aim is one: manipulation. Both communism and Christianity preached about social justice and envisioned a world ruled by absolute equality among people regardless of their skin color, class and caste, etc. Strangely enough, the first accounts about man’s vital need to live in a communist society are already available in the text of Christianity. In his teachings, Jesus of Nazareth voiced an outright – almost absurd - indictment of the idea of property:

« And Jesus looked round about, and saith upon his disciples, How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God! (...) It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God » (Matthew X 17-25)

DISCUSSION

So, we notice, that in his perpetual imprecation of property, Jesus was articulating an unabashed call for people to divorce all their materialistic needs and devote themselves to an austere worship of the Almighty (the latter, for the Trinitarians, was Jesus himself). The same is applicable to the communists who go for the obfuscation of the individual to the benefit of the state (the latter being a temporary representation of the idea of classless society). Having social justice as the main concern in both philosophies is what has in fact erased the parameters of the self, thus announcing imminent caesurae in both of them.

Starting from the policies established in primitive societies for the sake of preserving cultural perpetuity, René Girard argues that human beings are forever inhabited by a mimetic desire which inevitably generates competition and rivalry. And for cultural order to be kept away from those vicissitudes of the human psyche, there has to be a certain mechanism of purgation that would direct the accretion of human ills (or collective violence) in a given society against one individual: the scapegoat, who would bear them out and guarantee the survival and concord of the remaining majority. This can also be read as a practice related to the Darwinian hypothesis about the survival of the fittest. Yet the process of elimination occurs, not because of natural selection, but in view of the mimetic desire for possession and therefore of the vital propensity for humans to contend for superiority by competing over ownership.

Let us not forget that Christianity was inaugurated in its early stages by a sacrificial act. It is the crucifixion of Jesus who bore upon his shoulders all the sins of humanity and was lifted up high to stand somewhere as the symbolic Savior of his followers. This happened, because the Jews were so unready to take leave of their religious traditions and were fiercely vying with the Christians over who was holding the true faith. Communism, in its most primitive stages was an expedient measure to limit external intrusion in personal property. Parts of the land, therefore, had to be vitally submitted (or sacrificed) in return for the service of watching the whole field from strangers.

We speak therefore, of the notion of social Darwinism whereby, according to social circumstances, the human beings struggle for existence within a particular socio-economic surrounding. Communism, in this respect, was so unpractical a regime that its end was inevitable. In his Social Origins, Lang and Atkinson states that there was nothing more primitive about man than the notion of proprietorship and that what we know as « primitive communism » came simply as a moderation of instincts for the sake of driving away some other tribes out of the immediate social environment of small communities (Lang and Atkinson 2010). To extrapolate, we can say that « communism » came as nothing more than an expedient to survival. If I would let you share my land, it is for the simple reason that you belong to my tribe and likewise, we would not be destroyed by intruders.

This implies the fact that there was nothing historical about communism. It came as little more than a strategy of survival or let us say, a condescension to communal life as a shield from death. The latter (death, that is) was equated in this context with the loss of property. This is a proof that communism, in its primitive versions, included no abandoning of property for the sake of a social group. On the contrary, it came as an investment in communal life in order to maintain property of the means of production. And, again, it leads us to discover one possible truth about communism: that it emerged in its 19th-century version as a deformation of the idea of ownership and as actually a policy of killing individuality. It took the form of blind subjugation to a unanimously agreed-upon individual known as the holder of truth: This truth being the promise of prosperity and equality among the people. In his book, Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age, Anthony Giddens speaks of the psychology of authority as follows:
Some individuals find it psychologically difficult or impossible to accept the existence of diverse, mutually conflicting authorities. They find that the freedom to choose is a burden and they seek solace in more overarching systems of authority. A predilection for dogmatic authoritarianism is the pathological tendency at this pole. A person in this situation is not necessarily a traditionalist, but essentially gives up faculties of critical judgment in exchange for the convictions supplied by an authority whose rules and provisions cover most aspects of his life.¹

Still on the same page, Giddens (1991), points to the stunning reality that similar forms of subjugation are actually different from and more blinding than religious faith itself:

(…) for faith almost by definition rests on trust. Taking refuge in a dominant authority, however, is essentially an act of submission. The individual, as it were, no longer needs to engage in the problematic gamble which all trust relations presume. Instead, he or she identifies with a dominant authority on the basis of projection. The psychology of leadership plays an important role here. Submission to authority normally takes the form of a slavish adherence to an authority figure, taken to be all-knowing².

