Introduction

Literature of the twentieth century is an amalgamation of the diversity of humanity’s experiences. Right from the humble beginnings of 1900s to the more experimental and contemporary writing of post 1960s, literature of this century signifies the fusion of different cultural identities and trends that came into the forefront. The inclusion of traditionally unacknowledged literatures in the world literary canon not only expanded the horizon for explorations into the unknown but also absorbed the experiences outside the perfunctory categories. Literature as such reflected a richness in diversity and increased the scope for myriad possibilities. Twentieth century literature assimilates two broad trends which can be defined in terms of pre- and post-Second World War timeline. The first half of the twentieth century, roughly between the years 1900-1940 heralds the age of modernist literature, and the latter half is defined as that of postmodern literature, which covers the years post 1960s. These two trends brought a significant transition in literature. They brought out the multiplicity of encounters which reflect the convoluted state in the contemporary society. Which are born out of our socio-economic structure and cultural interactions. The catastrophe of the Second World War led to the composition of a series of distinct literary texts as they sought to include experiences associated with war. Writers explored the socio-cultural and economic dynamics of the state and created a space for the modern man to reinvent himself through fiction. The result is a rich history of writing that focuses on the various aspects of existence that haunts the modern man.

Global war is one of the chief defining features of the twentieth century experience, and as such literature endeavours to capture the moment through different narratives. The perpetual dogma of war mongering, along with sadistic approaches to gain power through means of violence, has created a world which is steeped in suspicion and cynicism. The paranoia that
characterizes this state of affairs is symptomatic of the bereavement with which one leads one’s life in the world before. The fragmentation of existence, along with the sense of alienation, leads to a fractured self. The modern man is thus only a remnant of his earlier self. Writers in this post-world war era wanted to express this increasing anguish and despondency. Deprived of an identity and the safety of a cogent reality, people found a release through the accounts of characters in fiction where they found an expression for their diverse emotions. The transition from modern literature to postmodern literature marks the change in the idea of the self. Despite its own fragmentary characterizations (e.g., James Joyce’s Leopold Bloom), modernism is still defined by the sense of a unified, centred self which heralds the idea of individualism. The postmodern identity, on the other hand, is that of a fractured self with multiple identities each conflicting with the other one. Billy Pilgrim (Slaughterhouse Five) or Eliot Rosewater (God Bless You, Mr Rosewater) reflect the fractured self throughout their narrative. Unlike the character of Septimus Warren Smith from Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway, who is in a state of fragmentation himself, characters from Kurt Vonnegut reflect a more self-conscious acceptance of the fragmentation. After the Second World War, the idea of hierarchal, centralized control with faith in grand theories of history, science, and culture was subverted. This resulted in scepticism towards progress, and led to the rejection of totalising theories. Subverted order, the loss of decentred self, and social and cultural pluralism dominated the latter half of the twentieth century. Both the wars had their effect on the writers of the respective age as well.

The horrors of the First World War led to a reassessment of values, and thus the writers from the early 1900s focused on the disillusionment prevalent after the War. The writing of this period was inspired by the changing norms in the fields of science and technology, philosophy, and psychology among others. Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, Friedrich
Nietzsche, and others heralded this movement into the new century. There were massive changes in everyday lives, and the theories presented by Freud changed the popular understanding of one’s identity. Freud’s theory of the unconscious led to new avenues in psychology to explore the realm of our minds. Late-nineteenth-century thinkers questioned the Enlightenment notion of a unified rational self. Thinkers like Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche changed the way of looking at the notions of truth, reality, and morality. Nietzsche asked:

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power. (Nietzsche 46)

In the field of science, Darwin’s evolutionary theory brought about major changes. Einstein’s theory of relativity brought about a change in the way science was conceived till the previous century, for example, the idea of space time continuum. Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, and Thomas Stearns Eliot are some of the modernist writers who attempted to assuage and engage in this conversation concerning the changing world scenarios in the face of modernity. The use of stream of consciousness technique, unreliable narrators, and exposing the fiction behind the supposed roots of the world are some of the ways in which writers approached literature in the early part of the twentieth century. In an article entitled “Ulysses, Order and Myth,” T. S. Eliot described Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which depicts twenty-four hours in the life of the protagonist, Leopold Bloom. He notes that the technique used by Joyce is “a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama
of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.... Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art” (qtd. In Deming 268). Yet after the Second World War it was tough to find rationality anymore, and this led to a condition of desensitised living.

