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Existential Crisis in Post-War American Fiction: A Study of Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*.

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Abstract:

*Twentieth Century American novelists brought about certain radical transformations in novel writing, reflecting in their works an apocalyptic tendency in describing contemporary human culture, life and civilization on getting fractured, debased and above all dehumanized. These novelists made their works as symbolic of the totally recreated image of the human identity, the human self, and there by composing a new mythology of the space and machine age with the illustrations of a totally different protagonistic situation in the fictional societies of their novels. Kurt Vonnegut, one the representative novelists of post-war America, repeatedly portrays his heroes as perpetually engaged in unraveling the mystery of human predicament. The meaning of life functions as a pivot round which the bulk of Vonnegut's fiction revolves. Vonnegut's heroes, like their other fictional counterparts in contemporary American fiction, experience an ironic mode of existence. In *Breakfast of Champions* protagonist's existence is defined by irony with the shadow of apocalypse looming large because the love and appetite of post-modern American materialism serves only to aggravate man's alienation and the trial and tribulations of his existence. The ethos of mass society has made Dwayne Hoover, the hero of the novel, a mere dust particle that floats aimlessly across a sea of absurdity to his eventual self-annihilation*

KEYWORDS:

American, Post-War, Vonnegut, Dwayne, Vonnegut

INTRODUCTION:

Existential Crisis in Post-War American Fiction: A Study of Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*.

In the aftermath of the World War II, American writers, particularly the novelists, portrayed their fictional personages as humans agonizingly wrestling with the unsettling and unpredictable ethos of mass society, a disjointed and fragmented society which no longer rendered itself to any certain description. The ethos of mass society created a new compulsion and novelists changed the contours of novel to cater to such a brand of society and culture. In fact, the Cold War era of 1950's and 1960's in the twentieth century had already alarmed the writers, especially poets and novelists that the technique of creativity had to be remoulded in order to cater to the totally altered socio-political and economic condition. This, according to Ihab Hassan, gave birth to "an agnosticism of fictional forms" (Hassan 1961: 105) and the contemporary novelist assumed the role of a socio-cultural spokesman of his age and times forcing the novel to adopt new treatment in terms of plot, characterization, theme and imagery.

Younger novelists of America, profoundly shaken by the bombing of Hiroshima and the threat of human annihilation, found the conventional trend of novel writing inadequate for treating war's nightmarish implications. Novelists like Saul Bellow, William S Burroughs, Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut,

Norman Mailer, Jerzy Kosinski and John Hawks etc., weaved their fictional works as representations of a recreated image of the human identity, the human self; thereby illustrating a totally different protagonistic situation in their novelistic worlds. Post War American novelists presented their protagonists as existential explorers across the afflicting spectrum of deculture materialism and dehumanisation. The novelistic hero is portrayed as a contemporary Odysseus embarking on his own odyssey of self-discovery and identity. *Breakfast of Champions* or *Goodbye Blue Monday* is Kurt Vonnegut's seventh novel. Published in 1973, the novel was written by Vonnegut as a fiftieth birthday present to himself. The novel is a sort of parody of Vonnegut himself and his earlier works. It contains an averse confession that "the author cannot create order out of chaos". The narrative in *Breakfast of Champions* functions as a jumble of Vonnegut's scientific or clinical diagnosis of the social matrix which reveals a "tragic" tendency to isolate the hero Dwayne Hoover a rich Midwest Pontiac dealer. With the skillfulness and craftsmanship of a master synthesizer, Vonnegut employs various literary devices ranging from juxtaposition of past and present, fact and fiction, autobiographical collage, irony, antithesis, contradiction and above all black humour, thereby bringing forth the debased and degenerative nature of society that is at the brink of cultural and moral collapse. In the novel Vonnegut laments over man's tendency for bringing apocalypse on humanity. The apocalyptic strain gets manifested through the "memories of holocaust from Auschwitz to Hiroshima, a success of wars from Korea to Vietnam ... ravages to the natural environment, renewed awareness of poverty in America, the discrimination of race and sex, political protest of every kind..." (Hassan. 1978: 2). This crisis of existence that modern times inflicted upon mankind becomes a major concern of the novels of Kurt Vonnegut. In *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut places his hero Dwayne Hoover in a protagonistic situation haunted by an approaching apocalypse. Life has lost all its meaning for Dwayne Hoover. His existential predicament ends in his obsessive commitment to unravel the meaning of life. Dwayne Hoover deliberates upon the problematics of existence profoundly, his situation becomes thematic as well as tragic to the extent that he becomes a personification of dianoia—a theme in literature with deep conceptual interest. Kilgore Trout, a science fiction writer, plays a major role in *Breakfast of Champions*. Vonnegut employs a host of science-fiction stories written by Kilgore Trout, his alter ego, to convey a series of apocalypses though on the extra terrestrial level. Kilgore Trout's stories serve as the thematic platform in the narrative attaining the form of "a series of oracular pronouncements" (Frye 1975: 55). Trout weaves his plots with stories from a number of planets from different galaxies to reflect the highly degenerative and dystopian state of affairs on Earth.