We notice that underpinning the dogma of both Christianity and communism, is the idea of sacrifice. Both philosophies praise one exterior entity to the detriment of the self. The target being either God or the State, the individual is seen as a victim or -in Girardian terms- as a scapegoat. In this way, a gap is being set between the self and its community and only two alternatives avail themselves to him: either to follow or to resist.

The paradox (Personally, I would call it «historical incongruency») inherent to communism is that it preaches what it is not: a downfall actually common to any dogma that targets the consciousness of the people. If Marx’s Manifesto (1848) saw (or let me say «wished») communism to be a historical necessity and that the State was a temporary representation of class oppression, it also saw no need for the State by the mere expedient of «ridding» society of its classes. However, and still within history itself, we come to find out that those theories were nothing more than utopian speculations or mere projections of an oppressed and heinous self against the idea of competition. The communists –along with the rest of the world- were soon up to a rude awakening that such theory has no room in real life. The State never «withered away»; on the contrary, under Lenin and Stalin, it became a far more totalitarian entity than it had ever been under the Tsars themselves.

An utterance like «from each according to his abilities to each according to his needs» really leaves me unimpressed for the mere fact that human history allows no similar concession to the detriment of the principle of social Darwinism that had shaped human «history» since ever. Still in this same streak, human history has held strong testimony to the impossibility of survival for any Utopian speculations about the future. The latter is not what we wish as much as it is what we actually make of it. Besides, what would life look like if we were all destined to live in a «paradise» where everything avails itself to numb hands and passive minds? What would be then the use of the human consciousness? And how shall we ever evolve? What reveals itself as the inevitable outcome of history is the endless birth and rebirth of over-reachers: those idiosyncratic figures (whom not many people would like) and who conceive of their own Utopia as a matter of sheer individuality. Hence the tribute perpetually and unconsciously given by them to the human mind: something which takes us back to the ancient portrayal of man as a God-like figure and which remains forever threatened by the danger presented (by either Christians or Communists) to the notion of property.

The latter of course, can simply be mitigated (not erased at once) for we live in a world of social interaction: that is, of combative human instincts. A counterbalance to the principle of absolute and unruly property would be that of internationalism because the nations’ economic interests will be hailed as of far more importance than national chauvinism, party allegiance … This liberal theory with all its free-trade philosophy is directed to the boon of humanity despite all difference: a dynamics of a modern Utopia set in opposition to what we encounter, for example, in Thomas More’s text:

There are 54 cities in the island, all large and well-built: the manners, customs, and laws of which are the same, and they are all contrived as near in the same manner as the ground on which they stand will allow.

Still, Marx’s theory that men’s minds are restrained by their economic necessities has to be substantially questioned. Actually, there is more into the human mind than sheer material needs: there is consciousness which equips it with the capacity to look beyond what purports to be a system of any sort. It is true that communism and Christianity were long-lived not only as dogmas but also as matter for controversy (Marx 2011). They were part of a written tradition: of a historical recording of the minds of some men who craved to gain faith in them and save them from the abyss of oblivion. This is fairly legitimate for all humans of thought, in other words for any human who fears to have his ideas ignored or forgotten.

However, what matters on the other end of the spectrum, is that we should be critical towards all heritage we

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² I think he is referring here to Pascal’s Wager.
were made to read. Nothing is firmly set within the confines of the historical component, as claimed by Marx in his *Communist Manifesto*; there is much more than history in a system of any sort.

"The theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be universal reformer. They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes. The abolition of existing property relations is not at all a distinctive feature of communism. All property relations in the past have continually been subject to historical change consequent upon the change in historical conditions."

The problem with both Christianity and communism is that they respectively view human life as unmanageable unless under the gratifying presence of an all-knowing deity (be it Christ or the State). From the point of view of deconstruction, both should be read with a distance. The latter is drawn by our critical reading of what is called metaphysics of presence. We are actually made to hold faith in the presence of an entity capable of saving us even though it may often make us endure hardships and we are bound, nevertheless, to humbly accept things as they come (or as they are destined to befall us). In regard of this, I am reading "the metaphysics of presence" as an instance of misguidance that has been unconsciously fossilized in people's minds. Its effect finds expression in different forms of intellectual slavery in Christianity as in communism. People have been numbed by the spell of those opioms to the extent of developing a sense of unrealistic contentment (often verging on stupor) with the status quo in spite of all suffering:

That's why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. *COR 12:9-10*

**CONCLUSION**

What they have contrived as «presence» is given prominence over what people had been blinded to see. And any exterior ideas are deemed as violation of what «nature» (whether in the sense of providence or determinism) had hitherto made perfect. Their indictment of the human mind was perniciously translated through their discourse of shared fate, determinism, sacrifice and promise ... while it all bore within itself a cruel inclination to minimize individuality and humanism.

