War, Violence and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-five*

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Abstract ;

Some events, throughout history, affected the world, societies and peoples in a plausible welcomed way, or in a rather disastrous manner that caused a major shift in the different aspects and sections which shaped, in return, the existence of a society singularly, or the world globally like pandemics and wars, etc... War is to be considered one of mankind's darkest manifestations due to the dire and dreadful consequences that took place, if not before, then surely during and after. What researchers, writers and literary works in general paid attention to is the alteration that wars had on society due to the long-term aftermath of it (war); Violence and death-combatting triggered inner conflicts within soldiers to specify, and within laymen to generalise. This research paper studies the effect of war including violence and PTSD in Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five.

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1. *Introduction*

It has been noted that wars and pandemics have been elements that contributed to grand changes in the world from a general view. Wars specifically affected and influenced different angles of society, including literatures and art of the time as well as that which followed. War has become more of a defining theme in modern and early postmodern novels for the effect, consequences and casualties subsisted on a long-term basis. War novels aim was more concerning re-viewing (post)modern literature than it was about story-narrating\telling. The focus became not only on dealing with subjective experiences of individuals, but also on introducing different emotions and responses to the warfare, including the momentous outcomes of the latter on different societies and different ideations. World War II was a devastating turning point in the world as it was known for it reached all angularities that could be studied and analysed; from the first combatant to the latest civilian.

2. Wars: Blood Spatters in History

There is and should not be a single good outcome of war. It is started by people, to hurt people for different reasons and to reach different ends. It a cause for the destruction of peace and societies because of the humongous numbers of deaths that was caused by induced diseases and armed wars in general. It commences with justifications that do not usually make sense in order to gain something in particular to exhibit power over other countries "politics" , economic reasons, and sometimes even because of misunderstandings, or misinterpretations of words coming from men in power. This, consequentially, leads to disastrous events bringing upon death that does not differentiate between men and women, youngsters and adults, babies and elders. It is mainly for this that wars must not be seen as anything apart from the "times of darkness" they are. These times, alas, come with effects that do eventually last for long after the wars are done; leading mainly to the loss of generations and hence the evolution of communities, societies, and why not the whole world.

2.1. **Causes and Effects of World War (II)**

The definition of war is a necessity in order to clearly note its causes, effects and to tersely differentiate between it and the "conflict". Goldstein and Pevehouse define "conflict" as multiple required outcomes in a "bargaining" situation while they define war as an extensive armed conflict with heavy violence used to force the second part to 'refrain from' change their preferences as well as to, prevent with leverage, others from affecting one's own 'preferences'. These forms of violent acts include arms, political and economic transactions as they noted (2008, pp. 189-190, and cited in Adams, 2009, p. 2).

Levy and Thompson define war generally as sustained, coordinated violence between political organizations (2010, p. 5). Relatively, they identified war as violent and dangerous with the use of force to kill and injure. They (Ibid) brought upon the German theorist Clausewitz's idea that

violence was one momentous part of the rather 'unholy' trinity of dominance inclination in wars (1976, p. 89). Clausewitz noted before this that war was simply an application of force and that there was "logically" no limit to what extent it (force) could be exhibited. (p. 76)

While the two researchers noted (2010, pp. 6-7) that war was to be a consequence of the "behaviour" of two or more participants, others would claim, according to Vasquez (1993) that war is to be seen as a strategy (p. 6). Clausewitz, again, focused on the notion that war was just a means to reach a particular political end. Malinowski elaborated on the definition of war as he wrote that it was "an armed contest between two politically independent units" (1968, p, 523). This takes one back to the general definition that entangles behaviour of two political actors with the characteristic of freedom

As noted before, war is triggered for multiple, economic social, political and historical reasons. It is an act that would take place between countries and within them all along. It has been the defining characteristic in altering the world, shifting it from a state to another, opposing the balance of powers and creating systems that would reversely cause it, sooner or later. Tilly (1975) said in this respect that wars create states that would eventually re-create wars (p. 42)

Scholars, researches and historians altogether aimed at studying the past wars, and especially those which had the greatest effects on the world in order to find the logic behind starting them. Some claim some reason behind igniting wars while others totally oppose it for the apparent reasons and negativity that even the following generations suffered from. Scholars according to Wæver (1998) disagree grandly concerning the causes of war and what causes the major conflicts within| between countries. He noted that these scholars and historians differ in opinion depending on respective countries and on respective fields of research (Levy & Thompson, 2010, p. 21)

This, eventually, makes the debate based not only on these differences but also based on how the research is approached (Psychology, economy, sociology, etc…) which makes perspectives change with the embraced strand of research. Difference in views of war and its different form is also a factor in studying its causes (Levy and Thompson, 2010, p, 2-3).

