Chapter-VII

Conclusion
CONCLUSION

The unique literary background of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. and the circumstances of his life led him through all the movements and influences of his age. He pursued a life-long devotion to the fictional art. His strong grasp of the post-modernist society made him a part of all that he saw and experienced. He continued to evolve his creative art of fiction to mirror every fresh experience—physical, psychological, socio-political and technological. That was the secret of his success as a novelist. Whether it is fantasy, black humour, mythic vision, and horror of war, schizophrenic treatment or the absurdity of life— all these are compatible in his creative mind and are the main ingredients of his novels and stories.

Vonnegut’s writings constitute an unremitting protest against the horrors of our century—the unending sequence of disastrous wars, the plunging decline in the livability of the environment, and the dehumanization of the individual in a society dominated by science and technology. His protest had a deep imprint in the minds of the readers. The peculiar force of Vonnegut’s voice among so many other
post-modernists such as Heller, Pynchon and Barth may be traced to its complete contemporaneity.

It is significant that modernist novels use ancient myths and stable symbols whereas post-modern fiction confronts and explodes contemporary myths and symbols. But Vonnegut’s novels are the finest examples of varieties of fictional mode, embarking on a new way of writing, factual and fantastic, time shifts and space flights.

The uniqueness of Vonnegut is that he himself performs multiple roles both as creator and creature, author and character, taking centre-stage at the beginning and conclusion, and also appearing as a Dresden prisoner of war. Thus his novels give its readers an author and character who for the novels duration, has indeed been living with the reader as an active participant in the creation of the text. It is pertinent that Vonnegut creates a radical reconnection of the historical and the imaginary, the realistic and the fantastic, the sequential and the simultaneous, the author and the text.
American writers of the 1960s and Vonnegut in particular used parody and irony to mock American history to the point where it is reduced to an absurd farce. Vonnegut rightly fits into the class of these new-wave novelists—'chaos-drunk-writers' who always confront the fiasco of unbelievable historical events and offer new ideas of history. Since civilization is agonizing and full of enormous lies, we have to demetaphorize, demythologize, and deconstruct our thinking about people, objects and events. In this spirit, Vonnegut presents the fragments of experience, the mess of civilization and culture. But above all, it is important to demystify official (political, social, economic and cultural) discourse which continues to perpetuate lies and illusion. Vonnegut does just that and in so doing he is recognised as a versatile novelist of his age.

Vonnegut's uses various fictional techniques distilled from realistic, psychological and technological arena. He is a post-modern analyst of unsurpassed genius. He is essentially a science fictionist although he is not comfortable with the label. He uses the science fiction technique to delineate human experience—a wide range of human experience broadened to include within its scope the post-
modern technology which forms the quintessence of that experience. His space fantasies in *The Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* are imaginative rather than scientific. His characters are found fantasizing in their attempts to cope with the seemingly irrational realities of life. For instance, Jonah in *Cat’s Cradle* and Billy in *Slaughterhouse-Five* seek imaginary props to their lives, which otherwise become intolerable thereby affording a potential mode of survival. Again to enhance the illusion of his surrealist world, Vonnegut uses all the trappings of science fiction to provide a perspective for his themes about plight of man in God’s universe. As narrator he describes his own characters as “machines made out of meat” with such accessories as “wiring and plumbing”. Metaphorically, he includes himself among the machines, explaining in the Preface that he was “programmed” to write that book.

Vonnegut is an intelligent and inventive master who is good at using the techniques of science fiction, fantasy and satire to expose the evils of the modern world. The technique of science fiction is used to create an ideal world of peace as opposed to the world of everyday reality torn by strife.
Vonnegut’s major themes relate to death or haunting fear of death. For him the elements of death, fear, and humour are almost interchangeable, the presence of one leading quite naturally to a consideration of the other two. “You can’t be funny”, Vonnegut maintains, “unless you get close to death, to fear”. This is Vonnegut’s most persuasive logic about death (qtd. in Vonnegut’s World of Cosmic Futility). The single deaths in Vonnegut’s recent fiction are overshadowed by the vision of a massacre. The bombing of Dresden in Slaughterhouse Five is a remarkable example of this vision. It is significant that the vision is recreated in different novels. A tide of industrial waste threatens to bury Midland city in Breakfast of Champions. A mysterious plague in Slapstick causes devastation of the island of Manhattan. In Cat’s Cradle, Vonnegut invents “Ice-Nine”, which destroys the world by freezing all its water and frees him to play God with comic buoyancy of a writer who has out-imagined science. The story of the Cuyahoga massacre is retold in the Prologue to Jailbird, and the familiar Midland city is recreated in Deadeye Dick so that Vonnegut can depopulate it with a neutron bomb. The instances of violence and death assume a meaning and order in Galapagos in the light of Darwin’s law of natural selection. Is
there another contemporary novelist more concerned with vision of destruction and morality than Vonnegut? In fact, this vision has a depth-dimension which projects our existential anguish and raises philosophical questions on the survival of mankind in our planet.

