

Tenacious Administration and Social Inequality in America: An Analysis of Select Short Stories of Kurt Vonnegut.**Iram Qureshi**

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Abstract: Kurt Vonnegut is arguably the finest black humourist and postmodern writer of the contemporary age. Vonnegut primarily used the genre of science fiction to underscore the overarching and blatant problems of American society in his works. He portrays the socio-economic and political milieu of the country. Vonnegut wrote fourteen novels, three short story collections, five plays and five works of non-fiction. He primarily received acclaim for his novels, nevertheless some of his short stories were well received and are written in the same strain as his novels, exhibiting his keen insight into the postmodern society. Two of Vonnegut's short stories, "Harrison Bergeron" and "2 B R 0 2 B" will be analyzed in this paper. In "Harrison Bergeron" he delineates how the coercive administrative forces and people at the helm of affairs confiscate the individuality of the commoners by giving out the ostensible reason of safeguarding the larger social interests (i.e., in the name of egalitarianism) and eventually intrude their lives. "2 B R 0 2 B" depicts a government which is emotionally detached from its subjects. Vonnegut in the story represents and lampoons how the births, deaths and lives of most of the citizens are regulated by an overriding and indifferent government.

Key Words: Vonnegut's satire, American dream, coercive administration, dystopia, individuality.

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Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) has been regarded by many critics as a postmodern writer par excellence. Vonnegut uses numerous postmodern techniques including metafiction and pastiche and he cannily incorporates them to underpin the morbidity of numerous notions and situations which he explicates in his works. His satire is directed towards contemporary world at large and America in particular--its society, politics and the important events that have formed the backdrop of its history and played an important role in placing America at the helm of almost all affairs in the world.

Vonnegut was an American writer and his experiences as an indigenous citizen living in the twentieth century America profoundly shaped his works. He astutely conveys through his essay collection *A Man Without a Country*:

I grew up at a time when comedy in this country was superb--it was the Great Depression. (2)

He chose black humour as his mode of expression in his novels as well as his shorter works and it gave him the platform to vent his disappointment, distress and dread, as he states in the aforementioned book:

Humor is almost physiological response to fear. Freud said that humor is a response to frustration--one of several. (3)

Be it the obnoxious attitude of whites towards the blacks or the stark divide between the haves and the have-nots, Vonnegut blatantly voiced his disappointment over the age-old divide in America, for instance in his lecture delivered at the Clowns Hall, Indianapolis on 27th April, 2007 (printed in the collection *Armageddon in Retrospect*) he stated:

And there is certainly nothing new about a tragically and ferociously divided United States of America, and especially here in my native state of Indiana. . . . When I was born. . . . this city back then was as racially segregated as professional basketball and football teams are today. (17-19)

Vonnegut became an internationally renowned writer owing to some of his finest literary works, like: *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Breakfast of Champions*, *Cat's Cradle*, *The Sirens of Titan*, *Mother Night* etc. Although these novels have received a lot of critical acclaim, nevertheless some of his short stories are remarkable and deal with many issues which are rendered patently in his novels, including: unrestricted technological progress jeopardizing human life, evils of vanity, class bias, government trespassing individuality of subjects, need for solicitude in the contemporary world etc.

“Harrison Bergeron” (1961) was written during the time when Civil Rights Movement was at its peak in America i.e. the 1960s. The story can be read as Vonnegut’s response to this movement. It depicts a future society in which so-called egalitarianism prevails but at the cost of individualism:

The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren’t only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than everybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th and 213th amendments of the constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General. (1)

“Unceasing vigilance of agents” is a satire on government for transgressing its control over the citizens. It turns out to be a society in which the government curbs the individuality of citizens under the façade of ensuring equality. Stanley Schatt states:

In any leveling process, what really is lost, according to Vonnegut, is beauty, grace, and wisdom. (133)

The protagonist Harrison is the intelligent, personable, robust and gifted son of George and Hazel. However, he is separated from his parents at an early age by the government [H-G men] on grounds of his extraordinary merits and is imprisoned. The government coerces its subjects to wear various handicaps, so that collectivism can prevail. Harrison has to endure extensive handicaps, as he excels all other citizens. He has to wear “tremendous pair of earphones...for mental handicap”, spectacles with “thick wavy lenses” aimed to make him not only half-blind, but to give him “whanging headaches” and “scrap metal” all over his body, so much so that he looks like a “walking junkyard” (3). He has to haul three hundred pounds every day. His father, George’s wit is termed as “way above” (1) ordinary and is therefore decreed to wear a little mental handicap radio in his ear invariably, in which a sharp noises reverberate at short intervals so that George cannot take an “unfair advantage” (1) of his brain. Vonnegut here and throughout the story satirizes that even the thinking process is channelized as per the whims of the government through ways analogous to sadistic practices to bring about uniformity. Hazel can’t contemplate about anything in one go and has “short bursts” of thoughts. Although her

intelligence is quite substandard, Vonnegut lampoon the norms of intellect set by the government and states that her intelligence is regarded as “perfectly average” (1).

