

CYBER DESPOTISM IN KURT VONNEGUT'S *Cat's Cradle*

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Abstract

Cyber Literature is a word that has gained popularity with the dominance of technology that has shrunk the periphery of the world to palm size. Dependence on science has infused mechanization in culture and also in love. Science and its men have started becoming a threat for the human race in general. In Cat's Cradle (1963), Kurt Vonnegut shows how the society functions as a fairy land but later it turns impotent to the human stupidity and greed, when the Postwar American scientists find a deadlier substance, ice-nine, that can turn all the water on the earth to ice. In this study the researcher has investigated Cat's Cradle through the idea of cyber despotism that has reduced human beings to just pre- programmed robots that work without passion, sans mind, constantly in search of destructive power. The novel is a struggle to illustrate the indomitable stance the world takes leaving man helpless in the hands of science and scientists.

Keywords: *Cyber Literature, Cyber Despotism, ice-nine, Postwar America*

1. INTRODUCTION

“Technology marches relentlessly forward, and it would be foolish to argue otherwise, but some things remain fundamental, and people-to-people communication will continue to be one of them. Just because the tech is available, doesn't mean it's always going to be the best option in every situation” says Ron miller in his article.

The great change in literature and culture in tandem with the social and political changes saw a boom after the writers of the century, like Kurt Vonnegut, started employing Science Fiction (SF) as a measure to reveal the anxiety and uncertainty the people experienced. As this techno-anxiety amplified in the mid-twentieth century, authors employed SF as an inspirational vent to articulate their concern about the relationship between technology and society and technology and the individual.

The people of the century are mostly technophiles, obsessed with gadgets and machines, that everything has become artificial for them. Life has also become mechanical, that most of the daily chores are controlled by these machines. At the beginning of the century slavery is by man over another man, but at present machines have taken the upper hand making man its servant and man seems to enjoy this subjugation. Vonnegut is not a luddite because he believes that machines are good slaves but bad masters.

The firebombing at Dresden, which resulted in the death of 135000 innocent people, emotionally shattered Vonnegut, after which he started voicing his pain in the form of fictions. Employing fantasy and Science-fiction to attribute the qualities of a perfect world to that of the reality is his idiosyncratic theory to teach humanity to his readers. In all the novels “the humourous antics and the sheer delight of the science fiction fantasies ease the shock which the descriptions of war produce” (39), says Donald J. Greiner.

In Wampeters Vonnegut says, “Writers are a means of introducing new ideas to the society and also a means of responding symbolically to life... And when a society is in danger we're likely to sound the alarm” (237-238).

SF is adopted by Vonnegut only to transmute the horror of mastery of science and to help his readers contemplate on the intensifying chance of Apocalypse by imprudently over- using Science and Technology. Vonnegut is not antagonistic to technology, he is only nihilistic to its dominance.

Ice-nine, an isotope of water, in *Cat's Cradle*(CC) (1963) is created by Dr. Felix Hoenikker as a solution for the problem of digging soldiers out of the mud. This ice-nine molecule freezes the water molecules making the corpse of the soldiers stick when dropped in the soggy mud. But this creation freezes everything and that liquid which is frozen becomes a seed crystal for solidifying every water molecules in the world.

When the novel begins, Felix receives is on the process of creating something worse than a bomb, for bringing about the destruction of the world, Ice-nine. The action of freezing would continue like a chain until the last droplet of water turns ice-nine. After the discovery of this, Felix lives only to reveal this to his children. He sits on a rocking chair for a nap after the discovery and dies by unknowingly consuming the leftover in his hands.

Jonah Hoosier, the narrator of the novel, arranges for a meeting with Dr. Asa Breed, to learn more about Dr. Felix for the intention of completing his book, *The Day the World Ended*. From Dr. Breed, Jonah understands that effect of using ice-nine, which serves as a seed and has the ability of locking the atoms of water in such a way that they form another water crystal seed. It is a “blue-white gem, that seed of doom...” (Vonnegut CC 53).

Money becomes something of very less importance to the Hoenikker's. After Dr. Felix receives the Nobel Prize money, it is used by his children for buying two things. His children buy a huge tomb for their loving mother and a cottage at Cape Cod. After the death of their mother the children are left without anybody to love them or care for them. This becomes the reason for them to buy love by selling ice-nine.