Kurt Vonnegut, as a sensitive human being and a conscious writer, shows a deep concern for negotiating the apocalypse that America as a nation has inflicted upon entire humanity in general and the Americans in particular. The various causes that have triggered this frightening decline are racism, war, violence, greed, environmental exploitation, overpopulation and so on. In the novel Vonnegut portrays an unfeeling robotic society, and an American culture plagued with despair, greed and indifference:

Everybody on earth was a robot, with one exception—Dwayne Hoover. Of all the creatures in the universe, only Dwayne was thinking and feeling, and worrying and planning and so on. Nobody else knew what pain was. Nobody else had any choice to make. Everybody else was fully automatic. (Vonnegut 1973: 14)

The plot of the novel revolves around two old men, one very opulent and the other very poor. Dwayne Hoover is a fabulously "well-to-do" automobile dealer living in the heart of the Midland City, USA, and Kilgore Trout is Vonnegut's persona, created to camouflage the authorial voice. Through the science-fiction stories, Vonnegut makes Trout the chief apocalyptic spokesman for both present and the future of mankind. Thus the novel seems to be an aesthetic exercise of Vonnegut's "imaginative recreation of experience" that "becomes a revolt against world which appears to have no logical pattern". Here Vonnegut employs an innovative and unprecedented literary device that makes him come face-to-face with his own fictional creations: Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore Trout. Early, in the very first chapter of the novel, Vonnegut reveals that Dwayne Hoover will learn from Trout what life is all about. When Hoover comes to know that only Trout could provide answer to the question of the real meaning of life, his sole aim remains to meet Kilgore Trout face-to-face so that the mystery about the meaning and purpose of life is resolved once for all. The reader interestingly follows Dwayne Hoover's journey from the beginning to the climactic meeting with Kilgore Trout at the end of the book.

Towards the end of the novel the two old men meet during an Arts Festival at Mildred Berryton Memorial Center for the Arts in Midland city, the hometown of Dwayne Hoover. Dwayne's sole aim to attend the Arts Festival is his "quest for an absolute sense of significant meaning in life". Dwayne Hoover like Billy Pilgrim, the fictional protagonist of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, is obsessed to find out the meaning of life. The hero's addiction vis-a-vis the meaning of life is aggravated by his reading of a Kilgore Trout novel titled *Now It Can Be Told*. Dwayne loses grip over his senses, becomes almost schizophrenic and even a series of sexual encounters with his secretary Francine Pefko, fail to restore the hero's confidence. Kilgore

Trout's novel implants in the hero the idea that all human beings around him are mere machines like robots, he being the only one possessing free-will. This idea destabilises Dwayne's mental and spiritual condition and he runs amok. The novel *Now It Can Be Told* is written in form of a letter from the creator of the universe to the reader. The reader is addressed as:

Dear Sir, poor sir, brave sir, you are an experiment by the Creator of the Universe. You are the only one creature in the entire Universe who has free-will. You are the only one who has to figure out what to do next—and why. Everybody else is a robot, a machine.

(Vonnegut 1973: 253)

From Trout's novel, Dwayne realizes that the people around him are machines: those who like him are 'liking machines' and who hate him are 'hating machines'.

Dwayne Hoover was born in Midland City, spent first three years of his life in an orphanage and was adopted by a childless couple. After having served as a civilian employee in the U S Army in World War II, Dwayne became multimillionaire of Midland City with a long list of entrepreneurships. Hoover suffers badly, despite his property and wealth, and is burdened with problems of himself and his family. He is acutely aware of the fact that on the societal and familial planes he is a failure. He is mentally disturbed suffering from a kind of disillusion. Hoover's wife Celia Hoover has committed suicide by eating Drano, a sanitary germicide and his only son Bunny Hoover has grown up to be an infamous homosexual of the town who earns his livelihood by playing piano in Cocktail Lounge of the Holiday Inn owned by Dwayne himself. Dwayne's materialistic wealth acts as a whirlpool for him and he gets engulfed deep into it resulting in a binary fission or split of his personality. Dwayne breaks into "fragments" and each fragment shows mirror up to the hero's multiple confusions, obsessions, and disillusion. The reader at this point of narrative can easily grasp the author's message that helpless human beings on earth are mere puppets in the hands of alien forces. In other words, man's life is meaningless in a purposeless and mechanical universe, a kind of Kafkaesque syndrome which defines human predicament at a larger level.