The Second World War brought in a lot of changes in the literary world as well. The ideology of modernism was greatly reshaped after the events of the Holocaust and the dropping of the atom bombing. This led to the advent of postmodern literature which focused on the shifting trends in society after the Second World War. The term “postmodernism” is difficult to define as the debates regarding the same have never ceased to reach a momentary assertion of a unified expression. In the book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard analyses the notion of knowledge in postmodern society. He says that it is the end of the quintessential feature of modernity, the use of grand narratives or metanarratives. He believes, metanarratives should give way to ‘petits récits’ localized narratives. Yet postmodernism thrives on this plural self of discontinuity from old narratives and dogmas.

Postmodern literature can be broadly distinguished into three usages. One denotes the literature that takes the modernist characterizations to an extreme point, the second reflects the literature produced during the phase of late capitalism, and the third can be identified with the literature produced after the Second World War, and refers to non-realist and non-traditional literature. It focuses on the absence of closure, and uses parody, irony, and intertextuality. There was a radical decentring of the cultural space as this era discounted the myth of Christianity, Science, and Democracy, to support the claims of meaningful existence. Writers endeavoured to experiment with different forms such as metafiction, pastiche, and intertextuality in their writing. The result is an exceptional amount of prolific writing in the field of literature from writers such
as John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Jorge Luis Borges, Joseph Heller, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, Salman Rushdie, and Kurt Vonnegut among others. Though they vary in their approaches and literary techniques, all of them are bound by a self-reflexive interest in the art of narration itself.

As discussed earlier, global war is one of the defining aspects of existence that has overshadowed the literature of the twentieth century. The Second World War, followed by the Vietnam War, changed the perception of war and violence for people. This was reflected in literature through the writings of Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, and others. The war raised as never before the question of man’s capacity to perpetrate evil which knew no boundary or conscience- a lack of consciousness with regard to wrong-doing and questioned not just the war criminals, some of whom were persecuted eventually, but the ones who stood by and did nothing to stop it. The passive immorality of people who remained spectators to the genocidal atrocities perpetrated throughout nations left a chasm of faithlessness and disbelief in humanity. As a matter of fact, very few nations emerged out of the war morally untainted. The survivors of the Second World War were scarred for life and struggled to come to terms with their own feelings of guilt and survival. There was a crisis of faith and art, which reflected the absurdity of living through different modes of expression. The “real” was surreal and the writers tried to capture it through their writing. There was a need for artistic autonomy, to break out of the old traditions which did not hold true anymore. Veteran writers such as Heller and Vonnegut struggled to find a voice through which they could express their anguish and come to terms with their experiences of war. Joseph Heller uses parody, black humour, and the quest for the absurd in his novels, and most notably in *Catch-22*. Kurt Vonnegut, a war veteran himself, had to deal with his trauma of
the Second World War. His novel *Slaughterhouse Five* is an exploration into anti-war writing, and deals with a protagonist who was himself a prisoner of war during the Dresden fire bombing.

Literature of the absurd grew out of the modernist literature of the late 19th and early 20th century. It focuses on the questions of the purpose of life and experiences of the characters under those circumstances. It is often represented by the meaninglessness of life and the existential questions of truth or value.¹ It is seen in the form of novel, play, poem, or film and uses the elements such as dark humour, satire, the abasement of reason or incongruity and others. Some of the notable absurdist fiction writers include, Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Nicolai Gogol, Haruki Murakami, Kurt Vonnegut and others. Works such as Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, Thomas Pynchon’s *V*, Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, all include elements from absurdism. A further classification came in the form of particular plays of absurdist fiction written after the Second World War. The term ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ was coined by critic Martin Esslin in the essay of the same name. All these works focus on the man’s reaction to a world devoid of any meaning. Samuel Beckett’s 1952 play *Waiting for Godot* popularised the theatre of the absurd. The play revolves around two friends, Vladimir and Estragon who wait endlessly for the arrival of Godot. The endless wait for Godot reflects the meaninglessness of existence and the absurdity of the wait. In the works of Kurt Vonnegut, we find strains of absurdism in the way some characters such as Paul Proteus from *Player Piano*, Billy Pilgrim from *Slaughterhouse Five*, and others signify the meaninglessness prevalent in their life.