One truth is that capitalism has gained edge since ever because it has emerged in history as a global phenomenon (Wallerstein 1974). Even in countries like China, we do speak of the sprouts of commodity economy since the 17th century. Those sprouts were simply made to resprout in the middle of the 18th century in spite of the Manshu conquest. Capitalism was not firmly acknowledged in the history of China as a system per se. However, some indexes in history prove that certain groups of people even within the communist party itself (namely those affiliated with the Guomindang and the Trotskyist factions) were dead against the primacy given by the communist party to the land revolution in China (Dirlik 1989).

Failed models of communism through history like Cuba or Paraguay equally testify to the fact that a similar social system was no longer tenable nor feasible worldwide. It was made practically impossible: its bête noire being human competition!

This deduction is also based on my reading of *Canterbury Tales* The by Geoffrey Chaucer (2002), who draws hilarious portrayals of Christians who preach what they are not. The Father of English literature followed the lead of the Wycliffites but his tool was literary rather than theological (or theoretical). Both Wycliff and Chaucer antagonized the wealth of the Catholic church and pointed with an incriminating index to the hypocrisy inherent to that religious sect. In his «General Prologue», Chaucer draws uproarious caricatures of a monk who relishes in riding and hunting and of the friar who pays more heed to taverns and whores than to the leprous or the needy.

*He Knew wel the taverns in every town*  
*And every ostiller or gay tapstere*  
*Bett than a lazer or a beggere*

The safest of all bets remains to be made on the human consciousness for it is by virtue of his capacity for distancing himself from what he is given, that the individual manages to reconsider any historically documented text and is, thus, moved to put any form of logocentrism into question. Any allegedly fixed point, any text which purports to be an origin for thought shall be deconstructed. Then (and only then) a plethora of paths shall open up in front of the human drive to seek out new truths and tease out new meanings which, in turn, have but a momentary stay against emerging ones.

**Conflict of Interests**

The author(s) have not declared any conflict of interests.

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Full Length Research Paper

Gender and disharmony in Shashi Desphande’s that long silence

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That long silence seeks to represent the plight of women especially Jaya Kulkarni (the main protagonist) in a given social structure, attempting to rigorously scrutinize the portrayed gender roles that impose social norms, expectations and traditions on the grounds of gender discrimination. The research paper presents Jaya’s submissive revolt against the constant psychological pressure of male superiority and social conventions. It is submissive because finally she accepts the traditional principle of silence and surrendering believing that life has always to be made possible. Deshpande showcase her artistic brilliance that unlocks the complex human relationships wherein women’s arduous lives are exposed threadbare with the writer’s insightful meanings. This research paper focuses to expose Jaya’s inner turmoil and trauma as she seeks to create her own unique identity in the society. She struggles to get solace as most of her questions remained unanswered. But with the passing of time she realizes her own fate.

Key words: Discrimination, plight, submissive revolt, turmoil, trauma.

INTRODUCTION

Indian English literature has attained immense popularity and widespread recognition. It is no longer regarded as a sub-standard variety of English. Several prestigious international awards have been bagged by its highly talented authors. Ruth Pravar Jhabvala, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Aravind Adiga have all earned the most coveted booker prize. R.N. Tagore, V.S. Naipaul have both been honoured with the literary world’s most glorious award, the Nobel prize for literature.

Shashi Deshpande is a winner of the Sahitya Akademi award for That Long Silence (1989). She has emerged as a writer possessing deep insight into the female psyche. Focussing on the marital relation she seeks to expose the tradition by which a woman is trained to play her subservient role in the family. Her novels reveal the patriarchal traditions and uneasiness of the modern Indian woman in being a part of them (Renganathan, 2009). She uses social reality as it is experienced by women. Her heroines rebel against the traditional way of life and patriarchal values. In That Long Silence, Jaya is not only silent but also the sufferer. Her ‘silence’ is socio-psychic in nature. She is an object of utmost sympathy. The novel goes on to determine the personality of Jaya through her long trials—social, economic, political, psychological, spiritual and religious.

There is no strong female voice against patriarchy rather only psychological conflicts were depicted. She revolts, but in silence. Jaya is presented not as a woman

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who has a desire to revolt but the one who reconciles her helplessness. She is of the opinion:

“A woman can never get angry. She can only be neurotic, hysterical and frustrated. There is no room for despair, either. There is only order and routine today. I have to change. She sheets tomorrow, shrubs the bathrooms the day after, and clean the fridge ….” (That Long Silence-147-148)

Deshpande portrays the reality as it is. In this regard, she says:

“My characters take their own ways. I have heard people saying we should have strong woman characters. But my writing has to do with women and how they are…." (Vishwanath-1987:12).

