The Attributes of Postmodern Pluralism, Skepticism, and Relativism in Selected Kurt Vonnegut’s Four Novels

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Abstract—This paper explores pluralism, skepticism, and relativism in Kurt Vonnegut’s Player Piano, The Sirens of Titan, Cat’s Cradle, and Slaughterhouse-Five. The study attempts to reveal Vonnegut’s depiction of postmodern thematic elements through using the concepts of pluralism, skepticism, and relativism which apparently imprint the typical image of postmodernism life. Therefore, the study sheds light on the selected novels’ perception of postmodernism on the verge of social and cultural change stimulated by politics that plays a crucial role in shaping postmodern man and his capacity to cope cultural pluralism. In this way, the study unravels such pluralism via highlighting the characters' skepticism of their ability to grasp the relativism of postmodern life. The study examines Vonnegut’s postmodern dexterity as a critique of contemporary political actions that lead to new life styles. In addition, it discovers the selected novels’ narrative structure as a postmodern device of exposing contemporary socio-cultural reality that is spoiled by contemporary politics. In this way, it identifies Vonnegut’s postmodern fictional theme of relativism i.e., dealing with political sequences as challenging reality; and this reality should be amended by controlling postmodern politics.

Index Terms—pluralism, postmodernism, skepticism, relativism, Vonnegut

I. INTRODUCTION

This study aims at enriching the scholarship of Kurt Vonnegut’s Player Piano, The Sirens of Titan, Cat’s Cradle, and Slaughterhouse-Five by exposing their postmodern thematic elements through using the concepts of pluralism, skepticism, and relativism. Studying the allegorical factors of the novels might lead researchers to locate the authorial postmodern ideology on contemporary politics, social state of affairs, and culture. Interpreting the selected novels from multidisciplinary approaches, e.g., postmodern and post-structuralism with regard to thematic concerns would lead to new understanding of postmodern political fiction projected in the selected novels because “postmodernism has been looking at literature from various critical perspectives. It merges fictional forms with their predecessors to synthesize new literary modes capable of coping with the reviving narrative fiction and protecting it from artistic decline” (Abu Jweid, 2023, p. 21). Discussing the role of Vonnegut’s postmodern fiction relies on science fictional structure which might provide academic studies with key implicit authorial ideology regarding postmodern intellectuality and view of life.

The application of the concepts of pluralism, skepticism, and relativism to the selected works might open the door of researchers to discover latent meanings of World War II. Consequently, the political regimes could be analyzed in terms of narrative fiction, which give it different perspectives. Vonnegut’s fiction, moreover, would be interpreted as fictional critiques of both war and individuals. On the one hand, researchers might tackle Vonnegut’s fiction through experimental fiction that is extremely significant to discerning the function of narrative fiction in giving various meaning to reality. The fictional peculiarities of Vonnegut’s fictional works pave the way for classifying the selected novels within postmodern contexts. Additionally, the study of science fictional qualities might confront new narrative horizons. That is, the scrutiny of science fiction through postmodernism helps researchers to locate the allegorical aspects of the selected novels within the scope of modernism.

Being so, Vonnegut’s fiction would be of symbolical significance which assists future studies on how science fiction provides different meanings of reality during the first part of the twentieth century. On the other hand, individuals will also be highlighted by utilizing the findings of this study. The individuals I mean here are those representatives of postmodern life who led the most radical social and cultural changes. Accordingly, the study provides researchers with the authentic tools to identify the roles of postmodern society where “postmodern civilisation surviving the destructive events and their related ethical dilemmas” (Abu Jweid & Al-HajEid, 2021, p. 99). Studying the individuality of these leaders could tell researchers – through postmodern science fictional narrative – about the psychological motives behind their unjustified actions during the first decades of postmodernism; which is projected in the selected novels.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW
There are several studies which tackle the postmodern implications in the selected works; Jirgens (1999) approaches elements of “disjunction, dialogism, and multistability” in Vonnegut’s *The Sirens of Titan*. These elements exemplify Vonnegut’s obsessive concerns with science fiction (p. 153). Tahir Wood (2012) tackles the allegorical narrative structure of Kurt’s *Cat’s Cradle*. Wood argues that “we can conclude allegorical discussion without considering what it is that makes the novel different from any other genre and why it is that readers read it” (p. 361). Here, a postmodern study found that Kurt, in his novel, repudiates the traditional narrative structure. By concentrating on postmodern fictional techniques, Majeed Jadwe (2009) unravels the inherent intertextual literary elements of *Slaughterhouse-Five* by means of a critically-oriented view, whereby intricate components of the role of narrative fiction could shape its literary subjectivity, authentic reality, and pertinent moral consequences by dint of storytelling which anticipates some of the main concerns with postmodern fiction; Jadwe writes: “Kurt Vonnegut’s extensive use of intertextual references in his seminal 1969 novel *Slaughterhouse-Five: Or the Children’s Crusade. A Duty Dance with Death* is essentially postmodernist in appeal” (p. 33).