¹ In the *Glossary of Literary Terms*, Grieg E. Henderson and Christopher Brown defined the term “absurdism” as “a philosophical attitude pervading much of modern drama and fiction, which underlines the isolation and alienation that human beings experience, having been thrown into what absurdists see as a godless universe devoid of any religious, spiritual, or metaphysical meaning.” They further observe that absurdism counters the rationalist assumptions of traditional humanism, and it denies the existence of universal truth or value.
Kurt Vonnegut was born to third-generation German parents who were residents of Indianapolis, Indiana. Vonnegut and his siblings, his sister Alice and brother Bernard, whom he often mentions in his books, were never exposed to their German ancestry because of the anti-German image that was propagated after the First World War. The Great Depression along with other personal reasons led to a decline for the Vonnegut household. Later on Vonnegut’s mother died after over-dosing on sleeping pills. The loss of his sister, who was forty at the time of her death, led to a major depression for Vonnegut himself. But it is his participation in the Second World War which features as a backdrop for most of the novels. He was deployed to Europe and was part of the 106th Infantry Division. He was taken as a prisoner of war by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge. He witnessed the firebombing of Dresden by the Allied forces. The Dresden bombing is criticised because the city did not have any military targets. The Allied forces attacked to terrorise the populace. Along with other POWs, Vonnegut survived the attack as they were underground, locked in a slaughterhouse which was numbered five. This is also the title of his famous anti-war novel *Slaughterhouse Five*. Vonnegut’s writing reflects his anguish over the current state of the world. He comments on the warmongering and desensitized, machine driven living. Though he is seen as a cynic whose pessimism is legendary in the critic circles, it is his philosophy of doing good that stands the test of the time throughout his oeuvre.

My own assessment is that Vonnegut’s sardonic wit, black humour, and pessimism are a cover up for the underlying philosophy that he wants people to follow. In the introductory section of the book *The Critical Companion to Kurt Vonnegut*, Susan Farell observes that people tend to focus more on the ease with which he can create bonds with his readers and thus relegating the message he is putting forward. The easy, accessible, and conversational style of writing provides him with a larger base of audience from the young and old alike. He has created
an iconic status for himself, and is considered a pop icon for the readers of the 1960s and was hugely popular in schools and colleges, as well as among the older readers. The young like him for the honest portrayal of life, stripped of all illusions and sugar coated truths and the older generation find solidarity in the cynicism portrayed by Vonnegut. Vonnegut’s writing is an assortment of short chapters, often simple descriptive passages, and yet tempered with serious undertones. These serious pronouncements are often neglected and side-lined. Farell writes, “Underlying his jokes, humorous drawings, and descriptions of flying saucers and time travel, Vonnegut expresses social criticism about the suffering and atrocities human beings experienced in the 20th century—from the effects of war and atomic weaponry, to racism, social injustice, and environmental destruction” (3). Farell focuses on the humanitarian aspect in Kurt Vonnegut which is overshadowed by the cynicism that critics and readers generally associate with him. Once a pop icon for the rebellious youth of the 1960s, Vonnegut’s popularity has since then captured the imagination of his readers. Simple short crisp sentences, along with witty humour, and a general perusal of the present social scenario creates an engaging narrative for the readers. Vonnegut scrutinises the society and presents a commentary which often borders on scepticism, yet he maintains that writers have a special role to play. In WNYC’s program known as Reader’s Almanac, Walter James Miller interviewed Kurt Vonnegut after the publication of Breakfast of Champions and questioned about the role of writers. Vonnegut says:

I think writers should be more responsible than they are, as we’ve imagined for a long time that it really doesn’t matter what we say. I also often have First-Amendment schizophrenia — there’s a lot that I wish wasn’t popular and in circulation, I think there is a lot of damaging material in circulation. . . I think it’s a beginning for authors to acknowledge that they are myth-makers and that if they
are widely read, will have an influence that will last for many years — I don’t think that there’s a strong awareness of that now, and we have such a young culture that there is an opportunity to contribute wonderful new myths to it, which will be accepted. (Miller)

Vonnegut describes his narrative compulsions in an interview with David Standish for Playboy. He says, “Writers are specialized cells in the social organism. They are evolutionary cells. Mankind is trying to become something else; it is experimenting with new ideas all the time. And writers are a means of introducing new ideas into society, and also a means of responding symbolically to life. I don’t think we are in control of what to do” (Allen 76). The metaphors do not stand for the old values anymore; they have modified according to the needs of the present times. Vonnegut deftly fuses the contemporary issues at hand, and experiments with narrative forms in order to create stories which resonate with his readers across generations.

