

Destructiveness of War in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse: Five*

Aswathy AB

M.Phil English, Muslim Arts College, Thiruvithancode, Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

Slaughterhouse -Five is a novel by Kurt Vonnegut, considered to be one of the most popular writers of American Literature of the Twentieth century. The paper is an attempt to analyse destructiveness of war which includes description about the destructive effects of war, both physical and mental. It shows how, the soldiers who are trained to withstand all horrors of war are forced to pay the price in their post war life. It gives special attention to the mental health of the war veterans and how they devise various plans to escape from the excruciating experiences and memories of the war. The present study is an attempt to focus destructiveness of war which exemplifies not only how far war can affect the world physically but also the drastic change it brings about on the mentality of those who get involved in the war.

Keywords: war, dilemma, destructiveness

1. Introduction

Slaughterhouse-Five is a novel by Kurt Vonnegut, considered to be one of the most popular writers of the American Literature of the Twentieth century. In his fifty years of career as a writer he had won many awards. Even though his novels were very often target to many attacks by critics, they do agree that he has an important place among the best American writers of the sixties and seventies. Since then he has been a public figure, not only concerning his fiction, but also speaking openly about subjects like censorship, environmentalism, globalism, politics etc. His portrait was very popular, not only to those who read his books, but also to those who listened to his interviews on television, his speeches in Universities. This enabled his readers to relate to his novels by giving some autobiographical signs and discussing the art of writing with the readers and making them 'co - authors'. It is safe to assume that novels of social protest are not written by cynics or nihilists. Surely protest implies the belief that man's faults are remediable. It is relevant, then, that Vonnegut's novels, early and late, were conceived in the spirit of social protest.

Analysing Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse- Five* reveals the main concept Destructiveness of war which explicitly points towards the anti-war attitude of the author. The idea of nuclear weapons-a recurrent image in Vonnegut's work is that of the massive cataclysm which annihilates human life. In *Cat's Cradle*, it is the destruction of the world by Ice-nine. In *Galapagos*, the near extinction of humanity occurs as a result of stock market crash leading to starvation and war. In *Deadeye Dick*, it is the neutron bombing of Midland city, Ohio, while in *Slaughterhouse- Five* it is the firebombing of Dresden. In fact, Vonnegut demonstrates his own anti- war sentiments throughout the novel. It took Vonnegut twenty years to complete *Slaughterhouse- Five*. He was torn for years between a desire to forget Dresden, and a passion to reconcile what he saw there. Vonnegut says of *Slaughterhouse- Five*:

I would hate to tell you what his lousy little book cost me in money and anxiety and time. When I got home from second

World War twenty-three years ago, I thought it would be easy for me to write about destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen. (2)

He also says, "It is so short and jangled because there is nothing intelligent to say about the massacre" (16).

War is terrible – then what about its aftermath? What about the survivors who had proved to be heroes and later vanished into the blue? What happens to the refugees who live like a pariah in lands unknown to them? East or West, victory or defeat, every war ends in the wailing widows of the dead soldiers. The epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Iliad* has war as the central plot. War is celebrated in the epics as a show of heroism, loyalty and aristocracy. But the epics end on a sad note that had the war been averted, precious lives like Achilles and Karna could have been saved. Women cry over their dead sons, brothers and husbands. Even today after the war, we end up looming around the same question-how futile the war was? We wonder whatever glory the war has brought, can the loss be replaced. We may celebrate on the news of our country's army advancing towards the frontiers and swell with pride of our army and patriotism. Wars can even become opportunities for political parties and leaders.

After the war, many soldiers become dysfunctional or permanently deformed as a result of war. There are soldiers who suffer from shell shock and are left with permanent war trauma. Such characters appear frequently in modern and postmodern literature. Septimus Smith in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* suffers from shell shock. He is a complete recluse, detached from his friends and family. *And Quite Flows the Don* by Michail Sholokov is a semi-autobiographical account of the First World War. The Cassocks family's life changes as a result of the World War. *Slaughterhouse- Five* is proof that Vonnegut kept his promise to write a war novel that does not glorify or glamorize killing. Vonnegut relates all modern warfare to the original Children's Crusade of 1213. In his crusade, thirty thousand children volunteered to go to Palestine but half of them drowned in shipwrecks, and the other half were sold into slavery. He concluded that all wars are fought by

the young, usually for cause they can't understand. The innocence of those who fight in wars is depicted in the characters Billy Pilgrim from *Slaughterhouse- Five*. Billy, as his name suggests becomes the innocent pilgrim through a cruel and absurd world. Young of face, gawky of stature and childishly perplexed, Billy Pilgrim, who like the crusader starts out on a hot mission as a chaplain's assistant. He makes the perfect representational figure for this conception of war. Billy, as Adam figure, falls into the terrible wisdom of the Twentieth century. Billy being moonishly bemused, utterly helpless, even ridiculous, fits him for the role of the babe born to die. In this sense, Billy also becomes the Christ figure of the novel. An innocent man in a cruel world, in provoking scene in a train car, Billy hangs himself from a cross bar, symbolic of Christ's crucifixion. Vonnegut is reminded once again of Christ as Billy sleeps at the end of the novel. The character of Billy gives *Slaughterhouse- Five* a point of focus, partake for the emotion generated by the wide-ranging action of the story. After Billy sees the Americans shaved and cleaned, he realized for the first time how young they are and is shocked. My God, my god, it's the Children's Crusade! (87). He seems most concerned to show war as a terrifying unleashing of monstrous forces which upsweep the innocent children and men to destroy and enslave them.