Feminism

Feminism (a movement) gives an expression to the suppressed voice of women since long ago. Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal and Kamala Markandeya are the chief exponents of Feminism. It started in India late in the 1970’s. It existed in spirit long before even the Western feminist movement had begun. Few women writers took the trouble of writing their pleas and issues those days. The feminist thought and feminist movements in the west have had some influence on the women’s movements in developing countries like India. Yet feminism as it exists today in India has gone beyond its western counterpart.

Uma Narayan (1997) has rightly remarked “Third World feminism is not a mindless mimicking of ‘Western agendas’ in one clear and simple sense—Indian feminism is clearly a response to the issues specifically confronting many Indian women”—Weedon-1999: 13). The Indian women’s struggle for emancipation could not mimic its Western counterpart. In the Indian context, several feminists have realized that the subject of women’s emancipation in India should not be reduced to the contradictions between man and woman. Representative poet of Victorian age wrote of the feminist era in the following words:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey. “The Princess.”

Female protagonists in Deshpande’s novels stand apart from that of their male counterparts in the writings of many contemporary women writers. Sandwiched between tradition and modernity, illusion and reality and the mask and the face, they lead a life of restlessness.

That long silence

The title of the novel, That Long Silence, suggests the failure to communicate and assert one’s own self. When one read the epigraph from the speech of Elizabeth Robins he will find that this silence refers to the reticence of a female character. In Deshpande’s That Long Silence we can see the belated rebellion of Jaya after seventeen years of her married life. During her solitude, Jaya undertakes a sojourn towards her own self. She seeks her individual identity, which seems to be lost somewhere during such a long years of marriage.

Novels of Deshpande abound in female quest for identity. Her novels are usually narrated by female protagonists who strive to find out their own selves throughout the novels. They succeed to do this through their writing to reach a resolution in their lives. No doubt, they are haunted by the memories of past and feel a kind of worthlessness, but towards the end they realize their selves. Women do face a void, a vacuum in their lives. They appear to be successful externally, but they seem to lack direction and feel a sense of futility.

Deshpande got success in her representation of real life experience through That Long Silence. She realistically depicts the inner conflict through Jaya, who suffered from the beginning to end craving for the quest of the self and identity. She realized the frustration, alienation and over all emotional traumas she had undergone with her adolescent dreams being utterly shattered. Initially, after her marriage, she is apparently a satisfied spouse married to a responsible man of social status. For some time all went well and Jaya adjusted herself in new environment according to the wishes of her husband. She had absorbed herself in the family-folds completely and was no more aggressive and inquisitive but now, she was a docile, meek, passive, nervous and dependent upon her husband. She had undergone with her adolescent dreams being utterly shattered. Initially, after her marriage, she is apparently a satisfied spouse married to a responsible man of social status. For some time all went well and Jaya adjusted herself in new environment according to the wishes of her husband. She had absorbed herself in the family-folds completely and was no more aggressive and inquisitive but now, she was a docile, meek, passive, nervous and dependent upon her husband for sustenance and existence. Mohan (Jaya’s husband) was a man of orthodox view and he gave her not much freedom. In the novel, there lies the smell of frustration in married life of Jaya, who failed to be closer to her husband mentally and emotionally. Despite her marriage to Mohan and becoming a mother of two children, she suffered from isolation. Her husband could not understand her emotional self. She leads the life of silent indignation gifted by her husband.

The novel traces how Jaya gradually emerges as a confident individual fully in control of herself and refuses to be led by noose. The protagonist of the novel rejects the image of traditional women like Sita, Savitri and Draupadi. Instead she prefers the image of a pair of the bullock to describe a married couple. Deshpande uses an appropriate image of a crawling worm into the hole, to describe the state of Jaya, a budding writer, doomed to dwindle into a stereotyped Indian home-maker:

“Oh God! I had thought I can’t take any more even a
worm has a hole it can crawl into.”(Deshpande’s That Long Silence).

Thus, at the end of the novel, Jaya’s self-realization was brought out very skillfully. A woman wants home and family not at the cost of her identity. She wants liberty to implement her talent and respect which family members should give her. When she is denied to have liberty and identity, she possesses the ability to revolt against bindings. That Long Silence, thus, teaches women to fight the silence and express themselves. Woman according to Desphande can be understood better when they are pampered and showered with affection. As their hearts are tender they deserve tender love.