The story proper begins with George and Hazel watching ballerinas on television. However, the ballerinas are handicapped and have to endure baggage of birdshots and wear masks. Their elegant gestures and attractive visages are thus invalidated. As soon as George begins to perceive that ballerinas should not be handicapped, his thoughts are distracted by means of the ear-splitting noises reverberating from the radio in his ear. Hence anything, including vague notions countering government’s laws and policies are smothered. As George is struggling with the noises that make him shudder, Hazel suggests to him that he must repose on the sofa and remove some lead balls from the forty-seven pound birdshot in the canvas bag, but George fears being fined and jailed and thus prefers yielding to the government’s laws instead. One can infer that although the amendments and the laws are apparently enforced to bring about greater equality in society, but on the contrary they are resulting in tremendous inconvenience underneath the surface. In the meantime, the dance of the ballerinas on the television is interrupted for a news bulletin wherein it is announced in a “grackle squawk” (3) by a ballerina that Harrison has escaped from the jail, where he was imprisoned because it was speculated that he intended to oust the government. However, at the same moment Harrison enters the studio and proclaims himself as emperor. He sets himself free from the handicaps and snaps off the handicaps of musicians and a ballerina and directs the musicians to play fine music and dances with the ballerina. The handicapper general, Diana Moon Glampers arrives at the studio with a shot-gun and shoots Harrison and the ballerina and orders the musicians to “get their handicaps back on.” (5) This reveals the severe heavy-handedness of the government. It also seems that Diana Moon Glampers herself is unimpeded by any kind of handicap, and doesn’t wear any as she moves swiftly carrying a loaded massive gun. The situation thus sarcastically reinforces that under the garb of equality, discrepancies proliferate and has strong parallels with the iconic line in *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” (105). It’s also ironic that neither George nor Hazel can comprehend that a terrible tragedy has befallen them.

The short story “2 B R 0 2 B” (1962) also deals with the issue of an all-pervading government. The title refers to the legendary phrase from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet: The Prince of Denmark*, “To be, or not to be”. Like many other Vonnegut’s novels and short stories, this story represents a dystopian future. It depicts a society where cure has been found for aging and nobody dies. Hence in order to curb overpopulation, it is mandated by the government that a new birth can only take place if someone voluntarily agrees to die. 2BR02B is the telephone number one has to dial in order to reach the Federal Bureau of Termination which is a government endorsed institute and schedules assisted suicides for the volunteers.

As Vonnegut, in his numerous works has staunchly satirized the American dream and the utopian set of notions associated with it, the story begins with an analogous description of United States:

Everything was perfectly swell. There were no prisons, no slums, no insane asylums, no cripples, no poverty, no wars. All diseases were conquered. So was old age. (1)

The story deals with the collapse of ideals in America. The first fissure begins to emerge when in this “merry” world, in Chicago Lying-in Hospital, Wehling, the father-to-be of triplets is “hunched in his chair, his head in his hand . . . rumped, so still and colorless as to be virtually invisible” (1), for he has only one volunteer (his maternal grandfather) for the triplets. An artist is working on a mural in the same hospital. However, even art, which is an idiosyncratic mode of expression and reinforces individuality, is not allowed to flourish as the government determines how the artist will make the mural. Instead of cherishing the piece of art, the artist despises it. In an ironic tone Vonnegut states that the mural depicted a “very neat garden” (1). The “very neat garden” symbolically represents America. Vonnegut mocks at the representation of America as being an impractically flawless and well-tended garden as it strikes an incongruous note with reality. When an orderly praises the mural, the artist gives him a “satiric smile”, and responds that it’s named as the “Happy Garden of Life” (1). The obvious implication being that it’s in essence devoid of joy. Furthermore, he believes a foul dropcloth better indicates an honestly depicted American life. It’s ironic that human figures are already made in the mural and only the faces of significant people either from the hospital staff or Chicago Office of the Federal Bureau of Termination are required to be filled in. They merely choose a body like Leora Duncan [who works in the Service Division of the Federal Bureau of termination] does to paste their visages on. The artist asks Leora: “See any faceless body here you’d like me to stick your head on” (2). This random selection is quite contradictory to the notion of idiosyncrasy and uniqueness. Dr. Hitz, the hospital’s chief obstetrician enters the room and breaks the news of the birth of the triplets to Leora. Wehling, “red-eyed and frowsy” (3), conveys that he is the father of the triplets. He desires that the triplets along with the volunteer must be granted life. However, Dr. Hitz rebukes Wehling and is impassive towards him:

Dr. Hitz became rather severe with Wehling, towered over him. ‘You don’t believe in population control, Mr. Wehling?’ he said. (4)

He can be regarded as a proponent of government’s policies.

‘This child of yours—whichever one you decide to keep, Mr. Wehling,’ said Dr. Hitz. ‘He or she is going to live on a happy, roomy, clean, rich planet, thanks to the population control. In a garden like that mural there.’ (4)

Wehling, being in an extreme psychological dilemma shoots himself, Dr. Hitz and Leora, thus legalizing the lives of the triplets and hence Dr. Hitz and Leora undergo a repercussion of their own irrationality. The artist, who is a mute spectator of the incident contemplates about life at large and only gloomy images recur in his mind leading to despondency. He rings the Federal

Bureau of Termination for an appointment for assisted suicide. He receives an automated response which is devoid of compassion for his life:

‘Thank you, sir,’ said the hostess. ‘Your city thanks you; your country thanks you; your planet thanks you. But the deepest thanks of all is from future generations.’ (4)

The story scathingly attacks the excessive involvement of an omnipotent government in the lives of citizens as well as its claim that it has the potential to ease all affairs and resolve all issues. On the contrary, Vonnegut seems to suggest that room for individuality, equality among the governors and the governed and compassion are mandatory to usher in prosperity of a nation.

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