Published in 1969, at the height of the Vietnam War, and the Cold War, while a portion of the American people were vocally protesting even at the idea of war, *Slaughterhouse- Five* was given to the public. Vietnam belongs to a very dark part of the history of the United States, filled with senseless death and suffering for a cause that never seems important enough, one that is never understood. The continuous brutality is never-ending, as World War 2 does not enforce a long-lasting peace. Vonnegut makes parallels between World War 2 and Vietnam War through time travel by jumping from one timeline to the other, from one war to another. The jumps through time serve to fragment the narrative; when it comes to the parallel of two wars, an additional interpretation comes to mind. Since the narrator makes it clear that his story is an anti-war novel, the reader can interpret the time jumps as a means of escaping from reality to another. The devastating nature of the Second World War proves to be shattering experience for the narrator, and he keeps escaping the terrible landscape of concentration camps to a later time. This other time proves to be more pleasant, since the Vietnam war keeps claiming lives of boys who need to fight for ideologies beyond their level of understanding. The cycle of violence and the meaninglessness of death that Vonnegut marks with a catch – phrase "So it goes" seem to be at the centre of the novel, as well as in the minds of the public.

In Vonnegut's vision, all the soldiers are boys, no men, and fight wars that they barely comprehend. That is why he calls attention to children, who fight for causes, to them, unknown. He does this in order to show the sadness and terror of war rather than what Hollywood and literature usually portrays. Being an integral part of the American tradition, Hollywood has always been there to justify and explain the unexplainable. This is one of the reasons why Billy Pilgrim is, not only young, but very much the opposite of a rugged, masculine hero. Hollywood tends to create the illusion of greatness in its war films, forgetting reality and ignoring the real corpses of real people left behind in wars. The narrator openly criticizes this propensity having

previously felt the horrors of war. Additionally, he offers a critique of the American society, who feeds off the notion of greatness of their country through Hollywood, seeing that Americans are usually victorious in the great war epics, either morally or literally.

This novel's main character, Billy Pilgrim is like Vonnegut in many ways. A very important part of Vonnegut's life was when he served in second World War and was a Prisoner of War in Dresden, Germany. During that time, he experienced the firebombing of Dresden, which affected him greatly. This event had around one Lakh thirty-five thousand casualties, which is about twice the number killed in Hiroshima by the atomic bomb. Many claims that his involvement in the war is what made him write *Slaughterhouse- Five*. When Vonnegut created Billy Pilgrim, he made Billy subject to the experience of war. In fact, Billy experiences it almost exactly the same as Vonnegut himself had, including the experiences of being a prisoner of war during the firebombing of Dresden. But in Billy's case, Vonnegut writes it with a particular point of view, which is against war. For example, when Vonnegut writes of the ways Billy views things, especially in the war, he makes Billy's view slanted, which makes the reader perceive the war as something absurd, grotesque, macabre in any case, no quite real. Making Billy so much like himself, Vonnegut uses Billy to "tell" the reader his own views.

Vonnegut not only talks about Billy Pilgrim's life during the war, but also Billy's post-war life on Earth. By depicting the life of Billy, Vonnegut also unravels the Destructiveness of War. It is known that Billy does struggle after the war to start up his life, which indicates the hurtfulness of war, but if one looks further, to Billy's profession as optometrist, a theme can be seen: the importance of sight. This theme relates to the idea that Billy has sight before he goes to war, then goes to war and goes insane, thus losing his own "true-sight". But he ironically tries to correct the vision of others in his profession as an optometrist.

Destructiveness' here doesn't simply symbolize the Physical destruction brought out by the war, but it is more than that. It includes the post-traumatic effects and guilty feelings that snatches away the desire of the war veterans to lead a normal life. The not-so-subtle destructiveness of the war is evoked in subtle ways. For instance, Billy is quite successful in his post-war exploits from a materialistic point of view. While Billy seems to have led a productive post-war life, these seeming markers of success speak only to its surface. He gets his job as an Optometrist not because of any particular prowess but as a result of his father-in-law's efforts. More important, at one point in the novel, Billy walks in on and realizes that they are unfamiliar with each other. Beneath the splendor of his success lies a man too war-torn to understand it.

A humanist at heart, Vonnegut believes man is inherently good and can overcome the violent and cruel streak inside. The fire-bombing and ravaging of Dresden and the tragic number of casualties it emphasized the destructiveness of war, along with the portrayal of Billy Pilgrim's mental deterioration shown in several cases after he returns from duty on the European front. In the la line of the novel, a bird says to Billy, "Poo-tee-weet?", illustrating the lack of words to describe the horrors of war and providing a final example of its destructiveness.

References

1. Kurt Vonnegut. Slaughterhouse- Five. London: Vintage, Print, 2000.
2. Pamler Barton R. Twentieth-century American Fiction on Screen. 1st ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. Print, 2007.
3. Trivedi, Harish. The American Political Novel: Critical Essays. New Delhi: Allied, 1984. Print.