Abdalhadi Abu Jweid (2020) studies Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a dystopian novel dealing with the demanding political sequences in Germany and America. He (2020) concentrates on the negative experience of the characters that became the victims of the war when their lives had been devastated by political atrocities. Consequently, Abu Jweid (2020) traces the theme of time travel in order to explore the novel as a dystopian satire of such politics: “time travel carries out the sense of satire. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, corrupt politics is highly critiqued. The narrator describes his bitter experience at the hands of corrupt German and American politicians” (p. 105). Abu Jweid (2020) adds that the novel’s characters are the fictional exemplification of the author’s voice. In this case, He (2020) scrutinizes the novel’s discourse to delve deep into the narrative attributes of its postmodern plot: “another characteristic of postmodern reality is the discourse by which the author’s revelation of his/her “identity” as the creator of the work. In the course of events, the author appears on the narrative level. The author appearance is manifested in the discourse initiated by the fictional characters he/she creates” (p. 105).

However, this study applies the concepts of pluralism, skepticism, and relativism in Vonnegut’s *Player Piano, The Sirens of Titan, Cat’s Cradle*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. They will be used to explore to analyze the multiplicity of the allegorical quality of these novels and how they exemplify postmodern fiction. They will be used to describe the selected novels’ as science fictional replicas that stand as critiques of post-World War II politics which had been rarely studied in previous studies. The study also applies these concepts to the novels’ structure as a tool for critiquing the contemporary changing reality. These concepts have been scarcely applied to interpret the selected novels’ themes and characters. Hardly any study applied pluralism, skepticism, and relativism to discuss the selected novels’ oppositional state against reality, specifically, political reality. Therefore, my study studies postmodernism to argue that the novels are critical postmodern indictments against of the scientific devastation of human beings’ reality.

In turn, in specifying the nature of narrative fiction as a particular object of the analysis, this study sets out many of the study’s focus which will be persistent as a central concern for pertinent narrative theorists’ concepts. However, the main narrative concepts will be reliant on pluralism, skepticism, and relativism and their postmodern narrative insights. They will be branched out through narrative themes that are going to be discussed later in the following sections. Yet for foremost orientation of the nature of postmodern theory, authorial background and its projection in the novels will be tackled.

### III. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Vonnegut is a prolific American novelist, dramatist and short story writer (Drabble, 2013, p. 1065). He was born in Indianapolis, Indiana. He is mostly renowned for his novels which treat the political condition of America after the great world wars. He tackles the comprehensive impact of wars on American and its position in the world. Military power is one significant peculiarity of Vonnegut’s fictional issues (p. 1065). Yet, he only focuses on the American political power, especially after the Second World War in the bulk of his works. There literary fabric of Vonnegut’s writing involves an all-encompassing visualization of the war and people’s suffering made by the war’s sequences (p. 1066). Moreover, he deals with the harsh conditions that stormed in world before the World War II. More precisely, the Great Depression is a representative example such conditions. It is inevitably connect with his references to these conditions and their influence upon them, as he once stated that he is the son of the Great Depression.