Kurt Vonnegut’s oeuvre can be best described in its skilful fusion of form and content. Along with this amalgamative penchant he merges the burning questions of the society in a satiric manner. Critics such as Courtlandt Dixon Barnes Bryan observed that Vonnegut’s gentle satire or irony “lacks the anger and impatience which great satire demands” (Bryan 21), and as such he is often neglected as a writer of engagement by readers and critics alike. Vonnegut is often regarded as a black humourist, celebrity writer, pop icon, and a comic writer, and of course, his writing is suffused with an amalgamation of all these traits. Robert Scholes disagrees with the generalisation of Vonnegut into the category of a satirist. He maintains that Vonnegut is rather a black humourist. Vonnegut is trying to focus on the horrors and the excesses of the world through the use of humour. Scholes writes:
Vonnegut, in his fiction, is doing what the most serious writers always do. He is helping, in Joyce’s phrase, ‘to create the conscience of the race’. . . . Just as pure romance provides us with necessary psychic exercise, intellectual comedy like Vonnegut’s offers us moral stimulation – not fixed ethical positions which can complacently assume, but such thoughts as exercise our consciences and help us keep our humanity in shape, ready to respond to the humanity of others. (Scholes 55)

Critics such as Granville Hicks categorise Vonnegut as a sardonic humourist and compares him with Mark Twain and Jonathan Swift. Both the writers failed to observe the philosophy which Vonnegut proposed throughout his works and reflected through different literary forms. As discussed earlier, Vonnegut is trying to create space for the modern man, who is broken, fragmented, and often powerless to create any change in society. He is commenting on the prevailing meaninglessness surrounding the modern man. My contention is that the protagonist in Kurt Vonnegut’s novels show a response to this change through their explorations into time and space. The temporality and spatiality of their existence is at the core of Vonnegut’s writing.

Vonnegut’s own battle field experience has been one essential point throughout his writing career which has created an impact on how he perceived reality. It forms the pivot of his artistic practice. The war experience along with his personal trauma has led to a desensitized and fragmented state which needs a platform for expression. Writing about war and trauma can be cathartic as well as challenging. The post-war reality was in a jumbled state of fragmentation, with the infrastructure crippled and the identity in shambles for the people and veterans. Writers were foraging for newer forms of writing in order to capture the inexpressible in their writing. Geoffrey Hartman in his book *The Longest Shadow*, writes about the process of new writing. He
writes, “[W]e are deep into the process of creating new instruments to record and express what happened. The instruments themselves, the means of expression, are now, as it were, born of trauma” (Hartman, *The Longest Shadow* 1). In an essay entitled “Cultural Criticism and Society” from the collection *Prisms*, Theodor W Adorno writes, “The critique of culture is confronted with the last stage in the dialectic of culture and barbarism: to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric, and that corrodes also the knowledge which expresses why it has become impossible to write poetry today” (Adorno, *Prisms* 34). Vonnegut has experimented with the tropes of science fiction and used his pen in the art of satire. According to Mircea Eliade, mythical events happen in “illud tempus,” literally that time and Vonnegut fuses the elements and attempts to bring out the time-space aesthetic dimension of myths and grappled with the literature associated with the war narratives. Hence, Vonnegut has been sorted into various categories such as a satirist, an ironist, or a black humourist by various critics. However, these readings lack an adequate understanding of the deep personal and emotional stress that Vonnegut refers to throughout his novels and short stories. A critical study pertaining to the effect of war and trauma and its subsequent effect on the perception of time and pace can lead us to a better understanding of Vonnegut’s literary identity. This thesis will thus focus on eight of his primary novels in order to ascertain the deeper connection that he had with the effects of war and trauma. This thesis also tries to locate the various ways through which Vonnegut has explored the aspects of time and space in his novels. The spatio-temporal aesthetics forms the fulcrum of his engagement.

Kurt Vonnegut started his writing career as an undergraduate for Cornell Daily Sun. After his return from World War II, he started studying anthropology at the University of Chicago and in the meanwhile also worked as a reporter. He started publishing his stories in magazines such as Collier’s and The Saturday Evening Post. He was working in the General Electric Company as
a public relations personnel and left his job after receiving some popularity for his writing. The first few novels were reduced under the category of science fiction and thus did not lead to commercial success. Novels such as *Player Piano* (1952), *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), *Mother Night* (1962) did not garner enough recognition as they fell under this category and were published as paperbacks. The works were not recognized by the critics. It is after the publication of *Cat’s Cradle* (1963) and *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater* (1965) in hardback forms that Vonnegut received critical attention. It is in 1969 when he published *Slaughterhouse Five* that he received immense critical and popular acclaim. War plays a very important role in his life and is reflected throughout his oeuvre. His novels show the reception of war through the various characters. Vonnegut also comments on the reckless use of science and technology in generating machines for warfare and which will lead to mankind’s disaster. His later novels *Slapstick* (1976) and *Galápagos* (1985) show a more resolute Vonnegut who is trying to find solutions to the questions of warfare, inhumanity and the eventual extinction of humankind.

