Trauma of War in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*

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The novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. provide an image of Jewish-American experience in the postmodern conditions of the late twentieth century America. It is the century that caused human being to suffer from the atrocities of war and deadly inventions. Vonnegut's characters experience these atrocities and they cope with them by inventing new worlds of their own since the ones they live in became unbearable. New worlds are the reflections of their cultural ethos, more specifically, their Jewish cultural ethos. The present paper explores the issue of cultural ethos as employed by Vonnegut in his novels. Vonnegut has written fourteen novels and almost all of them, directly or indirectly, deal with the trauma of war and character's attempt to finds its remedy. In order to examine the present issue, ***Slaughterhouse-Five*** has been selected for the study.

Slaughterhouse-Five (1969) delineates the issue of trauma of war and its remedy as sensibly as do all novels by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. At the pivot of its narrative is the protagonist named Billy Pilgrim, a chaplain's young assistant during the war. The book is Vonnegut's Dresden novel dealing with the senselessness of war and its brutal killing of innocent humans. It is an account about the massacre machinery of war and about the lasting traumatic effects of the war on the nerves of both Vonnegut and his protagonist. The novel describes Billy's and his creator's attempts to come to terms with the war that they are witnesses of. In their moral stance and attitudes towards life in relation to war lays the issue of cultural ethos. Vonnegut represses the memory of Dresden and World War II because of the terror it holds. To remember is to relive that what is unbearable in the first place, and to visit the memory once again of the single greatest destruction of human life in modern military history, in the second.

At the outset of the novel, Vonnegut reveals his evolving attitude both to the horrors of war and to the composition of it as well. By referring to the novel contemptuously as "lousy," what Vonnegut conveys is that heroism is never central to his memory of Dresden. It is clear that he resists heroic portraits of World War II soldiers in the novel by saying that "there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre" (16). As a result, he fails in his early attempts to tell a single story he feels he has to tell. The story of Dresden is a hard one for Vonnegut to tell for a couple of reasons: first, it is designed by the Allies to kill as many German civilians as possible, and second, it is shockingly successful in achieving that aim. The American

government rejects Vonnegut's attempts to obtain information about Dresden bombing saying that it is classified. Consequently, it takes Vonnegut years to realize the scale of the destruction of life on the night of February 13, 1945. Eventually he learns that 135,000 people died in the raid attack – the number is far more than of people who were killed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Vonnegut survives the attack by purest chance as he and other American POWs (prisoners of war) and their guards take shelter in a meat locker two stories underground.

In his attempts to come to terms with the trauma of war, Vonnegut turns to the Book of Genesis from the Old Testament of Hebrew Bible-the story of first thing-to learn from other holocausts in other times. Compared with the fire-bombing on Dresden, the raining of fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah in the Old Testament seems a just act. "As the Gospels use the Old Testament," Giannone comments, "so the novel uses an Old Testament figure to characterize the moral stance of the witness to Dresden" (64). Lot's wife provides Vonnegut with the model of survival because she prefers to turn into a pillar of salt by looking back at the burning cities when she was told not to. Vonnegut applauds the action of Lot's wife for expressing her feeling of love and compassion towards fellow-humans at the cost of her life. For the novelist, writing a book about Dresden experience is meant to look back at the destruction of Dresden and become a pillar of salt like Lot's wife. He completes the book about Dresden and thus celebrates the humanity of Lot's wife. In Vonnegut's reflections on that scene, his sympathies lie with Lot's wife:

> Those were vile people in both cities, as is well known. The world was better off without them.
>
> And Lot's wife, of course, was told not to look back where all those people and their homes had been. But she *did* look back, and I love her for that, because it was so human (18).

The reference to the bible story suggests the novelist's attempt to deal with the issues of humanity and identity which are related with the central issue of cultural ethos. The bible story provides the novel with humanitarian frame in which the protagonist develops. The novel is as much about writing novels as it is an account of the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim and Dresden. Crucial to an understanding of Billy's character is his reaction to the fire-bombing of Dresden. In this respect, Billy's reaction to Dresden massacre is similar to Vonnegut's reaction to it. Billy, like his creator, tries to forget Dresden and its pain while finding a way to reconcile the human suffering he observed there. In addition to this, there are other similarities between Vonnegut and Billy Pilgrim: both are Americans who were born in 1922; both have the same souvenir of war (a Luftwaffe ceremonial saber); both are interested in science

fiction; both have messages to help mankind. The most important similarity, above all, is that both have survived the air-raid by British and Americans with the survival guilt-a general trait Jewish past. They cannot understand why they were among the 105 survivors of the massacre of 135,000 people. The survival guilt has become a part of Jewish cultural ethos. It is clear that Vonnegut comes close to identifying himself with Billy when he intrudes into the story of the novel four times to say, "I was there." And the first chapter in its major part is autobiographical where we feel the presence of the novelist.