**Jaya’s character in That Long Silence**

Deshpande describes the woeful plight of Jaya through the image of a woman crawling into a hole. Unsecured and suffocated, Jaya feels distance from real life. She is scared of writing, scared of failing. She is unable to face the challenge and wants to retreat back to her safe family life. That Long Silence concentrates on an important theme, that is, on gender differentiation and valorizing of the male categories, along with the silence and surrender to which a woman is subjected in our society. In this perspective Adesh Pal comments,

“This too, is true that they revolt against the social taboos, the cramped wrinkled traditions and value of their ancestors and ceaselessly question the very concept of love, marriage and sex and feel an urge to redefine human relationship and behavior.”

The Novelist has woven the tragic tales of Jaya’s relations with Mohan and her acquaintances into the texture of the novel. Jaya speaks of interdependence of love and sex. She speaks out her mind,

“First there’s love, then there’s sex that was how I had always imagined it to be. But after having with Mohan I had realized that it could so easily be the other way round.”

Mohan had crushed both the woman and the writer in Jaya as he neither loved nor encouraged her. Her silence is responsible for the misery and slavery. Her mental agony is so adverse that her desire for articulation fails. Jaya resolves to break that long silence by putting down on a paper all which she had suppressed in her seventeen years silence- that long silence which had reduced herself in fragments:

“I am not afraid any more. The panic has gone. I am Mohan’s wife, I had thought, and cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan’s wife. Now I know that kind of fragmentation is of possible. The child, hands in pocket, has been with me through the years, she is with me still.” (That Long Silence-191).

**MATERIAL AND METHODS**

For this research article, I endeavored to analyze the different aspects of feminism and its concept. It is also examined on the post-modern feminist approaches. The methodology of the research paper is chiefly based on the comparison of the western feminism with the eastern concept of feminism (Third World feminism)—Indian feminism which is apparently a response to the issues specifically confronting many Indian women. A brief analysis has also been done to find the women’s compatibility with their male counterpart in terms of the different equalities like economic, social and political.

**RESULTS**

The reading of Deshpande’s That Long Silence has revealed that woman’s position and status had little changed since India’s independence. Their plight remained nearly the same. However, it should not be judged from the western suppressed women. The character of Jaya has succeeded to portray that patriarchy is still prevalent in our Indian society. To subdue patriarchy, the women have to undergo and face different challenges and issues in the society. Hence, we get a new woman in That Long Silence in the form of Jaya. She is new not because she is silent and submissive, but because she has compromised herself with her surrounding and fate (Nayak 2011).

**DISCUSSION**

The present paper is prepared with an avowed objective: to textually and contextually study the present day Indian English Literature, especially fiction, vis-a-vis the theme of conflict and development in it (especially in relation to gender). It is designed to make it an invaluable asset to the literary world (Singh,1997). A stereotyped house wife initially nervous and seeking masculine support all the time thinks that she also has contributed to her victimization and that she has to fight her own battle and work out her own destiny.

Deshpande has unleashed a scathing blow to the patriarchal set up and ushered a novel chapter of women liberation in any sphere of life. It is not the circumstances that contribute to the negation of women right but that even their own women folk are polarizing their dig at the emancipation of women. The novel seeks to probe deeper in those subaltem tendencies which ruined the vital of our society.

The female protagonists of Deshpande evince sufficient
vigor and courage to question the oppressive role of society, religion and culture, but yet they refrain from taking the paths suggested by the Western feminists. They rather seek to find their own paths. Indian feminism as reflected in the Indian fiction is a unique phenomenon that has to be valued on its own scale and should not be weighed against the scales of the western feminist literature. Shashi objectifies new female subjective experiences with a gynocentric vision. She reflects on the problems and concerns of the middle class Indian women.

CONCLUSION

Deshpande concludes that Jaya’s rebellious nature is not the solution to the problems of life rather it complicates the things around her. The last sentence of That Long Silence explicitly shows that human happiness consists in harmonizing the opposites of life. In Deshpande’s novels, men give up easily and go on to fresh fields but women fight on and do emerge victorious after most battles who want to achieve individuation and authentic self-identity without changing the culture and tradition of the society. They may be weak and even be oppressed but they have the will power to rise up like a phoenix out of its own ashes. Deshpande makes an authentic plea to free the female psyche from the conventional male control. The success of the novelist lies in her representation of real experiences. She realistically depicts the inner conflicts of Jaya and her quest for the self identity. Thus, this paper attempts to depict how the attitudes and behaviour of women differs according to the society she belongs to.

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