Kurt Vonnegut repeatedly portrays his heroes as perpetually engaged in unraveling the mystery of human predicament. The meaning of life functions as a pivot round which the bulk of Vonnegut's fiction revolves. Vonnegut's heroes, like their other fictional counterparts in contemporary American fiction, experience an ironic mode of existence. Dwayne Hoover's existence is defined by irony with the shadow of apocalypse looming large because the love and appetite of post-modern American materialism serves only to aggravate man's alienation and the trial and tribulations of his existence. The ethos of mass society has made Dwayne Hoover a mere dust particle that floats aimlessly across a sea of absurdity to his eventual self-annihilation.

Kurt Vonnegut, in the preface to the novel, makes a confession that the very exercise of writing *Breakfast of Champions* was to clear his "head of all the junk" (Vonnegut 1973: 5). Like his fictional protagonist, Dwayne Hoover, Vonnegut himself craves for some meaningful, justifiable, logical and comprehensible pattern of life and living. Vonnegut shares, with contemporary fiction writers in America, the premise that the "common pattern in American fiction is the exposure of an innocent hero to a series of events which awaken him to sense of meaninglessness in nature and lack of moral direction in people" (Hauck 1971: 9). Dwayne Hoover is a specimen of post-modern man who lives in a decreative and anarchic world, monitored by political demagogues, economic biggies, a world completely disguised by media. Like other fictional protagonists of Post-War American fiction, Dwayne Hoover inhabits "a relatively comfortable, half welfare and half garrison society in which the population grows indifferent and atomised; in which traditional loyalties, ties and associations become lax or dissolve entirely (and) in which man becomes a consumer, himself mass-produced like the products, divisions and values that he absorbs" (Howe 1992: 130). Kilgore Trout's novel *Now It can Be Told* tells Dwayne that he is "pooped and demoralised". 'Why wouldn't you be? Of course it is exhausting, having to reason all time in a Universe which wasn't meant to be reasonable" (Vonnegut 1973: 253). The hero inhabits a world that is meaningless and chaotic and any attempt to give meaning or construct some comprehensive design culminates in failure and total absurdity.

Breakfast of Champions, in a postmodern self-reflexive manner, removes the curtain that separates fiction and reality in order to reveal "that human experience is fragmented, irritating, apparently unredeemable" (Weinberg 1970: 11). Kurt Vonnegut himself asserts that a novel does not promise to "bring order to chaos" instead lend "chaos to order" thereby suggesting that "there is no order in the world around us, that we must adapt ourselves to the requirements of chaos, instead" (Vonnegut 1973: 210). Such a premise gets manifested in apocalyptic deconstruction of everything, be it humans, the world they inhabit or even the cosmos.

A close reading of *Breakfast of Champions* presents before the reader a perennial problem tormenting postmodern mankind, which is the plague of boredom. Boredom has become the biggest enemy of mankind which deprives man of satisfaction, happiness and meaning, leaving human beings like

He would get down on the floor and roll around With Sparky, and he would say things like this, “you and me, Spark,” and “How's my old buddy?” and so on.

(Vonnegut 1973: 18)

Dwayne Hoover is at odds with the society he lives in. The robotic society of machines forces the hero to revert to childhood stage, a stage where he tries to communicate his feelings to an animal. Kilgore Trout, like Dwayne Hoover, is agonizingly wrestling with the question of absurdity and is living a meaningless life. After having lost three wives, Trout is living the life of a decrepit old man only to mutter and sneer to his parakeet, Bill, about the end of the world. Trout tells Bill that “humanity deserves to die horribly since it had behaved so cruelly and wastefully on a planet so sweet” (Vonnegut 1973: 18). Protagonists of American fiction like Kilgore Trout and Dwayne Hoover are the victims of cruel forces which have brought the world to the verge of apocalyptic collapse and extinction. Trout tells his parrot that contemporary man is acting like the notorious Roman emperor Heliogabalus. Heliogabalus becomes emblematic of a dehumanized American culture, which breeds anomie, hatred, insomnia, and bewilderment. A culture where people are engaged in an unbridled race to hoard materialistic wealth; where God has been replaced with money.