It may be argued that like Jonathan Swift in the 18th-century England, Vonnegut satirizes the cruelty of war and man’s cruelty towards man in the modern world. Vonnegut’s satire touches on different aspects of modern society and of American scene in particular. His targets for the most devastating and frequent attacks are the military establishments, big business, capitalism, war, automation and aggressive nationalism.

It is pertinent to note that Vonnegut is a social commentator who reveals the bizarre conditions of modern life. His basic concern is the plight of man in a dehumanized world. Man is picturized as an essentially wretched, vulnerable creature, at once pitiful and amusing in his futile struggle against his own human weaknesses and his own brilliance, both of which can destroy him. He exposes the social and moral emptiness, the corruption and insanity of American society.
dominated by materialistic considerations. In so doing he presents the human situation and evaluates human behaviour in his works. The Vonnegut hero, despite being a victim of social, economic and political upheavals, upholds the values of life. The positive nature of this affirmation of values is the core of Vonnegut's creative power.

Nevertheless, Vonnegut presents a coherent description of our world, one which may not explain the grand design, but which does offer some answer and promote our understanding. The vision may be loosely described as existential, in that within its existence generally precedes essence. The working of the cosmos remains inscrutable. Therefore, man self-consciously continues alone, reluctant to accept the fact of his anguish, anxious to find reason, purpose and order in the universe. Man sees that things just happen unpredictably, pointlessly, and often cruelly. In reality, efforts to change what happens to make things go in an ordered way generally prove futile: things 'just happen' any way.

It is interesting to note that Vonnegut has the uncanny ability to recreate this kind of situation in his fiction. He frequently falls back
on seeming explanations, which fit the conditions he depicts and which are often presented in the novels from outside perspective of extra-terrestrial beings. Thus we see Rumfoord’s learning about fixed patterns of time from his chrono-synclastic infundibulum, Tralfamadorians speaking of events occurring because the moment simply is structured that way. This is description, not explanation: ironically advanced philosophy in each case, serves primarily to emphasize the characteristics as Vonnegut sees them. In short, the world according to Vonnegut appears absurd and life within it generally seems meaningless. Hence Vonnegut explores the experiences of space, time travel, war and madness as the vehicles for describing such conditions.

The world of Vonnegut is a blending of hilarity and futility, illusion and truth. It is also an absurd world. For Vonnegut, the only resource is to laugh and create a new world, ever more insane, perhaps, than the original. That is the way he can ease the burden of fellow sufferers or earthlings.
Vonnegut’s writing contains a strong element of grotesque, the incongruous, and the chaotic. Nothing proceeds in a neat logical sequence. The strategy of the Black humourist is skepticism, which causes him to invoke a “world of multiple unverifiable possibilities”—is essentially true of Vonnegut’s world.

Vonnegut’s sense of awe and wonder about this planet and its relation to this universe is expressed repeatedly in his fiction. In an article written immediately prior to the first moon landing, he speculates about Earth, orbiting the Sun and simultaneously spinning on its axis. His views on our polluted planet are precise and pointed. For instance, he writes, “Everything has turned to shit and beer, cans and old automobiles and clonox bottles”.

His power of fantasizing is marvellous. Outer space reduces man and his follies to their proper proportions. It is an especially effective device that he uses in his second novel The Sirens of Titan. Technological warfare poses one of the greatest threats to mankind. The brain washed inhabitants of Mars and imported Earthmen are compelled by electronic controls to attempt a futile assault on their
brethren on Earth. All these are beautifully presented in The Sirens of 
Titan. In Cat’s Cradle a poisonous frozen world results from the secret 
weapon ‘Ice-Nine’. The horrors of war permeate Slaughterhouse Five, 
culminating in the bombing of Dresden.