Vonnegut’s opinions and description of the Great Depression is a direct allusion to his own sufferings from depression through cultural pluralism. From this point of view; we could trace the biographical elements in Vonnegut’s work. He often fictionalizes some of his experiences in his wirings, especially the novels (Tally, 2013, p. 29). His fictional writings, consequently, serve as biographical documentation of some periods of his life. However, he indirectly universalizes his experiences through fiction. This universal documentation comprises his society as a victim of depression created by postmodern pluralism. The harsh economic conditions, therefore, had left their apparent impact upon his literary talent. He conveys the life of his sufferings through fiction. When he writes his own experiences, he provides us with Americans’ suffering from depression as a whole (p. 29). In this case, his experience becomes universal i.e., his life as a stereotype of all Americans who underwent the harsh depression goings (p. 29). The narrator, in The Sirens of the Titan, immediately speaks about this depression: “The following is a true story from the Nightmare Ages, falling roughly, give or take a few years, between the Second World War and the Third Great Depression” (p. 8).

Vonnegut does not only tackle his economic experiences, but also about the political experiences he saw in the World War II. The most obvious actions in his plots are about the war and the destinies of people who participated in the war by means of postmodern pluralism (Bloom, 2009, p. 1). Vonnegut treats the consequences of war in the bulk of his fiction. He depicts the economic, social and the psychic influences of the war upon people. He tells the events from a military perspective. This is because he experienced the bitter devastation of war (p. 1). The reason for his military experiences was that he had been chosen as one of the Americans who must follow the American army in Europe. But Vonnegut went to German war fronts where he met his military roles.

These violent strifes lead Vonnegut to reconsider the human conditions regarding war and its creation of postmodern pluralism. It seemed to him that people lost confidence in their political regimes (Farrell, 2008, p. ix). As such, politics was inspirational issue of his imaginary plots. He found politics corrupted and in need of restoration. He did not believe in peace pacts among political combatants to resolve the blood war status quo. He thought of the probable exit from the contemporary crises to save the human race form annihilation (p. 3). He thought over recompilation among war political fronts. Ultimately, he found fiction as the easily obtainable vehicle for abating war at any expense. For this reason, he inserts his authorial voice in his works to critique the corrupt politics in order to find peaceful outlets from war (p. 4). His Cat’s Cradle is a fine example of his discontent with war politics. He severely attacks arm race which resulted in a sense of skepticism among the fictional characters. The arm race would bring about new harsh experiences. The nuclear arm race, for example, could annihilate vast lands and crowded nation in one military attack; as the narrator puts it simply: “I found that the picture was of an humble little war memorial in front of a small-town courthouse. Part of the memorial was a sign that gave the names of those villagers who had died in various wars” (p. 27).

War experiences have profound sense in Vonnegut’s fiction. This is because they are the true motivation of postmodern pluralism. He treats the reality of war through fictional episodes. The treatment of reality is one representative token of postmodern fiction. Vonnegut is always associated with postmodernism because he treats reality in its meticulous fragments (Davis, 2006, p. 14). In fact, pluralism had been an exemplary feature of postmodern literature. Fragmentation is the perception of reality as a part not as a whole. Being so, the postmodern writer perceives reality according to his/her own experience. Vonnegut, similarly, treats reality in terms of his experience. He implicitly tells the reader of his harsh life during the war. This postmodern quality puts Vonnegut in the position of postmodern fiction. Pluralism and skepticism, in Vonnegut’s fiction, resemble the real wars to a great extent (p. 15). This is the serious connection between his fictional and postmodernism.

Moreover, the multiplication of voices in the literary text is a definitive feature of postmodern plots since “realistic narrative in postmodern fiction formulates a technical construction of the text in order to represent reality relatively; perceived by individuals according to their judgment of the world outside the text” (Abu Jweid, 2020, p. 338). That is, the plot is told from different voice narrative voices. In like fashion, Vonnegut tells his fictional plots from different narrative points (p. 15). In The Sirens of Titan, the Vonnegut refers to his harsh life through omniscient narrative point of view in the opening sentence: “Everyone now knows how to find the meaning of life within himself” (p. 8). Nevertheless, in several narrative stances, the fictional events are narrated by the first narrative point of view in terms of fictional dialogues: “Every failure of Earthing leadership has been traceable to a lack on the part of the leader,” says Rumfoord” (p. 85). The multiplicity of these narrative voices are appropriated within postmodern narratives points of view. More important, such narrative voices are the essential nexus of postmodern cultural relativism dominating the American society.

