Conclusion

Locating Fictional Cartographies and Time Capsules in Kurt Vonnegut’s Writings

Kurt Vonnegut writes in *Player Piano*, “I want to stand as close to the edge as I can without going over. Out on the edge you see all kinds of things you can't see from the center” (Vonnegut, *Player Piano* 84). The fictional territories created by Vonnegut not only reflect his philosophy of looking at things from the edge but also enables him to comment on the state of affairs that is reflected throughout his oeuvre. He creates these fictional spaces as time capsules, places which he revisits throughout his career. The characters in Vonnegut’s novels are travellers, wanderers, and often adventurers. They frequent these territories to find a home for themselves, in search of solace or in need of a refuge from the otherwise chaotic world of reality. These territories provide them with a semblance of ‘constancy’ in the otherwise fluid reality. Time, according to the aliens created by Vonnegut from the planet of Tralfamadore, is an ever going fulcrum which never ceases to be, and in effect captures all the moments, of all times as one singular point in entirety. For the Tralfamadorians, “All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five* 22). For Vonnegut’s protagonists, the perceptions of time and space encompass as well as embody their life and sanity in this post-war world.

Vonnegut’s protagonists embark upon their own public and personal journeys and are frozen in these ‘forever living’ capsules where all of their past, present, and future exist in the reader’s memories forever. In this thesis, I have discussed the temporal and spatial disturbance as seen in the novels of Kurt Vonnegut with focus on a unified reflection of his personal life experiences, choices, war trauma, and grief throughout his personal life. This thesis has
endeavoured to analyse the above mentioned aspects through which we analyse the characters in
a Vonnegut novel. Through the assessment of war trauma and grief one can come to an
understanding of how Vonnegut has evoked his real life experiences as expressions of
fragmented visions which intertwine with characters’ perception of time and space. Reality is
closer to fiction than one can imagine. The temporal and spatial disturbance as one can see in the
Slaughterhouse Five and Mother Night is symptomatic of the fragmented sense of time and space
that is portrayed through Billy Pilgrim and Howard Campbell. Vonnegut’s experimentation also
led to his deft use of tropes of science fiction in his writing in order to compensate for and
assuage the lack of language which could encompass the vastness and irregularity of his war
experience. Characters such as Paul Proteus from Player Piano, Malachi Constant from The
Sirens of Titan, and John from Cat’s Cradle, have added another dimension to man’s perception
of time and space in a world which has abandoned any hope for self-preservation and is leading
to the apocalypse.

Vonnegut indulges in creating and recreating modern myths, myths which have
reverberated throughout history and the ones which Vonnegut propagates himself. The world of
Slapstick and Galápagos reflects a society which has lost its essence. Warmongering and power
struggles are rampant throughout and Vonnegut creates modern myths as an expression of his
anguish and caution. The thesis tries to bring out these intricacies in Vonnegut’s writing and to
ascertain the importance of the personal experience as a way of expressing his inner anguish as a
writer. In effect, a careful study of the characters’ psychological state and questions of sanity and
insanity in the current times has led to a better understanding of Kurt Vonnegut’s works. It is
through the perspective of time and space and a scrutiny of those through Vonnegut’s characters,
that we understand the aesthetics of disturbance in Kurt Vonnegut’s select fiction. Kurt
Vonnegut, in an interview with Israel Shenker for the New York Times says, “You can’t write novels without a touch of paranoia. I’m paranoid as an act of good citizenship, concerned about what the powerful people are up to” (Allen 20).

**Fictional Time Remnants: Vonnegut’s Protagonists**

Paul Proteus embarks on his own personal journey into the past, nostalgic and in a capsule of time as represented by the old player piano in a bar in Homestead. Paul is looking for his roots. In the age of machines in *Player Piano*, he is saddened by the almost forgotten player piano which stands alone amidst all the progress and development in the fields of science and technology. He revels in the memories associated with his old car, which is not automated and thus a point of annoyance for his wife, Anita who had adapted herself to this mechanized society. He is looking for the next big escape into the farmlands where he could live in harmony with nature, nurturing a time where living was defined in more human ways than those based on machinery. He is inclined to leave behind his society and join a rebel group in order to leave the elite society of which he is a major part. At the end of what he finds himself farther from reality than he was when he had joined the group. The city of Ilium, and the old yet decrepit situation of Homestead, harness Paul’s desires to be one with his past.