Both the protagonist and his creator carry messages of their own to help mankind, and thus act on their cultural ethos. Vonnegut's message is that if we are to avoid another Dresden-like massacre, if we are to break the inevitability of war and the end of the world, then we must keep ourselves away from war machinery and the massacre even of enemies. He tells his sons:

> I have told my sons that they are not under any circumstances to take part in massacres, and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee.
>
> I have also told them not to work for companies which make massacre machinery, and to express contempt for people who think we need machinery like that (16).

But looking back on a massacre is human and compassionate so that he compares himself with the wife of Lot. What he implies through this comparison is that it is inhuman to forget or neglect it. Love and compassion towards fellow-humans testifies Vonnegut's ethos, though looking back is as awful as it is absurd. The view that Vonnegut expresses here is that man has to try to ameliorate the suffering of his fellow human, or at least show some concern.

The stance adopted by the protagonist to Dresden fire-bombing is governed by his humanism. The event is more real to him than his shallow life as an optometrist in Ilium, New York. Often he feels drawn to the Dresden event even though it is more traumatic one for him. Through his time travelling we can see that his life is like a corpse mine, and a continuity of terror stretches all the way back to his childhood. Forward in time, Billy sees his death when Paul Lazzaro makes good his promise to have Billy killed after the war. At the age of twelve, Billy has an equally frightening experience when his parents ask him to see into the depth of Grand Canyon, a place notorious for suicidal leaps:

> Billy hated the canyon. He was sure that he was going to fall in. His mother touched him, and he wet his pants (72).

We are told that Billy's parents have placed a gruesome crucifix on the wall of his bedroom and how a military surgeon admires "the clinical fidelity of the artist's rendition of all Christ's wound." As a result, "Billy…contemplated torture and hideous wounds at the beginning and the end of nearly every day of his childhood," the narrator tells (31). "These early images," Allen comments, "have great relevance for Billy's fear and ineptitude in the war and afterward" (260).

Having experienced the traumatic childhood, Billy joins the war as an unarmed chaplain's assistant. He has no quality and physique of a soldier, hence becomes a laughing figure. The narrator describes him as "a funny-looking youth – tall and weak ad shaped like a bottle of Coca-cola" (19). During the war, Billy "a figure of fun in the American Army…He was powerless to harm the enemy or to help his friends" (25). And other time the narrator tells that "He didn't look like a soldier at all. He looked like a filthy flamingo" (27). But he has natural gentleness and innocence; however, they hardly prepare him for idiocy of battle. Billy's behavior during the war is ironic to a soldier in the battlefield. When the other three soldiers have weapons, Billy is "empty-handed, bleakly ready for death" (26).

Death-wish persists in Billy's mind during and after the war. In an event he is shot at and his reaction to the event is absurd for he "stood there politely, giving the marksman another chance" because it is his understanding of "the rules of warfare that the marksman *should* be given a second chance" (27). The other soldier saves Billy's life but he "wouldn't do anything to save himself" or more importantly, "Billy wanted to quit" (28). Billy is presented as not befitting the heroic wartime model of the soldier. In many ways he lacks the self agency associated with the hero; instead his lack of control is emphasized by pointing out that he "has no control over where he is going next" (19). However, Billy does some heroics as to refuse to join in with the conflict taking place in Germany and even to refuse to carry a weapon throughout his time abroad. Billy Pilgrim tries to maintain a more compassionate mindset. His continued innocence in a time of widespread madness enables Billy to retain his sanity. He has never lodged in him the militaristic desire to be the most effective soldier in the war. Rather, like his creator, he has a strong humanitarian stance causing him to respect life rather than to destroy it.

Through Billy, Vonnegut succeeds in offering a message of pacifism opposed to America's propensity towards militarism. It is made clear in one moving episode in the future when Billy watches a documentary on World War II backward. What he watches in it is a reconfiguration of an Allied attack on Germany into a healing rather than destructive sequence:

> The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes (61).

Opposed to Billy Pilgrim is the character of Ronald Weary who believes in the heroic wartime model. Weary is "stupid and fat and mean" (28) and is enchanted with the notion that he and his fellow soldiers are fighting the heroic war. Thinking that he is one of the Three Musketeers, Weary reconstructs the events he has witnessed in a romantic way:

> Weary's version of the true war story went like this: there was a big German attack, and Weary and his antitank buddies fought like hell until everybody was killed but Weary (34).