Dwayne Hoover, in *Breakfast of Champions*, like Billy Pilgrim, functions as a picaresque hero journeying across the wasteland of demonic human world suffocated with drug addiction, ecological pollution, racial discrimination, prostitution, homosexuality, pornography, violence, murder and what not. *Breakfast of Champions*, thus, becomes an emblem of pervasive schizophrenia, a world completely engulfed by commercialism. The novel stinks with paranoia, uncertainty and dehumanizing materialism. Vonnegut's own protagonistic situation in the external world seems to be no better than that of Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore Trout in the fictional world. The protagonistic situation of heroes in *Breakfast of Champions* becomes a kind of illustrative fable, a thematic parable about the condition of present day mankind. As a result, the novel represents “an intensification of low mimetic, in the sharpening of attention to details that makes the dullest and most neglected trivia of daily living leap into mysterious and fateful significance” (Frye 1975: 46). Vonnegut's sense of his hero, Dwayne Hoover, as a victim who swims pathetically across the turbulent sea of absurdity and meaningless creates tragic irony. The absurdity and meaninglessness become so devastating that the earthlings like Dwayne Hoover who inhabit a diseased, sterile wasteland feel that they have been cheated and insulted by their creator that “they might be in the wrong country, or even on wrong planet, that some terrible mistake had been made” (Vonnegut 1973: 9-10).

Breakfast of champions highlights the problems of the protagonistic situation applying to wastelanders like Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore Trout, besides illustrating their helplessness and victimization. Dwayne becomes a helpless victim of a ruthless agency which is mass society, a society which does not render itself to any concrete definition and remains continually in a state of flux. Hoover as the ironic alazon remains involved in a struggle with his enemy and the enemy is none other than the mysterious heavenly order and an incomprehensible societal ethos. Not only Hoover, but his other counterparts as well find it self-defeating and absurd to combat the predicament of human existence. Dwayne, with his fractured protagonistic situation undoes himself by assuming the role of a “deep diver” for whom society has become a “hard crust” and diving beneath it, the alazonic self of the hero tries to find “an alternative mode of existence” (Hassan 1961: 107).

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut situates his fictional protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, in the Dresden context. Vonnegut himself being the recipient of the horrible Dresden Experience had to struggle for twenty four years to distance himself from that traumatic experience so that he could write a book on that subject. Likewise in *Breakfast of Champions*, the fictional combination of Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore Trout symbolize the dual aspect of Vonnegut's own self: an alter ego “A would-be creator who failed and failed” (Vonnegut 1973: 97) and a hero who is presented as an ironic Adam, an exhausted Sisyphus at the boulder, whose identity revolves upon the twin axles of meaninglessness and absurdity. Be it Billy, Trout or Hoover, as ironic Adams they “remain dramatically in the position of children baffled by their first contact with an adult situation” (Frye 1975: 220). The god who operates in the novelistic cosmos of *Breakfast of Champions* is described as an egomaniac or egotist, highly presumptuous, punishing disobedience who derives pleasure in inflicting pain and suffering on helpless human beings.

In a satirical tone Vonnegut describes the world as overcrowded with humans no different from programmed machines craving for sex and producing babies like consumerist products. The idea, deeply ingrained in Hoover's mind, is that every human being around him is programmed to devastate and nullify all the revered institutions like religion, culture, family and society. As a sensitive and committed humanist Vonnegut feels disturbed over the path mankind was treading in the twentieth century. Vonnegut laments the loss of socio-cultural values and he talks about the ethos of mass society in terms of individual anomie

(Vonnegut 1973: 5)

The plot-structure of *Breakfast of Champions* coupled with Dwayne Hoover's existential problems strongly substantiates Vonnegut's statement that he himself possesses "no culture", no "humane harmony" in his mind. Kurt Vonnegut and his hero Dwayne Hoover experience a similar protagonistic situation. They both inhabit the societies, one real, and other imagined where the colour of the skin determines the social values and standing of human beings. Discrimination on the basis of race and colour constitute the most detesting and disgusting kind of deculture where superior whites hate the inferior blacks and black man is even sawed in half with a barbed wire. The blacks as 'Niggers' are stereotyped by whites as lazy, dirty, unlawful and dumb and are simply seen as lesser beings. Vonnegut himself considers racism as one of the most hateful and dehumanising phenomena in the history of human civilization.