Malachi Constant, the protagonist from *The Sirens of Titan*, is the ever-ready adventurer who embarks on his journey to Titan when in reality has never been “outside the gaseous envelope of his native planet, the Earth” (Vonnegut, *The Sirens of Titan* 10). He is searching for the next big message from the almighty whose existence is questionable in the novel. “Time passed quickly. Constant did not move” (Vonnegut, *The Sirens of Titan* 14). Malachi’s surname, “Constant” stands against the movement of time. Therefore, though his world wishes to find the
its creator and his plan for the human race, the ‘Constant’ in Malachi’s name is at loggerheads with the fluidity of time. He is travelling from Earth to Mars to Mercury to Earth and eventually to his final destination of Titan, the moon of Saturn under the deterministic will of other creatures, and not his own. He cannot remain constant. He is driven by the ‘UWTB or the Universal Will to Become’ which “makes universes out of nothingness—that makes nothingness insist on becoming somethingness” (Vonnegut, *The Sirens of Titan* 138). All these spatial dimensions are territories which reflect the mindscape of Malachi.

The creatures Tralfamadorians who appear in both *The Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse Five* are aliens from the planet of Tralfamadore. In *The Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut presents them as the driving force behind every action that has taken place on the earth since time immemorial. They are the ones behind Malachi’s journey. They are also responsible for Winston Niles Rumfoord. Rumfoord is endowed with the capacity of seeing all of time and space because of getting stuck in the “chronosynclastic infundibulum.” He is a fragmented soul who has to live through all of time and space as remnants of the person he used to be. Vonnegut develops this idea in the form of time as seen by the Tralfamadorians in *Slaughterhouse Five*. They are friendly creatures who can see through all of time and space. Thus the temporality of an event is scattered for them throughout space. They could see in four dimensions and looked upon Earthlings with pity because of their restriction of scope to three dimensions. According to Billy, “They had many wonderful things to teach Earthlings, especially about time” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five* 21). Time and space do not hold the same meaning as it does to the earthlings, and thus they dwell in a space beyond the imagination of the human brain.

In *Slaughterhouse Five*, Vonnegut creates time remnants of Billy throughout the novel. Billy visits his childhood, his future self as well as sees his life from his conception to his
eventual death. Vonnegut aids these ventures into time travel with the spatial ambivalences. Billy travels between the German war front to Ilium, his hometown and back and forth throughout his lifetime. Both Ilium and the warfront in Germany are continents away and spatially different from one another, but they both look like the “surface of the moon” (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*). These fictional territories that Vonnegut has created have been of course a result of his own personal experiences but they also reflect the trauma of war and of loss the whole humanity.

Tralfamadore, the planet of the aliens Tralfamadorians, does not reflect a utopia that Billy or Vonnegut has in mind. Rather, the Tralfamadorians scrutinise all the earthly affairs from afar. For the Tralfamadorians war does not mean anything. They would rather dwell in the moments which provide them with happiness. Through them Vonnegut has shown a way to look at our world objectively and dispassionately.

Howard Campbell, the protagonist of *Mother Night*, is also appears in *Slaughterhouse Five*. Vonnegut has also created other characters who move from one novel to another. The character of Eliot Rosewater and more importantly of the fictional science fiction writer, Kilgore Trout jump from one narrative to another. Eliot Rosewater shares the hospital space with Billy, and later is introduced as the protagonist of *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater*. Leon Trout, the son of Kilgore Trout, is the omniscient narrator of *Galápagos*. These characters add yet another dimension to the story and stand as time capsules in Vonnegut’s oeuvre. They are all trying to make sense of this fragmentation in time and space, each of them on their own journeys to find the space for such explorations. Vonnegut thus creates the fictional cities, territories, and alien lands where his characters can go and relocate themselves in order to win their own semblance of reality in an otherwise chaotic world.
Fictional Cartographies: Geographical Locations in Kurt Vonnegut’s Selected Fiction