Vonnegut’s fiction bears a contiguous affinity to the issue of absurdity of cultural relativism (Bloom, 2009, p. 5). He tackles absurdity and meaning of life on the majority of his work. The meaning of absurdity in his novels is annexed to relativism (p. 5). Melancholic characters do not find any meaning of life as they undergo new social pluralism and skepticism. This is due to their experiences and social backgrounds. When they are attacked by tyrants or ruthless accidents, they lose their confidence in life. They get immersed into absurdity. To use the critical insights of Vonnegut’s novels, there is an indicative allusion to melancholy together with destitute; the charters are devoid of their human sense. Scenes of bereavement, for example, lead these characters to be in melancholic conditions (p. 6). Valencia Merble, who is Billy Pilgrim’s wife in Slaughterhouse-Five, dies in a car accident. Billy is completely overwhelmed by his memories of war becomes more melancholic. Though the accident does not affect him immensely, yet it complicates his
melancholy since it reminds him of war accidents. In essence, the story is all about Vonnegut’s melancholic vision of life as he witnessed the war’s devastating havoc stimulated by cultural pluralism.

Another science fiction element of Vonnegut’s novels is space invasion. Such space invasion has a close relationship with postmodern cultural relativity. In essence, the intrinsic themes of space invasion are to provide people with alternative home of residence in case the earth is destroyed by physical powers (Goodbody, 2007, p. 293). Vonnegut, who is aware of quantum physics, knows that the world is threatened by negative powers. These powers are mainly political (p. 295). They are the combatants fronts in the war. They had previously met in the World War I. They also met in the World War II. These wars, as psychical science claims, might threaten the live of human beings. For this reason, hum beings must find shelters another than earth (p. 298). These shelters are other planets. From this premise, the idea of space invasion was gradually occupying the public interest (Goodbody, 2007, p. 299). Science fiction writers dealt with these ideas in their fictional works in serious narrative tones. They used their narrative’s discourse to provide new solutions to the destruction of Earth (p. 312). Vonnegut is prominent writer among those authors. He tried his hand to expose the war destruction in his fiction. Consequently, he wrote some fictional pieces to emphasize the importance of space invasion with regard to cultural relativism.

Vonnegut’s The Sirens of Titan depicts the American obsession with Malachi Constant. This obsession is the core of the American postmodern cultural relativism per se. It is the archetype of the richest man in America. Any person who searches for good fortune must follow the steps of Malachi Constant. This man decides to take a journey from Earth to Mars. In fact, he embodied man’s interest in space invasion to achieve good luck and wealth. He travels through interplanetary journeys. He encounters several terrestrial wars. Hence, the novel holds a symbolic function. It does not foreshadow the invasion of space to take shelter form the destructing Earth. Notwithstanding, it predicts the spread of destruction of other planets if human beings proceed combating in ruthless fights. Vonnegut symbolically wars people of the world against the political destruction everywhere.

Technology is considered as another definitive attribute of Vonnegut’s use of science fictional themes. He approaches technology within the broad scope of postmodern aspiration to space invasion. To put it another way, in modernism, the traditional technological prosperity was not perfect due to the lack of pluralism (Thurschwell, 2006, p. 164). Technology was taking its way towards perfection. The invention of planes and moving automobile, for instance, was still in the initial production phases (p. 164). Moreover, companies of the world were not able to device new models and shape for their production. They did not collaborate or reciprocate their scientific experience. They are depending on their initial theories about scientific inventions (p. 165). Technology, thereupon, substituted human labor to make work easy and quick (pp. 169-68). This automation prosperity is palpable in Vonnegut’s science fictional works. Player Piano is an overt example of this technological accomplishment.