Vonnegut is strong at presenting a parallel theme of conflict 
between father and son, which owes its origin to the theme of man 
against technology. The son revolts against his father, who represents 
the control, the establishments, and more frequently, the technology 
itslf. In fact, this is Vonnegut’s own rebellion in becoming a writer 
rather than a scientist as his father had hoped.

Vonnegut presents two categories of fathers: one the strong 
minded, domineering and all powerful type depicted in most of his 
works: the other - a more loving and gentler sort, appearing only 
occasionally. The thread of father—son conflict is woven through all 
his major works with the parallel of “Earth son” rebelling against 
“Heavenly father”. This theme has been fruitfully depicted in Cat’s 
Cradle and ironically reversed in Breakfast of Champions.
Vonnegut’s novels before *Slaughterhouse Five* include a beautiful and intricate space fantasy, *The Sirens of Titan*; a coruscating satire on human destructiveness, *Cat’s Cradle* and a funny book on Holocaust, *Mother Night*. But *Galapagos* reiterates Vonnegut’s ponderous themes which Vonnegut first raised in *The Sirens of Titan*: the universe is an accident from which has evolved the serendipity called life. This novel is deeply concerned with the futility of human life and his distrust of scientific ideologies. In this apocalyptic satire of Charles Darwin’s *Theory of Evolution*, Vonnegut entertains the notion that humankind is doomed to evolutionary failure because of its oversized brain. The novel centers round a group of tourists marooned on the Galapagos Islands in the course of a nuclear war and world wide economic collapse. Consequently, descendants of the tourists eventually attain a more peaceful existence by developing fins, beaks, and smaller brains.

In *Galapagos* the narrator is the headless ghost, Kilgore Trout. He is clearly a persona of Vonnegut. Thus Vonnegut has created doppelgangers of himself in quadruplicate partly to provide clues for the reader to unravel the complex nature of the novel, partly to
demonstrate the post-modernist vision of intertexuality, and partly to objectify his perceptions of the non-linearity of time, the human artifice of literary work, and the illusory nature of human identity. It may be argued that Vonnegut has beautifully presented the intellectual, psychological and philosophical density of *Galapagos*, but it is puzzling that a few critics seem to miss Vonnegut’s artistry altogether.

The quintessence of this novel is that humanity has been living in illusions that are about to explode. Vonnegut’s subtle message in *Galapagos* is that human race has muddled its way to such splendid and horrific achievements because of accidental evolution of brain that does not seem to comprehend the danger of its own arrogance. Vonnegut is serious about the damage to the society done by humanity’s insistence on taking itself too seriously. In fact, he pushes this theme so far that he questions the singular ‘Truth’ of any literature including his own. Surely, such an accomplished author committed to social responsibility is rare. Vonnegut powerfully uses an idiomatic vernacular to prove his point. Surprisingly, he has been the brunt of more than his share of inept criticism in the past few
years. If life is absurd so is he. But he goes on, any way, and he puts
further considerable literary energy to see life as a joke rather than a
tragedy. This kind of candour that he has shown publicly about his life
and work shows his courage and humility.

Vonnegut assumes the role of “God the creator”, manipulating
his ‘children’ according to his whim, boasting of his control, and then
dispensing with them altogether at the end. Just as Vonnegut’s earthly
fathers are cold and indifferent to their sons, unpredictable, frequently
destructive, his God is a disinterested Creator, remaining aloof from
His earthly creatures except to punish them occasionally when they
step out of time. In a similar way, he maintains considerable aloofness
from his characters, infusing into the reader’s mind a sense of
detachment. It is a deliberate device of Vonnegut, the artist, drawing a
black parallel between himself and God, both creators of world
plagued with pain and sufferings. The chilling parallel between
celestial and terrestrial fathers is too strong and compelling to ignore.

Vonnegut’s is at his best in portraying the alienation of
characters in the midst of social, political and economic upheavals in
the modern world. As a sincere artist he evaluates the life around him as the basis of his own moral standards. Nevertheless, Vonnegut is neither anti-God nor anti-Christian but ridicules the superstitions of religion. In his fictional world moral vision is highlighted by the creation of a new religion based on man. His mission is to evolve the universal brotherhood of man. He avoids the presentation of physical relationship between man and woman as he believes in love at a Platonic level. He assesses the moral worth of man in the amoral world of science today. He beautifully explains how the present man is caught in the complexities of modern life.