The first chapter of the thesis, entitled “The Aesthetics of Disturbance: War in *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Mother Night,*” deals with the effects of war and trauma on Kurt Vonnegut and discusses how that has defined his perception of time and space in relation to the understanding of reality in the pluro-genric, pluro-technical melting pot. The chapter deals with two of his novels, *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Mother Night,* and focuses on how war and its effects have shaped the life of the characters of these two novels, and specifically of the two protagonists, Billy Pilgrim and Howard Campbell, respectively. Throughout literature we find reminiscent pieces of war experiences and memories, mostly fraught with episodes of valour and courage, and yet some which focus on deglamourizing war, de-idealizing the idea of ‘brotherhood’, and the necessity of war. Through these two novels, Vonnegut tries to come to
terms with his own anguish and horrors perpetrated by humanity. A historical overview of war narratives and the textual analysis of the two novels will lead us to understand the way time and space is perceived in these two novels.

The second chapter, titled “USTOPIA: Time, Space, and science fiction in Player Piano, The Sirens of Titan and Cat’s Cradle,” analyses the use of the tropes of science fiction in Vonnegut’s earlier novels. It follows the plotlines from Player Piano, The Sirens of Titan, and Cat’s Cradle, and scrutinises the way in which Vonnegut has used science in his fiction. It follows the argument from the first chapter, which focuses on how the limited capacity of the genres to encapsulate the reality of our times has led to a plurality of genres, and thus they all spill into each other in order to find coherence. All the novels fluctuate between their visions of utopias and the reality of their dystopias and struggle to find a balance between the two. Vonnegut creates a matrix that encapsulates all these elements. A detailed exploration into the genre of science fiction and its tropes will help us understand the ways in which Vonnegut attempts to use time and space in his novels as well as modify them in order to cater to the new sensibilities which emerged after the world wars and the subsequent change in the way society and economy countered the transformation.

The third chapter, entitled “Forever Pursuing Genesis: The Use of Myths in Kurt Vonnegut in Slapstick and Galápagos,” focuses on the aspects of myths used in the aforementioned novels of Kurt Vonnegut. This chapter analyses the coexistence of the old myths and the new ones created by Vonnegut. There is a subtle fusion of the old classical and biblical myths along with the new ones in the same narrative. Time, space, and memory assume a new dimension when seen through this new mythical lens. This chapter deals with the subtle references to classical stories of the myth of Eden or the Fall or loss of innocence, biblical
character sketches such as that of Jonah, or the recurrent mention of the Messiah figure. The characters in Vonnegut’s novels, on one hand attempt to reform the world, and on the other hand they also wish to pursue the ideal of the Edenic utopia. I pursue a historical study of the mythification in literature and I hope it will lead to an adequate understanding of the use of time and space in the above mentioned novels.

The fourth and the final chapter, entitled “The Insanity of Our Times: The Fragmented Vonnegut Man,” brings the analysis to an end by focusing on the characters from Vonnegut’s oeuvre and to focus on the fragmentation as seen in all of them due to the public as well as the private trauma that all of them go through. The characters in Vonnegut’s novels propel themselves towards the fragmented vision of a man who has been caught in the disease of warmongering. The character in Vonnegut’s novels is not an active participant of this situation but rather a cog in the wheel of the big machinery. The characters dwell in the loneliness created as a result of the machine driven world and that is reflected in the modern man and his sensibilities. Vonnegut’s protagonists harp on this anguish of the modern man, his isolation, and at the same time, abuse of the power given to him. Alfred Kazin in an article entitled “The Alone Generation,” describes the contemporary novel as an apology for the mundane abnormality of the state of affairs. He describes the contemporary novel, which becomes “not a series of actions which the protagonist initiates because of who he is, but a series of disclosures, as at a psychoanalyst’s” (qtd. in Klein 115). The characters in Vonnegut’s novel disclose their abnormalities, fetishes, and uncomfortable situations to the readers, who are receptacles of their anguishs. A study of these characters and their perception of time and space substantiate the various ways in which Vonnegut uses them in order to make sense in a fragmented and divided world of terror.