Furthermore, Vonnegut’s Player Piano portrays employs such kind of automation to depict the dystopian sequence of technology i.e., the excessive over-utilization of military technology will lead to the annihilation of human race, which is the essence of postmodern pluralism and skepticism. Thus, he critiques the unjust political combats of World War II. The invention of airplanes is another illustrative example. Airplane was invented in 1092 by the American Wright brothers (Karen, 2010, pp. 12-13). They contributed a great deal of scientific authenticity to the world. This invention stimulated the imagination of literary writers (p. 14). G.H. Wells, for example was immensely interested in this kind of discovery. He wrote a number of his novel to provide the world the conceptualization of the airplane’s ability to enhance people’s means of transportation. Wells’s The First Men on the Moon serves as an important model of this scientific obsession. It was written in the first decade of the twentieth century when the possibly of landing on the moon was mere imagination; and this is the authentic exemplification of postmodern relativism reflected in Vonnegut’s fiction.

The sense of science fiction was present before Wells’s works (Bleiler, 1953, p. 72). In the nineteenth century, we could have some scientific imaginative modulation through the works of Jules Vern (p. 73). He wrote a well-known science fictional novel Around the World in Eighty Days in (1873). In this novel, Vern conceptualizes the possibility of crossing the world in short time. In 1873, the idea of crossing or roaming the world in eighty days was only imaginative. Nowadays, we could cross the world in eighty hours. The sense of belonging has changed the original features of places. Fiction, therefore, deals with this change through literary works. Wells’s The Time Machine, written in 1895, tells us of the clear difference between Victorian England and modern England. In the Victorian England, the time machine was only a dream (Bruns, 2010, p. 91). Yet, in modern England, it became reality when new scientific inventions became more than before. Just so, science fiction, in modernism, was prediction the unknown discoveries that might happen in the future (p. 91). Literary authors, like Vonnegut, in this sense, imagined the shape of the world that could be in near or distant futures by means of cultural relativism via “the author’s implied voiced articulated by the characters’ explicit voices” (Abu Jweid & Sasa, 2020, p. 340). They only have imaginative insights about science.

In postmodernism, nonetheless, science fiction relates to the scientific discoveries that had been already known (Asimov, 1981, p. 86). But postmodernism tackles the improvement and evolution of those discoveries in the future; and this is could be achieved by scientific pluralism and skepticism (Conte, 2002, p. 37). Vonnegut, for example, tackles the issue of space invasion in The Sirens of Titan. He imagines the terrestrial interaction between the human race and space aliens. More importantly, Vonnegut tackles the issue of space invasion that he had already known. The idea of space discoveries is not his own. He depends on previous discoveries and ideas about space. Wells’s novel The War of
the Worlds (1897), for example predicts the Martian invasion of earth. This scientific idea was not known to Wells when he wrote the novel in 1897. He only predicts space invasion through fiction. In contrasts, Vonnegut’s The Sirens of Titan was written approximately in 1959, approximately 62 years after Wells’s novel. This means that Vonnegut has pre-existing knowledge about science and space invasion. But the function of science fiction in Vonnegut’s novel is the point of departure.

In The Sirens of Titan, Vonnegut uses science fiction not for entertainment. He uses it as a critique of war (Asimov, 1981, p. 54). Wells uses science fiction for the sake of prediction of the future invasion of earth. He has complete imaginary literary artifice. However, Vonnegut uses science fiction as a means of amendment with regard to social pluralism and skepticism. He seeks to rectify the political defects in the World War II. He resents the political destruction of human race; which leads to the culmination of postmodern relativism. He compares the human destruction of the countries that participated in the war to the space invasion i.e., earth might be destructed by invasions that are similar to space invasion. The following section will study the science fictional qualities of Vonnegut’s fiction.

Correspondingly, Vonnegut tackles time temporality in The Sirens of the Titan. In modernism, time temporality is conveyed via texts that resemble real life situations, such as social problems and everyday life. In postmodernism, however, reality and time temporality are conveyed via science fiction. Similarly, Vonnegut conveys the reality of World War II through science fiction in his novel i.e., space invasion as the essence of postmodern pluralism and skepticism. To explain, Vonnegut’s usage of reality in Cat’s Cradle imitates the reality of destructive politics during World War II. The initiation of arm race, for example, exemplifies the real obsession with power and supremacy. Yet, Vonnegut deals with this real obsession by using science fiction, namely, arm race and its possible threat in the future.