Vonnegut has also created certain specific fictional locations throughout his works. Places such as Ilium, Schenectady, Santa Rosalia, San Lorenzo, and Tralfamadore are fictional locations which have been modified according to real locations or are the creative output that Vonnegut has created, in the case of Tralfamadore, for a new fictional alien race. Ilium is another fictitious town created by Vonnegut. Unlike Gabriel García Márquez’s fictional town of Macondo, which is a microcosm of the Edenic state, Vonnegut’s Ilium is more a reflection of the numerous cities of America and which is in touch with the present reality. It is featured differently in all the novels. Ilium most likely refers to Troy in New York. It is placed in New York and has been a setting for quite a few of Vonnegut’s novels. Ilium first appears as a setting in Player Piano. In Vonnegut’s novels, the resemblance between Ilium and the real city of Schenectady is uncanny. Though Ilium and Schenectady are located as two different places in Player Piano, their resemblance is manifested through the way Vonnegut has created the city of Ilium. The fictional Iroquois river from the novel resembles the Mohawk river that flows through Schenectady. It also signifies the Native American tribe of the same name. In Slaughterhouse Five, the setting of Ilium is different from that in Player Piano. Billy, the protagonist of this novel, is a resident of Ilium. Mary Hepburn from the novel Galápagos was a school teacher in Ilium. Felix Hoenikker from Cat’s Cradle used to live in Ilium as well. Ilium thus stands as a spatial trope for these characters, and it also gets encapsulated as a time remnant. A piece of land, a psychological space, a place resembling the war front, and one which serves our dystopic

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17 Macondo is the fictional town created by Gabriel García Márquez. The town is first featured in the short story “Leaf Storm” (1955) and later on in his novel, One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967). It has featured in some of his other narratives as well.
visions. Ilium stands for the unity in Vonnegut’s vision of a place that captures the spatio-temporal matrix of his works.

Vonnegut also introduces other fictional territories to add depth and spatial dimension to his novels. If San Lorenzo from *Cat’s Cradle* describes the space for the beginning of an apocalypse then Santa Rosalia, the fictional island which is part of the *Galápagos* Islands from the novel *Galápagos*, is symptomatic of the fertile land that Vonnegut creates in order for mankind to survive the apocalypse. The alien planet of Tralfamadore is his most iconic creation. Both *The Sirens of Titan* and *Slaughterhouse Five* mention the planet of Tralfamadore, but they are distinct from each other geographically. Billy sees the planet of Tralfamadore from close quarters by Billy in *Slaughterhouse Five*, who was abducted by the aliens and kept in a zoo in Tralfamadore. Through the use of a relatively new and fictional planet and its residents, Vonnegut has provided the readers with a social commentary of our race. Tralfamadore does not merely occupy the geographical spatial space that Vonnegut provides. It is also a thought process in *God Bless You Mr Rosewater*. It is used in a mostly rhetorical sense in this novel and is portrayed as a hypothetical foreign planet. We can interpret Billy’s own escape from war trauma and personal trauma through his visits to the planet of the Tralfamadorians. Vonnegut not only creates a geographical space but also a psychological one.

The fusion of the matrices of time and space in Kurt Vonnegut’s works reflects a way for him to cathartically express himself through his fiction. The synthesis of time and space through science fiction, mythology, and war narratives provides the base upon which Vonnegut could explore the plurality of these fused matrices. In the 1973 interview for *Playboy* Kurt Vonnegut spoke about his writing and what he felt after the publication of *Slaughterhouse Five*. He says:
I felt after I finished Slaughterhouse-Five that I didn’t have to write at all anymore if I didn’t want to. It was the end of some sort of career. I don’t know why, exactly. I suppose that flowers, when they’re through blooming, have some sort of awareness of some purpose having been served. Flowers didn’t ask to be flowers and I didn’t ask to be me. At the end of Slaughterhouse-Five... I had a shutting-off feeling... that I had done what I was supposed to do and everything was OK.

(Allen 107)

Vonnegut did not cease to write, nor was he done with his purpose as a writer. Throughout his works, he has tried to create a bond with his readers. Vonnegut has finally resolved his inner conflicts and produced literature for the tired and confused soul in a world where a little bit of resemblance to reality, through the works of fiction, provides the reader with a space to call his/her own. His philosophy of kindness and humanity reflects through the character of Eliot Rosewater when he says, “There’s only one rule that I know of, babies — God damn it, you’ve got to be kind” (Vonnegut, God Bless You, Mr Rosewater 79).