He ends up being ditched by his companions, captured by the Germans, and dying of gangrene while travelling in a boxcar to a prisoner of war camp. Before Weary dies, he tells his story to Paul Lazzaro, who vows to avenge Weary's death by tracking Billy down after the war and killing him.

Both Weary and Lazzaro are lesser characters who serve to expose Dresden to a different moral point. The story of Lot's wife provides the novel with a perspective of love and compassion towards fellow-humans; however the story of Lazzaro provides a reverse perspective of hate and cruelty. Lazzaro is a miserable little man who invites our pity as well as our disgust. In the prison camp, Lazzaro tries to steal an English officer's cigarettes but he is caught and gets savaged. Characteristically, he swears that he will kill the Englishman in future after the war. According to Klinkowitz, Lazzaro "interprets everything that happens as a call for personal revenge, to the point that he is being consumed by it" (332). Lazzaro is cruel and vindictive yet he takes no satisfaction from Dresden's destruction. He bears no grudge to Germans and he never prides in harming an innocent bystander:

> When Dresden was destroyed…Lazzaro did not exult. He didn't have anything against the Germans…was proud of never having hurt an innocent bystander (115).

The atrocities of war go further when Billy sees numberless casualties died, unmarked, from suffocation. The bodies are staked before the mass cremation as first layer with heads pointed left, second layer with feet pointed left. Billy's account of war atrocities makes the reader numb with a shock. The two most shocking events of the novel are the American strafing and the execution of Edgar Derby for taking a teapot. The first event, the strafing incident, though minor, underscores the senselessness of the atrocity. There are no men left

alive in the city; everybody is dead. And in such a condition if anyone is seen moving "it represented a flaw in design. There were to be no moon men at all." The idea behind strafing of the surviving civilians, the narrator tell, is "to hasten the end of the war" (148). Edgar Derby's execution after the raid is most ironic in the narrative of the novel. He is a high school teacher of Contemporary Civilization from Indianapolis. He has entered the war because he is "mournfully pregnant with patriotism and middle age and imaginary wisdom" (123). He is ready to die gladly for the American ideals of freedom, justice, opportunities and fair play. He advocates the brotherhood between the American and Russian people. The striking thing about old Derby is that he remains a character regardless the effect of war. The narrator puts it in an acute way:

> One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters. But old Derby was a character now (134).

Derby, with his utter sincerity, tries to provide helpful leadership to Billy and his fellow prisoners. His cultural ethos - his loyalty to the sacred, civilized graces of family, love, God country - makes Billy believe that Derby should be the greatest father in the world. A believer in civilized ethics of society, he writes to his wife, telling her not to worry about bombing since Dresden is an open city. His belief proves true and he survives the Dresden bombing but executed for taking a trifle thing. Ethics of war always have upper hand over Derby-like civilized ethics which fail to exempt him from the stupidity and absurdity of world. What Vonnegut underlines in Derby event is the fact that the twisted sense of justice in a world can avoid to talk over the Dresden horror and yet meticulously observe the law to prevent petty looting. Other pitiful ironic event of war that wears on Billy is the execution of Private Eddie Slovik, the only American soldier to be shot for cowardice. The horrors of war which prove most traumatic to Billy include the destruction of Dresden and the event of his friend old Edgar Derby and Slovik.

Billy attempts to maintain the distance from the horrors of war, but they are failed due to his compassionate and loving nature. The point is made clear when Billy and the remaining soldiers, after the horrifying bombing of the city, go looting in the city on horseback. Happy over the ending of war, Billy does not realize that "the horse' mouths were bleeding, gashed by the bits, that the horses' hooves were broken, so that every step meant agony, that horses were insane with thirst"(161). Billy breaks down crying as he discovers the horses' suffering. McCoppin sees Billy's weeping for the horses' condition as "the thematic climax of the novel" (60). Billy's response in this way is due to his realization of his part or responsibility in the pain inflicted on the horses. Billy's actions and responses in the novel are always conditioned

by his sense of cultural ethos. Similarly, the narrator of the novel approaches the war in same way as Billy does. In the closing chapter of the novel, the narrator tells us how he goes back to Dresden again, but this time with his fellow soldier Bernard V. O'Hare. The trip is one of the nicest moments in the life of the narrator, he tells, "One of the nicest ones (moments) in recent times was on my trip back to Dresden with my old war buddy, O'Hare (Vonnegut 174).