The true sense of postmodern cultural relativism is appropriated in Vonnegut’s science fictional discourse. The discourse of Vonnegut’s fiction, as reflected in Cat’s Cradle, is directed towards World War II. The novel indirectly opposes the atomic bombs thrown to Japans. The plot’s fictional discourse is inherently Vonnegut implicit voice against the atrocities of War. The author utters the subject of his story through polyphony. In the opening page of The Sirens of the Titan, for example, Vonnegut’s dialogic voice straightforwardly reveals the subject of the novel which is about World War II: “The following is a true story from the Nightmare Ages, falling roughly, give or take a few years, between the Second World War and the Third Great Depression” (p. 1).

The focalization narrator, in Cat’s Cradle for example, conveys the narrator’s voice. This voice is a fictional channel of Vonnegut’s polyphonic voice in the novel. Nestor Aamons is a character who suffers from the same hardships that Vonnegut met during World War II, yet this suffering is told from the novel’s focalized narrator’s perspective: “Nestor Aamons was captured by the Russians, then liberated by the Germans during the Second World War” (p. 53). In Player Piano, Vonnegut projects his authorial insights about technological automation through the narrator’s focalization point of view: “During the past three wars, the right of technology to increase in power and scope was unquestionably, in point of national survival, almost a divine right. Americans owe their lives to superior machines, techniques, organization, and managers and engineers. For these means of surviving the wars” (p. 181). Such science fictional incidents are narrated by the omniscient narrator that highlights one of the novel’s major characters, Paul that seems to be a narrative replica of Vonnegut’s political reality during the events of the World War II: “Objectively, Paul tried to tell himself, things really were better than ever. For once, after the great bloodbath of the war, the world really was cleared of unnatural terrors - mass starvation, mass imprisonment, mass torture, mass murder” (p. 13). Thus, the political experience of these characters is created by Vonnegut’s experimental postmodern style which leads to the culmination of socio-cultural pluralism, skepticism, and relativism in the American society.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper explores pluralism, skepticism, and relativism in Kurt Vonnegut’s Player Piano, The Sirens of Titan, Cat’s Cradle, and Slaughterhouse-Five. The application of these concepts is sorely significant to understand Vonnegut’s writing style that reflects the true spirit of postmodern life. This is because he uses experimental narrative style that represents the postmodern political changes that influenced the society and culture of different nation, including America. Therefore, literary experimentalism is one key finding of the study. That is, Vonnegut experiments with the literary narrative components to deal with the intricate politics after the World War II and its massive aftermath upon the mentality and living conditions of people in America. Such literary experimentalism is the clue to grasp the implied thematic features of postmodernism which had become the topical image of life in American; and how Vonnegut meticulously depicts it by utilizing fictional plots.

Pluralism is another significant finding of the study. It refers to the multi-cultural and the diversity of ethnic and social grounds that had let to the formation of new lifestyles and ways of life in America. Consequently, the study highlighted plurality in order to offer new key socio-cultural factors within the American society. More important, the study accentuated such plurality by polarizing the science fictional peculiarities of the selected novels. Skepticism, in this regard, is empathized as a definitive finding; whereby it includes the selected novels’ characters’ mentality. In other words, the characters embody the postmodern people who underwent influential political changes.

These changes are stimulated by the World War II; and they are the laying premise for the advent of postmodernism. Skepticism, accordingly, is discussed as human beings’ ability to endeavor science in order to reach the ultimate extremes of power and knowledge. As a result, they created unprecedented enterprises to invade space and the outer
edge of the universe. Relativism is the last finding of the study. As a matter of fact, it refers encompasses the social and cultural fragmentation in postmodern world. At the beginning of postmodernism, the American people embarked new challenges influenced by politics. They had felt that there had been nothing beyond their capacity. Being so, their life had transformed onto social fragmentation which is the core of relativism where everyone views life as he or she believes in it.

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