World War II was one of the darkest times in history, causing the death of millions of people, the destructiveness of well-built societies, and the perishing of myriad cultures. It started basically for many reasons; some went to war with the conviction that they were defending their territories, others got into war under false pretensions and promises of liberty and freedom (Like those African and Asian colonies), some contributed to the war only because their allies were involved. Reasons differed but the sufferance was one; Death!

Wars come with a huge effect on every aspect of life including the global system and within domestic, small societies and communities themselves as their stimulus differs. To note the effects of wars, it is undeniable that one should highlight the variableness in warfare. In this context, Bremer (2000) questions the whereabouts of the fight, who the participating parties are and why they are engaging in such an act, along with the time of this engagement (p. xiv) For this, Levy and Thompson claimed that war is "variable" and not "constant" as they put into oblivion any idea that states otherwise. (2010, pp. 20-21)

According to what Alex Andrews George mentioned, the major causes of World War II were Germany-related including their reaction to what seemed to be humiliating according to that which

came out of 'Versailles' Treaty', (2016, n. p) and the first sector to have suffered because of the WWII was that of economy.

Shank commented on this disastrous effect saying that those participating in wars and especially, the defeated party, would suffer from the negativity of wars either "concurrently" which is inevitable, or, more likely it is that this horribleness will "develop as a residual effect" that would influence economics predatorily. (2012, para. 8) It also caused the destruction of major institutions which would lead, consequently, to a critical descent in the educational system and hence affect the prosperity of all parts of this war (2007, p. 183). This came along with the in\direct long-term effects of the war on individuals either financially, physically or mentally. The latter has been the core of extensive research for it caused disturbance over the years that followed the 'great war'

2.2. PTSD and Emotional Distress

The aftermath of wars varies accordingly and variably. Such consequentiality reached all corners of society (economy, policies, geography, etc…). Ideas and views differ as to whether there was something positive out of this whole desolation and havoc, for some saw that World War II was the main reason for the ending of colonialism and imperialism, while other could not get over the impact this war had on civilians and soldiers all along, away from the grand involvement of the states, namely; after-war physical injuries, Post-war traumatic stress and different other disorders (Shell shock, and emotional distresses, etc…)

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, according to the physician Felix Torres is a "psychiatric disorder" that mainly affects individuals with past traumas such as natural disasters, accidents or 'wars\ combats'. (2020, p. 1). The National Centre for PTSD in the U.S.A defines it as an "Anxiety disorder" that follows any traumatic event or a life-threatening incident such as sexual assault and "military combats" (2010, p. 1). Such incidents and overwhelming events do not always bring individuals on their knees, for some of those who suffered such happenings recovered after a while, but those who did not, they may suffer some bursts of stress that would get worse with time (Ibid).

Schnurr et al (2007, n. p) noted concerning exposure to traumatic events and its relation to physical health that people who suffer from PTSD are at great risk from having multiple inner physical health issues along with the mental ones, like the immunological and gastrointestinal problems, which would cause the body to deteriorate and eventually crumble.

PTSD is usually exhibited through recollecting events that caused the trauma to begin with (recollection of what already happened and stress over it). These extensive recollections along with sudden shifts in mood and alterations in cognition assessment, and processing of a past experience which is relived repeatedly, would cause a sudden burst of anger, an urge to suicide or some aggressive behaviour as a reaction (2013, p. 266-267).

The concept "trauma" has drawn much attention in the literary field to the extent that numerous studies were conducted on it as a basis. Literature was not seen as a field that would portray trauma as it should best be explained; Some researchers find it very difficult to amalgamate reading for the sake of understanding with reading and 'feeling' the meaning. Susan Sontag noted that as "the image" is deemed "an invitation" to watch\ perceive, "the caption" on the contrary , insists on "the difficulty of doing just that" (2004, p. 45).

Researchers deem it quite challenging to deal with such disorders and mental health issues in literature because of the opposition that is held in the process; It just means that words do not utterly represent the vivid atrociousness that was lived and re-lived repeatedly by those who suffer from war-traumas, etc… Gerd Bayer says in this respect that;

> All literature that deals with war exists in this grey zone between the didacticism of educating readers about the horrors of the battle fields and the enticement that stems from drawing on extreme emotions (2018, p. 213)

When bringing upon "Trauma" as a theory, memory plays a gigantic role in protecting victimised and in assisting and helping in the healing (the case is with war victims), by "memorialising" past events (p. 223) and forming new ideations devoid of pressure.

3. *Slaughterhouse-Five*: An Anti-War Semi-Autobiographical Science Fiction Novel

The novel entitled *Slaughterhouse-Five or A Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* was initially published in 1969 and tells the story of Billy Pilgrim who was captured by the Germans near the ending of WWII. The narration moves back and forth in more of an arbitrary manner which makes the reader along with the narrator and Billy as the main character in a cycle of events moving back in time and back to time along with travels to the imaginary "Tralfamadore". The narrator notes that Billy "has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between" (1998, p. 21).