Life for Billy after the war is as brutal and pointless as it was during the war; he experiences physical, mental and spiritual destruction of war. The destruction festers like an open wound in the years that follow, and cannot be shrugged off as trivial. This happens to Billy because America does not provide him with the possibility of working through his war experiences. The striking symptom of his condition is his changed perception of time. He sees himself as having "come unstuck in time." Being spastic in time, according to Vees-Gulani, "is a metaphor for Billy's repeatedly re-experiencing the traumatic events he went through in the war," (295) particularly as a prisoner of war during the Dresden bombings. Psychologically speaking, Billy has never completely left World War II; instead he lives the experience of war continuously. Though he looks "outwardly normal" (Vonnegut 144), the traumatic memories persistently intrude on him. He finds himself "simultaneously on foot in Germany in 1944 and riding his Cadillac in 1967" (48). Billy frequently relives his past experiences through his dreams, recollections and flashback episodes. The sensory phenomena such as sights, sounds and smells reactivate the traumatic memories in Billy. Certain colors and smells carry significance in his past. Sounds of siren, which Billy associates with the Dresden air raid alarm, "scared the hell out of him," and "he was expecting World War Three at any time" (47). Less surprisingly a few moments later he is "back in World War Two again" (48). The sight of men crippled by war selling magazines door to door cause great distress to Billy for he himself is crippled by war.

The barbershop quartet at his anniversary party reminds him of the four German guards in Dresden who, as they see the destruction of their home- town, in their astonishment and grief, they "looked like a silent film of a barbershop quartet" (146). The memory relating to the German guards lies at the center of Billy's trauma, the destruction of Dresden. This trauma is reflected in his physical complaint that "he might have been having a heart attack" (142). On other occasion, Billy moves away from the guests "remembered it shimmeringly" (145) but fails to revisit that event. The Dresden destruction and its effect are so painful to relive, and even it is too frightening to remember. This is the reason why he physically and psychologically reacts to the barber quartet. It even disturbs Billy's outward appearance which shows how deeply is buried his Dresden memories. Billy tries to suppress the trauma of

Dresden through avoiding thoughts, feelings, talk about it, as well as activities, places and people that arouse recollections. All these symptoms are displayed in Billy's behavior. He does almost not ever talk about his experiences in the war, even not to his wife. When she asks her if he ever thinks about war, his answer to her is "Sometimes" (99) thus avoids talking about war.

His response to the world around him is very rare as he "never got mad at anything…was wonderful that way" (24). And bears everything because "*Everything* is all right" with Billy" (163). His passive and emotionless reaction to tragedy and death which is acutely expressed in the much repeated phrase "So it goes" is suggestive of his nature. Billy develops the strategies of avoidance and psychic numbness as shields which protect him from the trauma. However, the memories intrude upon his mind despite his efforts to stop them completely. This happens because the war has destroyed him inside which now mirrors the ruins he has seen in Dresden. Three years after the war and during his last year in the Ilium School of Optometry, Billy suffers "a mild nervous collapse' (20). Nobody ever suspects that he is going crazy except doctors who agree that "He *was* going crazy" (82). Allen calls Billy's illness as "posttraumatic stress syndrome" (261).

It is true that Billy's illness is linked with the experience he has had in the war. People think that it has to do with his childhood experience of swimming pool. Unfortunately "They didn't think it had anything to do with the war." War chases Billy where ever he goes and the hospital ward is no exception. Next to his bed is a former infantry captain named Eliot Rosewater who introduces Billy to science fiction writer, Kilgore Trout. Billy loves the science fiction writer for both have similarities between them. The similarities are clarified as:

> They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war. Rosewater, for instance, had shot a fourteen-year-old fireman, mistaking him for a German soldier…And Billy had seen the greatest massacre in European history, which was the fire-bombing of Dresden (Vonnegut 82).

Both Billy and Kilgore Trout face similar crises, and they deal with them in a similar way. They turn to science fiction "trying to re-invent themselves and their universe," and "Science fiction was a big help" (82). Billy uses science fiction in order to cope with his mental condition. Science fiction offers him a way out from the confines of his grim existence. They are tools by which Billy tries to construct the postwar reality.

