

Posthumanist Aspects in Select Novels of Kurt Vonnegut

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Abstract

Posthumanism is an incipient philosophy that analyses the impact of science and technology on humans. Posthumanism is anthropocentric in approach and tries to this impact in the quotidian lives of humans. The scientific elements in the novels of Kurt Vonnegut are fictional and prophetic predicting a possible feature or scientific invention that affect human lives. In *The Sirens of Titans* Kurt Vonnegut deals with space travel and human life in Mars, *Galapagos* on the other hand creates a fictional evolution as a reaction to human science. This paper is a critique on Kurt Vonnegut's selected novels (*Galapagos* and *The Sirens of Titan*) in a posthumanist perspective. The paper analyses and indicates the synchronising aspects of Kurt Vonnegut's novels and posthumanism.

Key words: post-humanism, science, evolution, space travel, Charles Darwin.

Literary philosophies have been changing and transforming in the past centuries according to the trends and living style of the people. Literature and it's theories of every age develop a new set of ideas and thoughts based on the present social condition of the people with an outlook of creating an enhanced living in the future. Posthumanism is one of such philosophies, it is an emerging theory of the present trend having a futuristic approach on the enhancement of human lives. The concept of Posthumanism is unanimous in all fields of humans (Arts, Science, medicine, technology, etc.) dealing with the idea of future, the post living of humans in a chaotic, pre-apocalyptic world. Posthumanism does not propound on instructing human enhancement through

its writings, it puts its theory into practise: the discovery of new science and technologies to experiment human anatomy. Ultimately posthumanism is an anthropological approach primitively concerned on learning humans from a scientific viewpoint and modifying our bodies and mind into a new (enhanced/hybrid) human.

The end of the 20th century witnessed the birth of a posthuman world through the advancement and domination of science and technology but it remained unnoticed and unspoken. A few intellectual minds addressed the crisis of the developing posthumanist society in their writings yet posthumanism was not included as an exclusive part of their work. In the end of the twentieth century Francis Fukuyama's seminal work *Our Posthuman Future* (1999) pioneered as the first solid book of posthumanism theory, disclosing the growth and inevitability of science in human life i.e. the symbiotic relationship between man and technology. Particularly on the enhancement of human bodies in the field of biotechnologies and genetic engineering.

In the beginning of the 21st century Posthumanism was formulated as a solid theory by the works of Katherine Hayles *How We became Posthuman* (1999), Elaine L. Graham *Representations of the Post/Human* (2002) and Cary Wolfe *What is Posthumanism?* (2009). In 2013, Francesca Ferrando's thesis on Posthumanism explored and re-defined Post-humanism with more specificity.

In Literature, Speculative fiction/ Sci-fi genre has anticipated the emergence of science shifting to the convenience of mankind from their regular use. The rise of a superhuman, time travel, space travel, cyborgs, and post-apocalyptic human life were imagined and created with the use of science in the science fiction genre. Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* deal with the clones and cyborg human. The upcoming of a dystopian world is foreseen in George Orwell's *1984*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. The novels of H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, and Kurt Vonnegut are imaginative and advanced in depicting scientific technologies, time travel, and space life. This paper scrutinises the speculative fiction of Kurt Vonnegut. This paper analyses the parallel aspects of Kurt Vonnegut's *Galapagos* and *The Sirens of Titan* to posthumanism.

The core factor in *Galapagos* and *The Sirens of Titan* and their connection to the posthumanism theory is the evolution of human beings. Posthumanism intends an enhanced living of human beings through science and technology, being a multifaceted philosophy posthumanism aims in the transformation of human anatomy for the advancement in the life of humans. By doing so human body would attain a state of deprivation from themselves. It removes the boundaries of being a human and creates a post human. The posthuman body cannot claim it to be associated to the characteristics of a natural human being. Thus human beings would become free from their self-made conventions (Religion, language, race, etc.) Kurt Vonnegut's *Galapagos* follows the same idea by an evolution that transforms human beings into animals.

Kurt Vonnegut in his novel *Galapagos* portrays the present human condition and has created a fictional evolution of human beings which merges with certain aspects of post humanism. "*Galapagos* shares with Vonnegut's other works a poignant critique of the follies of man, a sense of the absurdity of life, but adds an element only hinted at before: hope" (Simmons 113). The novel depicts the present world through a group of passengers on a vacation to the Darwinian island meanwhile the effect of chaos among human result in their extinction. The passengers Mary, Selena, Adolf Von Kliest, Hisako and six Kanko-bono girls escape on sea and accidentally land "Galapagos Island" where they survive and form a new world which restores humanity. This plot is narrated by the ghost Leon trout who dies and wanders the earth to encounter the extinction and evolution of human beings. The memories of Leon reveal the world during 1986 A.D to be chaotic in terms of human behaviour which led to his own extinction. Leon Trout holds human brain as the reason for all chaos. "To the credit of humanity as it used to be: More and more people were saying that their brains were irresponsible, unreliable, hideously dangerous, wholly unrealistic were simply no damn good" (*Galapagos* 25).

Kurt Vonnegut condemnation on the human brain extends in his novel, *The Sirens of Titan* which creates an artificial inefficient human brain. *The Sirens of Titan* deals with the space invasion of humans in Mars and the war between humans of Mars and Earth. The plot can also be interpreted as a fight between the human brains

which attempts to gain supremacy by its capability. According to Kurt Vonnegut the humans' enemy are his own brain.