Dwayne Hoover's protagonistic situation assumes a totally apocalyptic position when Vonnegut shifts his deconstructive focus to man-made apocalypse. Floods, famines, diseases, epidemics and even unchecked population growth are the various dismal things that directly attribute to man's own foul actions especially the unrestrained production of babies. In this context, Vonnegut argues how the divine nature of man can be maintained and justified on the planet when humans keep on multiplying like insects with children "arriving all the time—kicking and screaming, yelling for milk" (Vonnegut 1973: 13). Dwayne Hoover, as sensitive as Vonnegut himself, becomes crazy at the sight of the degenerative and diseased surroundings because of all the creatures in the Universe, "only Dwayne was thinking feeling and worrying and planning and so on" (Vonnegut 1973: 14). Dwayne was the only person to know what pain was all about. Vonnegut realizes human beings around him and Dwayne are programmed machines who sustain themselves on chemicals. This realization urges Vonnegut to conclude that "there was nothing sacred about myself or about any human being, that we were all machines, doomed to collide and collide and collide" (Vonnegut 1973: 219). To intensify the satire and dismantling humour Vonnegut identifies two monsters that always inhabit the human brains in America: "the arbitrary lust for gold" and "girls underpants" (Vonnegut 1973: 25). However, as a gradualist, Vonnegut expresses his belief that humanity can still retrieve itself from the brink of apocalypse by admitting and realizing the futility and ravages of the actions done so far.

Dwayne Hoover in *Breakfast of Champions* represents Vonnegut himself as well as any other individual from post-modern American society. Dwayne's protagonistic situation in the novel becomes a paradigm that defines, determines and analyses the basic nature of human existence in today's world. The only character who seems to realise his situation is Kilgore Trout, who tells his parakeet: "the way things are going, all I can think of is that I'm a character in a book by somebody who wants to write about somebody who suffers all the time" (Vonnegut 1973: 241). Vonnegut, nevertheless, in an unprecedented novelistic manner, meets Kilgore Trout and tells him "I'm your creator, . . . You are in the middle of a book right now—close to the end of it, actually" (Vonnegut 1973: 291). Moreover, indeed, Vonnegut sets Trout free by the end of the book, awarding him with Nobel Prize, not for literature but for medicine.

In present day mechanised world human beings float like dust particles across the listless atmosphere of mass society. Such atomised humans simply qualify as consumers, and any one of them can be a Dwayne Hoover for whom even sex fails to be an antidote to existential boredom and anomie. Dwayne Hoover's protagonistic situation in *Breakfast of Champions* comes closer to Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*. However, Camus' Sisyphus finally reconciles with his situation by means of an absurd resolution, a kind of recognition, but Dwayne Hoover's practical life in *Breakfast of Champions* becomes so hopeless that only a terrible earthquake can flatten the slope and relieve Hoover from the burden of rolling the "boulder" up the "hill" only to have it rolling down again. For Dwayne Hoover the boulder is nothing else but his own sterile dehumanized existence with hill top as the possible meaning of life. In an attempt to render the fractured social scenario intelligible for the postmodern agonised self, Vonnegut makes his fictional counterpart, Kilgore Trout, answer the question "what is the purpose of life?", that he finds scribbled with a charcoal on a bathroom tile in New York:

**To be
the eyes
and ears
and conscience
of the Creator of the Universe,
you fool.**

(Vonnegut 1973: 67)

However, Vonnegut himself feels unsatisfied with this hypothesis and thus offers another solution through Rabo Karabekian during the Arts Festival in Midland City. Vonnegut describes it as "the spiritual climax of the book" when Rabo Karabekian explains his painting "The Temptations of Saint Antony",

It is a picture of the awareness of every animal. It is the immaterial core of every animal—the 'I am' to which all messages are sent. It is all that is alive in any of us—in a mouse, in a deer, in a cocktail waitress. It is unwavering and pure, no matter what preposterous adventure may befall us. A sacred picture of Saint Anthony alone is one vertical, unwavering band of light. If a cockroach were near him, or a cocktail waitress, the picture would show two such bands of light. Our awareness is all that is alive and may be sacred in any of us. Everything else about us is dead machinery.

(Vonnegut 1973: 221)

Rabo Karabekian's explanation of his masterpiece constitutes the thematic and aesthetic culmination in *Breakfast of Champion*, providing with an "ultimate answer that man is more than physical being and is in some way divine or somehow partakes of the divine" (Weinberg 1970: 15). Human beings on earth may behave as robots being driven to destruction by the chemicals but they do share one peculiar characteristic that makes them different from machines. There is essential virtue in man and every human being possesses a spiritual element that has been subjugated by the consumerist consciousness that dominates present day mankind. To conclude one can say that Dwayne Hoover in *Breakfast of Champions* personifies Vonnegut's three-dimensional answer to the complicated problematics of postmodern man's life and living and his irresistible desire to follow the path which may ultimately lead to self-annihilation.

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