Reference to Kilgore Trout's *The Gospel from Outer Space* suggests Billy's attempt to reconstruct a new form out of the old fragments. Or, rather it is to reinvent himself and the world around him. It is a book about a visitor from outer space who makes "a serious study of

Christianity, to learn…why Christians found it so easy to be cruel." The author of the book says that the storytelling in the New Testament is careless. Next he supposes that "the intent of the Gospels was to teach people…to be merciful, even to the lowest of the low." But the traditional Gospels are far away from this teaching hence they are flawed. Instead, they seem to suggest that the moral lesson one must learn from Jesus' crucifixion is this "*Before you kill somebody, make absolutely sure he isn't well connected*." Trout reconstructs Christ's story saying that Christ is not the Son of God; rather he is "the Son of the Most Powerful Being in the Universe." In new Gospel, which is a gift to Earth, Trout reconstructs the story of Jesus Christ: "In it, Jesus really *was* a nobody, and a pain in the neck to a lot of people with better connections than he had. He still got to say all he lovely and puzzling things he said in the other Gospels (89). Yet when this nobody Jesus is crucified, the heaven opens up with thunder and lightning and God announces his verdict saying that "*From this moment on, He will punish horribly anybody who torments a bum who has no connections!*" (90).

Billy's experience during the war is treated as painful as the experience of Christ may have when He was nailed on the cross. Christ resurrects and Billy survives; but the holocaust is so dreadful that Billy treats it as a dreamlike thing. Though he survives, he survives with a feeling of being trapped by a sense of doom to the point that prevents him from normal working. These things account for Billy's waving aside of everyday reality and his resorting to trances such as trips to the imaginary planet. He is in search of an alternative experience to his everyday experience and that is possible in fantasy, or trances. Billy's trip to Tralfamadore is a fantasy which, argue Merrill and Scholl, is a "desperate attempt to rationalize chaos." (18). His trip to an imaginary place reflects his longing for a golden age, an ideal place like Eden. Reading of Kilgore Trout, particularly his novel, *The Big Board*, helps Billy to forge his illusory trip into outer space. The novel is concerned with an earthling couple who are kidnapped by extraterrestrials and put on display in a zoo. Billy also watches a film of an erotic performance by Wildhack in the bookstore. All these details contribute to Billy's fantasy of Tralfamadore.

The Tralfamadorian philosophy propounds an escape from linear time and suggests that time is illusory. The problem of death addressed as ignoring it as finality. The phrase, "so it goes" repeated ritualistically throughout the novel whenever any death is mentioned. The phrase is a sign of human will to survive and its recurrence in the course of the novel is an important aid to "going on." Billy's concern on the Tralfamadore is how "'the inhabitants of a whole planet can live in peace!'" Here he acts as a messiah with a concern to make earth a peaceful planet without wars. Since the planet he is belonged to is engaged in senseless

slaughter, he wants to know how to save people there. The Tralfamadorian guide, answering to Billy's concern, suggests that war is universal and it is structured as to be happened always, and there is nothing to prevent it. Wars cannot be avoided, we can only make sense of them by believing that things that are should be whether they are now, or have been, or will be. Because of their ability to see in the fourth dimension, the Tralfamadorians know how the universe will end. Actually the Tralfamadorians will blow it by "experimenting with new fuels" (95). To Billy's question that if they can prevent the pilot from pressing the button, the Tralfamadorian guide tells, "'He has *always* pressed it, and he always *will*. We *always* let him and we always *will* let him. The moment is *structured* that way.'" Everything is always happening and we cannot do anything about it. In order to free oneself from the anxiety of wars, one must learn "'Ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones'" (96). Billy adopts this outlook as a way to cope with the tragedies and uncertainties of existence and frees himself from the anxieties.

Through Tralfamadorian philosophy, Billy learns a resigned tolerance of war, as it is made clear in his telling statement, "'So –' " said Billy gropingly, "'I suppose that the idea of preventing war on Earth is stupid, too.'" In addition, he also learns to accept whatever will be, will be. The Tralfamadorian theory of simultaneity of time makes death less horrible and it also suggests that there is nothing we can do to prevent war; consequently we cannot prevent the end of the world. Louis calls the Tralfamadorian philosophy "the gospel from the outer space" (176), thus underlining the Billy's sense of the cultural ethos in the novel. This view of history or the gospel leads Billy to say about the destruction of Dresden, "'It was all right,'" said Billy, " '*Everything* is all right , and everybody has to do exactly what he does'" (163). Even Vonnegut does not think that stopping war is a viable possibility, or that if it were, this would lessen human pain. In chapter I, on a movie producer's suggestion, "Why don't you write an anti-*glacier* book…?" the novelist says "What he meant, of course, was that there would always be wars, that they are as easy as to stop as glaciers. I believe that too." Further, Vonnegut admits that "even if war didn't keep coming like glaciers, there would still be plain old death" (3). Though the novelist accepts war and death as inevitable, he refuses to accept it blindly, or childishly. It is obviously made clear in the prayer hanging around Montana Wildhack's neck:

> 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 (50,172).

As Vonnegut-narrator observes, "Among the things Billy could not change were the past, the present, and the future" (50). In fine, Dresden has happened, is happening, and will always happen.

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