The basis of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the bombing of Dresden, Germany. Muted by the occurrences, Billy commences seeking answers to some of his queries, and to which he finds none. He enters a state of shock (Trauma) and thence discards any idea that depicts the existence of justice. He embraces a sense of escapism in being a father and a husband but the trauma that shook him in Dresden, got the best of him and for that he finds nothing as fulfilling for there was, according to him as a character (and to Vonnegut as the author) no justice to be served The novel ends with the idea that Billy embraces the "Tralfamadorian" doctrine that there is no free will, for although he is able to travel back and forth in time, he is unable to alter his past, his future, and not even his present.

The work is deemed semi-autobiographical because Kurt Vonnegut did actually suffer the consequence of war. He was placed in a camp in Dresden, Germany, after being captured along with 99 other Americans to work in a factory (making vitamin enriched syrup for women undergoing pregnancy). It was during the battle of the Bulge in 1944, and he remained there for a while till the "Dresden bombing" began in the winter of 1945. The deaths and destruction Vonnegut witnessed along with what he endured in the concentration camps (like that of Auschwitz) from cruelty and what he heard of horrific and terrible stories affected him immensely that he portrayed this in *The Children's Crusade.*

It is conspicuous that the narrator is a character in the story, but what is more intriguing is that the character is rather explicitly introduced as Kurt Vonnegut himself. This is obvious for there

is apparent intrusion of the narrator throughout the story. Per instance, the narrator says in the story: "That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book" (1998, n. p).

4. War-Trauma related themes in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

The representation of the ruinous outcomes of war that were exhibited through the destruction of buildings and institutions like schools and hospitals, etc… were not the only ones to be alluded to or rather present plainly in Vonnegut's work. An example of this would be through the characters that refused talking of anything that concerns what nestled in their chests and took place during their endurance of such heinous armed actions. Kurt Vonnegut himself mentions in the same work (1998, p. 19) that there was nothing to be said concerning these "massacres" and bloody crimes per se.

The desolation and devastating effect of war caused permanent damage that dwelled within people as well. This is seen through Billy (this note should include the narrator of the story as well, since it is marked to be the author himself –Kurt Vonnegut-) and his comrades (Like Bernard O'Harry) who suffered from the apologetic influence of what happened in Dresden (the bombing which was the defining scenery in the story to commence this 'diagnosis' defined primarily as "shell shock" and afterward as "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder".

4.1. Victory of Death

Death is the major ingredient of war and the most likely consequence to occur on a daily basis during such acts of violence. It is undeniable that death shall, 'eventually' prevail but in war, it was a certainty. The idea of death alone scares and gets into the best of us, let alone it being linked to an act of aggressiveness. This was the case in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* as death became something that Billy Pilgrim (along with the narrator) and his comrades should embrace, accept and come into reconciliation with instead of the ubiquitous fear that would accompany them through every single step of a life that was described to be nothing less than 'miserable'.

On multiple occasions, Vonnegut, through the narrative voice and through his characters (mainly Billy as a protagonist) tends to show the atrocity of war. He mentioned death, devastation and \ or violence almost every time war was brought upon as a term. But, what is worth mentioning is that death itself was accompanied by an expression that occurred repeatedly: "so it goes". It was used ninety five (95) times throughout the story starting with his talk about Gerhard Müller as he said that "His mother was incinerated in the Dresden fire-storm. So it goes" (1998, p. 9)

The previous expression was used as if intentionally, to normalise what happened and what took place on a daily basis throughout that omened period of war. Readers would embrace the idea of 'death' as the eventuality of everything through Vonnegut's words. The latter did actually trivialise life through this story by showing the meaninglessness of it in different parts but the most ironical instance would be the ending of the novel as he questions 'satirically' what a bird said to Pilgrim: "'Poo-tee-weet?' (p. 125)

The attempt to come in good terms with death is something that occurs over the course of habit. The fact that Billy witnessed too much death as the narrator notes that "Billy experiences

death for a while. It is simply violet light and a hum" (1990, p. 85) and the fact that he figured out that there was no elope from it, urged him to embrace the idea that the inevitable will remain that; inevitable. This is noted through the note that "If you protest, if you think that death is a terrible thing, then you have not understood a word I've said." (Ibid)

One must not withstand the fact that Billy Pilgrim was seen as an anti-hero for he was quite the opposite of what American culture of the time applauded to (He feared death, feared war, and feared combatting in general) for it is noted that he was taken to war against his free will. For a punishment, he was granted the "inability" to die. He was prone to wandering from his past to his future with no control over it during World War II (pp. 24-25).

