

**Post-Modernist Echoes in Kurt Vonnegut' Short Stories, 'EPICAC', 'All the King's Horses' and '2BRO2B'**

Anns ShajiAssistant Professor, Department of English,
Mar Augusthinose College, Ramapuram, Kerala.

ABSTRACT:

Kurt Vonnegut, an American writer, can be regarded as a one among the figures of post-modern writers. Post-modernism often necessitates an answer to the notion that the realities of the world will be realized through science. Vonnegut's literary works are embellished with post-modern tropes such as unreliable narration, metafiction, self-reflexivity, intertextuality to name a few. Through his short stories, he tries to bring out a new world, which seems like a different world, but it indirectly portrays the real world. Each of his works stands separately with new themes, with different narrative styles and employs different features that are peculiar to postmodernist writings.

Keywords: Post- Modernism, Pastiche, Irony, Paranoia

Post-Modernism emerged during the 1960's and 1970's was an immediate reaction to the modernist ideas which emphasised the search for meaning of life that has been shattered by world war. While the modernist writers try to bring an order in the chaotic word, post-modernist writers initiated a shift in the writing style by adopting techniques such as fragmentation, playfulness, intertextuality, metafiction etc thereby celebrating the meaninglessness of life. The roots of post-modernism can be found in the writings of Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud and Martin Heidegger. The rapid technological changes, ideological uncertainties, scientific revolutions in physics, biology etc. contribute to the development of this new thought.

Kurt Vonnegut is one of the pioneering figures among the post-modernist writers. He is known for his experimentation in literary works. This paper is to look into the post-modernist elements in three of Vonnegut's short stories namely, 'EPICAC', 'All the Kings Horse's, and '2BRO2B'.

In the short story 'EPICAC', Vonnegut pictures a supercomputer in the same name as of the title. The peculiarity of this machine is that it solves every problem given to it. Narrating the story from the point of view of a computer makes it an unreliable narrator, which is a characteristic feature of post-modern writings. The authors employ the technique of foreshadowing, a feature of postmodernism, at the beginning. The narrator goes back to the night of the incident where EPICAC commits suicide by short circuiting himself. The author also uses the technique of switching back and forth by referring the computer as 'he' and presenting it as a machine. The story begins by referring EPICAC as his friend at the same time gives an objectified description about it." After all he cost the taxpayers \$ 776'434, 427, 54" (Vonnegut 1). ENIAC (electronic numerical integrator and calculator) which was the first electronic computer used for general purpose was the inspiration for Vonnegut to write the story. Thus, the story is both fictional and real. The idea of a computer having human emotions especially love and the act of committing suicide makes the story fictional.

“Pastiche arises from the frustration that everything has been done before. The writers and artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and world...only a limited number of combinations are possible” (Jameson). Science fiction is popular source for postmodernist pastiche. EPICAC, a supercomputer with artificial intelligence who made conversation with the narrator and helped him to get into the marriage with Pat, his co-worker. The story unfolds itself through the relationship between the narrator and the computer. So, the story can be categorized in the genre of science fiction.

The use of irony is another feature of postmodernist writings. In EPICAC, the narrator maintains a personal relationship with the machine. He seeks its help to win the love of Pat. He presents the poems which were written by the computer. They ultimately join. The problem lies when EPICAC himself falls in love with Pat. The love poems that it wrote reveals his humanly feelings. Furthermore, the poems create a situational irony in the story. It is highly ironic that a computer could express deep human emotions better than a real human being. EPICAC is created by man to make war. As the story develops, the machine uses its intelligence to promote love and even die for it.

In the story ‘2BR02B’, the author creates an imaginary situation where people don’t become older. The advancement in medical field, especially in the creation of new drugs bring forth this situation. Since no one gets older, there is no question of death. This story indirectly suggests the growing technological developments in every field of human interference which cannot be rightly regarded as a boon or a curse.