The isolation created by these living conditions and waived emotions is amalgamated by the difficulty faced by these characters to find true love or make a life for themselves. The children of Hoenikker buy only the life that ice-nine could fetch them and they are convinced about it though they never mention that they are happy. They try for a life of their dream where love is ample; however they could only find love as a commodity which fades as the value of money reduces. Newt's love life crashes just a week after his wedding with Zinka. Angela lives with her husband but she does not feel happy about her life. Frank loves the wife of Jack for whom he has worked by making models, so he finds it impossible to marry Mona and become the President of San Lorenzo.

Papa consumes ice-nine and dies when his blood freezes to ice. All the waters on Earth freeze to become ice and become unfit to drink, immediately after the dead body of 'Papa' falls into the water after an accident. People, who by mistake touch ice-nine and place their hands on their mouth, die instantly, as ice-nine freeze their blood.

The master creation of Vonnegut to show how men change with his involvement and dependence with machines is Dr. Felix Hoenikker who cannot be categorized to any section of the society. He is a man with no human trait. He does not have love for anybody in the world, not even to his wife and children. Marvin Breed never believes him to be innocent because according to him a man who has invented atom bomb can never be innocent. He says that he has “never met a man who was less interested in the living” (Vonnegut CC 68).

At San Lorenzo one night, Jonah, Newt and Angela are awakened by a bang, which makes them run for their life with the most precious thing that they could take, thinking they would be killed. Jonah runs with his passport and a bill fold with him. But Newt and Angela carry a thermos jug, which has ice-nine, with them. Both are sure that they would not have the recognition or the life they have then, if they did not possessed ice-nine. They confine themselves to the life they get out of ice-nine. Frank rises to the position by selling ice-nine to Papa Monzano and he is also sure that he would find no place for himself without the killer isotope of water.

John informs his readers “Death has never been quiet so easy to come by” (Vonnegut CC 269), because all they have to do to end their life is to touch the ice and touch their own lips. Towards the end of the novel Mona and John, search for traces of any living existing on the Earth. They find a written phrase ‘Calypso’ stuck on a rock:

“Someday, someday, this crazy world will have to end,
And our God will take things back that He to us did lend.
And if, on that sad day, you want to scold our God,
Why go right ahead and scold Him. He'll just smile and nod (Vonnegut CC 270)

In *Cat's Cradle*, the society functions as a fairy land but later it becomes impotent to the human stupidity and greed. Finally it transforms into a massive grave yard. Vonnegut has made the most of the science fiction technique to highlight the flaws of science itself. The novel says how the world is destroyed when man passively submits himself to mechanistic systems.

At the Del Prado Hotel, John meets a man who comes there to drink and during the course of his conversation he says that he has planned to quit his job at the Research Laboratory because “anything a scientist worked on was sure to wind up as a weapon, one way or another” (Vonnegut CC 26). Vonnegut has said that science is an ugly game of fate, aggravated by man, for playing with the lives of innocent human beings.

John on his way to Ilium is informed, by Dr. Asa Breed, that the then Research Laboratory has been an old stockade, where public hangings are held symbolically explaining that anything done there leads to destruction.

Knowing well that it is futile to change the mechanized world the characters give up their try to change, but they remain strong in what they consider to be correct. Vonnegut believes that this thought of his protagonists would serve as a seed for the expected massive change in the world. The novel represents society where art is choked to commercial objectives and language gets frozen in such a way that it becomes impossible to convey the meaning.

Jean-Paul Sartre one of the most influential philosophers, insists that “Not only is man what he conceives himself to be, but he is also only what he wills himself to be.... Man is nothing also but what he makes of himself” (15). Imagination, according to him, is that which liberates man who is caught in spiritual despotism and the fantastic imagination that crops up on reading it is lost when it is explained. Every man according to Vonnegut employs imagination to escape the pain and emptiness created in him by the world. He believes that every man in the world is affected by the pain, helplessness and meaninglessness in life, which is worsened by the destructive luxuries.

Vonnegut implies that acceptance of responsibility or at least the understanding of fallacies is a sign of hope. With a head on collision with reality, by facing human situation squarely to compromise his integrity as an individual and at the same time avoiding the spiritual death, Vonnegut has successfully won over the hearts of millions of his readers. He has not failed in sharing his hope towards life with his readers in the same way he shares his rather disheartening vision human beings confined by Science and Technology.

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