The Human, or his/her brain, is a highly unlikely material (that is, energetic) formation. This formation is necessarily transitory since it is dependent on the conditions of terrestrial life, which are not eternal. The formation called Human or Brain will have been nothing more than an episode in the conflict between differentiation and entropy. The pursuit of greater complexity asks not for the perfecting of the Human, but its mutation or its defeat for the benefit of a better performing system. Humans are very mistaken in their presuming to be the motors of development and in confusing development with the progress of consciousness and civilization. (Lyotard 20)

Lyotard points out human brain as the reason for the formation and exclusion of human beings. Human beings create a frame or structure which they consider to be civilization but it resulted in constructing an uncivilised deformed society. Therefore Kurt Vonnegut reduces the ability of the human brains in Mars to create a uniformed lifestyle. The Martian brains are limited in thinking and erased after excessive memory. The brains of the Martians are controlled by an antenna in their skulls that enable them to live an upright way. "a radio antenna under the crown of his skull, and that it would hurt him whenever he did something a good soldier wouldn't ever do" (Titan 42). The human beings in Mars have no differences except of their nationality. Human distinctions are dissolved when the memories of the humans are removed from their brain, Kurt Vonnegut has created an unbiased human centered community by removing the identity of humans.

The Sirens of Titan also ensures that the erased identity or the memories of the human brain can be revoked back by the brain. This trait of retrieving human memories for identification and the verity of human history is another parallel aspect between *The Sirens of Titan* and posthumanism. "Marvin Minsky precisely expressed this dream when, in a recent lecture, he suggested it will soon be possible to extract human memories from the brain and import them, intact and unchanged, to computer disks. The clear implication is that if we can

become the information we have constructed, we can achieve effective immortality” (Hayles 13). In *Sirens of Titan* Unk’s discontent with his marriage and the Martian injustice triggers his brain to retrieve his identity as an earthling. Besides the pain from the antenna Unk successfully recalls his old memories and identifies his wife, Bee and son, Chrono. Unk is the only suspected human in Mars often hospitalised to erase his recollected identity. “Seven times, Unk! You know how many times they usually have to send a man to have his memory cleaned out? Once, Unk. One time!” (Titan 50)

Restructuring an anthropocentric world to establish a humane life is one of the key concepts of posthumanism. Posthumanism proposes the acquisition of humanity through science and experimentation of man through certain technologies Example: cryonics preserves the human body and it can help in extending human life span thus the human being becomes a biological being who would reject categorization as he has become a biological being or deprived the state of being a natural human species. “Humanizing is an embodied process; moreover, the embodiment of such an act is strictly human: non-human animals or machines have had no agential access to such a redefinition, yet” (Ferrando 63).

Galapagos merges with the notion non-human as it holds the human brain as the prime reason of the current chaos and paranoia. Kurt Vonnegut is confused on comprehending the nature of the human brain and raises unanswered questions to justify his creative style of using science on humans.

It is hard to believe nowadays that people could ever have been as brilliantly duplicitous as James Wait -- until I remind myself that just about every adult human being back then had a brain weighing about three kilograms! There was no end to the evil schemes that a thought machine that oversized couldn't imagine and execute. So I raise this question, although there is nobody around to answer it: Can it be doubted that three-kilogram brains were once nearly fatal defects in the evolution of the human race?. (Galapagos 8)

Likewise in *The Sirens of Titan* Kurt Vonnegut gestates a peaceful human life by tampering the brain capacity of humans. Unk, the Martian is found merrier after deprived off from his excessive memory. “It made

him furtively happy to suspect that there were probably other parts of his memory that had been missed as well. Why this suspicion should make him furtively happy he didn't know" (Titan 45). The human species detached from their memories and emotions in Mars live more peaceful. The incapability of the human brain to think and generate emotions relieve the human mind in Mars from negative thoughts and worries.

The modification of human body and mind collides Kurt Vonnegut's novels with posthumanism. Kurt Vonnegut alters the biological factor of human species as they are one of the main power source of their issues. "back in that era of big brains and fancy thinking asserted that the islands had once been part of the mainland, and had been split off by some stupendous catastrophe" (Galapagos 4). In *Galapagos*, Kurt Vonnegut uses a fictional theory for gaining attention and recognition which he does by using Charles Darwin's "*Origin of Species*" which asserts animals – human beings, in an inverted style: human beings – animals. Vonnegut flips the evolution of human beings to be an evolution in which human beings would acquire humanity. Kurt Vonnegut's presence is established through Leon trout often construed as Vonnegut's alter ego through whom he injects his notions.

If I may insert a personal note at this point: When I was alive, I often received advice from my own big brain which, in terms of my own survival, or the survival of the human race, for that matter, can be charitably described as questionable. Example: It had me join the United States Marines and go fight in Vietnam. Thanks a lot, big brain. (Galapagos 29)

Kurt Vonnegut's novels: *Galapagos* and *The Sirens of Titan* present a chaotic apocalyptic situation of humans created by themselves, the writer gives hope and solution to restore peace by modifying the body of Homo sapiens. This is visible in *Galapagos*, Leon Trout the author's super ego rests after humanity is established. Kurt Vonnegut's focus on the existence and evolution of human beings to depict the paranoia of human beings in the contemporary world has landed him to merge with posthumanism. His futuristic vision of the human society and his creative technique of handling science on man makes his novels corresponding to the philosophies of posthumanism.

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