Recent scholars have aptly recognised the significance of Vonnegut's art by establishing the relationship between sardonic humour and dark comedy. Indeed; he had the deep perception and insight of Aristophanes and Jonathan Swift. Undisputably, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., is a master of Black Humour and a major figure in contemporary fiction.

Vonnegut is essentially a transitional figure between High-Art and New-Pop fiction Pop art, famous among young people. He
highlights the storehouse of fantasy and endeavours for its survival in
the twenty-first century. Although Vonnegut used pop art techniques
in his novels, he still yearned to be considered a serious writer. As a
result, many of Vonnegut’s novels dealt with artists in much the same
way the earlier post-modern writers did.

Vonnegut’s works are concerned with major issues of life. He
has guts enough to explore the vision of the future. He examines how
machines, wars and cities threaten the ultimate survival of mankind.
Vonnegut felt that artists must be humanists even though the horrors
of war might suggest that universe was more absurd than human-
centred. In delineating his personal movement towards pessimism,
Vonnegut offered the entire generation the motto “To weep is to make
less the depth of grief”. The war in Vietnam tormented Vonnegut
more and more as the causalities and the tales of atrocities grew. He
made efforts to raise a public clamour that would help the end of
American commitment to Vietnam.

While many of Vonnegut’s essays have illustrated his attitude
towards war, he has also written substantially about his concern for
ecology and about his awareness of the loneliness and despair that cloud the lives of millions of Americans. In an essay entitled “Excel or! We are going to the Moon Excel or!” he informed readers of the New York Magazine that the space programme was a colossal blunder. It was worthwhile only to a few scientists like Arthur C. Clarke and to the countless engineers employed in the project. Vonnegut viewed the Moon project as a deliberate attempt to avoid the far more difficult problems on our Earth. He sees Earth as a blue pink and white pearl in pictures of NASA. It looks so clear. You can not see all the hungry, angry earthlings down there---and the smoke and the sewage and trash and sophisticated weaponry. Because of such problems, Vonnegut agreed with Isaac Amisov that American science fiction had passed through adventure and technology phase but that it was ultimately concerned with social reality, an objective concern for the cradle nurtured on Earth.

It is significant that Vonnegut’s fiction and non-fiction reflect his love for all humanity and his belief that both war and pollution are obscene—are far worse than the simpler bittersweet-lies that bring temporary happiness and amelioration of pain. His emotional response
to the human devastation is perceptively presented in his novels, which place him in high esteem as a good human soul. Breakfast of Champions serves as Vonnegut’s version of Mailer’s An American Dream, for both feature their creators as heroes whose lives illustrate the course of action that Americans must pursue if they desire to prevent the American dream from becoming an American nightmare.

It may be argued that all of Vonnegut’s novels are centrally concerned with the contemporary consciousness. They portray characters that believe in the purposefulness of cosmic creation and the agonizing absurdity in their own existence. Vonnegut’s novels explore the major themes of human nature and the continuity of human civilization. He is interested in man’s social problems and brings his cosmic perspective to bear on contemporary aspects of collusion between science and religion. The conflict between science and religion is dramatized through two opposing characters—Dr. Hoenkker and Bokonon in Cat’s Cradle. Vonnegut has all along been trying to show that the central characters of his novels may find life disillusioning, the universe a vast blankness, and may lose themselves
in their struggle against the dehumanizing forces, but they do struggle and try to retain their humanity.

Vonnegut expresses his disgust with war and condemns it. He is also critical of the American society for keeping the vast majority of people as victims of poverty. He is so worried about the horrors of the war that he seems to be telling us that the past is the destruction you have known, the present the violence you see, and the future the holocaust to come. But Vonnegut does not lose heart at all. He tells us that destruction has always been a part of life and as a creator he consciously or unconsciously makes an effort to re-invent the characters and their universe.

In conclusion, it may be pointed out that apart from Vonnegut’s themes, his narrative techniques, limpid style and the fantastic imagery implicit in his novels, he is a good human being who always wants to make the world a better place to live in and the people inhabiting it behave as more responsible individuals. This noble thought not only places him in high esteem but also makes him a master craftsman in the arena of twentieth-century fiction.
The scholars of the fictional mode in twenty-first century will certainly exploit the resources of new canons of criticism to unravel Vonnegut's deep insight into human panorama. Thereby his profound philosophical insight into human condition will appear in a more focused and meaningful context.