This is an idea that individuals suffering from PTSD would have to deal with; becoming unstuck in time means that one would live the past repeatedly, past events would be revived and life incidents would become constant recollections in one's mind. The solution, according to people with such a disorder (Billy, his comrades and the narrator included) would be either acceptance of the idea that there was no free will and that what is meant to happen will inevitably take place or elopement from the rather "dystopian" reality to a world of "imagination" where they would feel eased.

4.2. **PTSD and Escapism**

Because of the atrociousness of war, the bitter consequences of it and the 'bloody' incidents that the characters like Billy, Lazzaro, and O'Harry went through, they suffered from physical and mental instability which started instantly and evolved with time. Hallucinations are a symptom of trauma and that is seen in the work where Pilgrim would imagine aliens and how he would travel in time with constant fear as noted that "he is in a constant stage fright" (1990, p. 23). This is one thing that individuals suffering from PTSD would do, the other reaction is aggressiveness and violence. Billy apparently embraced the first part, for he was always afraid of what was yet to come.

One of PTSD sufferers' most common symptoms is reliving the past. Billy's fear was in his hallucinations of time travel, for he would shift through different time periods all leading him to the time when he was incarcerated in World War II. He keeps being back to that time as he would go back to other memories that trigger the same feelings of fear and dread. An example would be Billy's memory of his father throwing him in the pool to help him learn swimming (1990, p. 61). These memories altogether would cause a dissociative state in which an individual (Billy for instance) would not really differentiate between what is real and what has already happened.

In such cases, the past events become these PTSD patients' present reality, triggering different emotions of fear, angst, entrapment, suffocation, and likely to give up… This is addressed through free will in the novel which started with Billy being thrown in the pool against his will to be later on sent to the army again, by force; to finally be dragged by the illusion of "Tralfamadore" against what he wishes to do.

Even though Billy was dragged to Tralfamadore unwillingly, he found comfort in there; he actually escaped the horribleness of war and the destructed reality. He 'fled' the bombings and deaths, 'eloped' from the maliciousness of concentration camps and ensnarement, to an "imaginary" world where he would find relaxation. HE 'escaped' reality that was more of a bitter one to find refuge in a surreal world in which there was nothing except what his 'sub-conscious' wanted by

embracing escapism; peace of mind (even though it was temporary). This is a "freedom" space; something that PTSD patients would do un\consciously to relieve pain (both physical and mental ones)

Now, the depiction of war-reality as said in the very beginning is not really the same as living it. The novel portrays reality in more of a vague manner, particularly because of the shift in narration and the time traveling character (Billy Pilgrim) which interrupts and disturbs the reader's grasp of events and the work's portrayal of reality. This idea was just to support the fact that reading of war-incidents and living them are not similar and should not be perceived, nor be deemed so.

Billy's name is a symbol for what his curse was; He was doomed to shift constantly through his life periods (past-present-future) in a 'by-default' mode. His name was Billy 'Pilgrim' which stands for someone who travels from afar in a tiring journey. A pilgrim according to Christianity has a direct relationship to the experience that one has in life. This is typically what Billy and most of PTSD patients did, as he witnessed almost everything throughout his repeated life cycle. It gives him the privilege of being amongst the lucky experienced few who understood the meaning of life; the lucky few who understood the "meaninglessness" of life as Kurt Vonnegut trivialises it.

5. **Conclusion**

Wars come with consequences that affect the living and "the dead", at times even causing a merger between the two to bring about individuals 'with a soul' but with 'no life'. Vonnegut, suffering from PTSD and reflecting it on his characters (mainly Billy who presented the whole set of symptoms), is a support for the idea that the work could be a 'meta-anti-war novel', connecting the sufferance of the author\ narrator through commentary on the fiction itself and by reflecting real-life incidents, happenings, feelings and emotions upon characters through 'dark humour' to show the absurd act of war itself, usage of different references (ones that are related to clinical psychology, especially) in a self-reflexive\ conscious manner. The narrator (Vonnegut as noted beforehand) keeps reminding the reader of the idea that he was the one based on whose suffering, agony and trauma, the work was realised.

Notably, there is the notion of re-writing fiction that was defined as "sectioning, adding, eliminating, shifting and altering characters, their roles, settings, atmospheres, themes and even tones." (Mostefaoui & Mouro. 2021, p. 118), Similarly, Vonnegut tended to re-view, retrace and re-project his trauma by doing the same thing, not to one of his writings, but rather to his own memory\mind, resulting in an exhibition of what seemed senseless, even to the creator of this piece of art. This does not negate the fact that Vonnegut's ideas were 'conveyed', though quite 'differently' from the 'ideals' that governed his contemporaries.

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