On looking at the title of the short story, at first it doesn’t bring any meaning on its own. Only when one starts reading the story, the idea behind it is brought out. 2BRO2B is the telephone number to make appointment to die in the municipal gas chamber of the Federal Bureau of Termination. The title holds the essence of the story. Towards the end, the old painter makes a call to this number all because he is desperately tired of witnessing the harsh reality that he is in. he is fed up with his life. Making a call to this number is a way of liberating his soul and body, a kind of escapism, from the so-called modern society.

The feature of paranoia can be noted in this short story.” The threat of total engulfment by somebody else’s system is keenly felt by the writers of postmodernist fiction. This is an indirect mimetic representation of the climate of fear and suspicion that prevailed throughout the cold war. Postmodernist writing reflect paranoid anxieties in many ways including the distrust of fixities, of being circumscribed to any one particular place or identity and the multiplication of self-made plots to counter the scheming of others” (sim 129-30). In the story the individual identity is imprisoned by the state authority in an indirect manner. Dr Hitz in the story represents the government to enact the act passed on population control. It is he who talks to Wehlin, the father of the new-born triplets, about the situation of the state before the population control system. The Federal Bureau of Termination gas chamber is run by the government, and it orders that every new birth in the country should be at the cost of another individual.

The government also extends its power even in the artistic representation. This shows the magnitude of state control over the lives of the individuals. Art is considered as the independent because it is the work of the mind and hand. In the story the artist is prohibited from exercising his power in the way he likes instead the government authority provides him with instructions on how to make the mural. It is ironic that only the faces of significant people, those who holds power and position, are supposed to be in the paintings. When an older man praises the mural the artist smiles in a sarcastic way and says that the painting is named as ‘Happy Garden of Life’. This statement shows the flawed nature of the American society. He also adds that a foul drop cloth will show the honest representation of America. This involvement of government in every matter of individual life is critiqued through the story.

All the Kings Horses, yet another short story of Vonnegut portrays the effects of war on human lives. The victim of war does nothing wrong even then they are forced to die for the country. They have to

face death on the compulsion from the part of the state. Individuals are treated just like machines that can be used at any time.

The story is centred on the game of chess. The main character Colonel Byran Kelly along with his wife and children has been captured by the communist guerrilla chief Pi Ying. He forced Kelly to play the game of chess in order to save their lives. The worst part is that individuals must play the part of each chess piece. And if Kelly loses the game, every one of them will be killed. Here the situation of saving lives is juxtaposed with the game of chess. This is a new technique employed by Vonnegut from the rest of the works.

Irony is the most persistent element in this short story and one can find many instances in the story. The crash landing of the plane and the survival of the Americans is ironically portrayed. They were held as captives by Pi Yung. Their survival was only to become the prisoners of him. When Mrs Kelly cries out of despair Pi Ying makes the comment about Americans making bombs and jet planes and tanks for the sake of love to God. The story presents the futility of human existence. Vonnegut knows the dreadfulness of war because he had the experience of it. So, by making war as the background of the story he tried to bring the absurdity of it. The inhumanness of war is portrayed through the vicious and exaggerated game.

Kurt Vonnegut through his short stories tries to bring out a new world, which seems like a new world, but it indirectly portrays the real world. Each of his works stands separately with new themes, with different narrative styles and employs different features that are peculiar to postmodernist writings. Vonnegut believed in 'keeping it simple', i.e., to employ simple words rather than using flawed ones. Most of his works contains a sense of frustration and desperation due to the disillusionment caused by the world wars. The features of postmodernism such as intertextuality, irony, pastiche, paranoia etc. can be traced from the works of Vonnegut. He truly can be regarded as a postmodernist writer.

Bibliography

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. Print.

Klinkowitz, Jerome. *Kurt Vonnegut*. London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1982. Print.

Shapiro, Ron. *Surviving Postmodernism*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1998. Print.

Sim, Stuard. *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 2001. Print

Vonnegut, Kurt. *All the Kings Horses*. <https://mrjpisco.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/all-the-kings-horses-story.pdf>

Vonnegut, Kurt. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/21279/21279-h/21279-h.htm>

Vonnegut, Kurt. newmediaabington.pbworks.com/f/vonnegut_EPICAC.pdf

Woods, Tim. *Beginning Postmodernism*. New York: Manchester University Press, 1999.