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Subversion of Ethical Values

In

Kurt Vonnegut's A Man Without a Country [2005]

"But man, proud man...

Drest In a little brief authority

Most ignorant of what he is most

assured,

His glassy essence like an

angry ape,

Plays such fantastic tricks before high

heaven

As make the angles weep."

-Aldous Huxley

Ape and Essence

PRELUDE

It is the Witches' Sabbath

The Dance of the Harpies

With Scylla and Charybids

Manning the Orchestra

and Faustus playing the Host

Where is the Gorgon Medusa?

Gone to meet Gog and Magog? (K.B.Razdan)

A Man Without a Country (2005) is Kurt Vonnegut's swan-song, as after the publication of this work in the year (2005), it was in December 2010 that Vonnegut slipped while descending the stairs in his house, the resultant fall give him a head injury which eventually caused his death. As a modern and postmodernist American novelist, who began his novelistic career with the publication of his maiden work *Player Piano* [1952], Vonnegut has earned various labels : a

black humorist", "lover of the Apocalypase," "redeemer of mankind," "a writer-knight in infallible armor," "champion of moral and ethical values", to mention only a few. In, *A Man Without a Country*, any reader, well acquainted with Vonnegut's creative role-playing matrix, can easily discern that the author himself is the twentieth-cum-twenty first century reincarnation of Mark Twain. In *A Man without a Country*, Huck may not be there, going down the river Mississippi to expose the decadence of ethical and moral values in American shore-civilization, yet in this novel, the author dons the mentle of Mark Twain's Immortal hero, Huck Finn, dissecting, indicating and castigating unethical and dehumanized in American politics, administration and bureaucracy, right from the White House downwards. Even the then U.S. President, George Bush is not spared, especially Bush's invasion of Iraq to eliminate the Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussain. Vonnegut considers American invasion of Iraq as totally unethical, immoral and highly unjustified war. A host of other identical issues, in American politics and sociological ambience, come under the author's scanner for a ruthless, no-holds-barred analysis.

A Man without a Country in doxified style of narratology can be called as an autobiographical-cum-fabulatory work, in which Vonnegut dished out a "contradictor mix of joy and sorrow, hope and despair, humor and gravity." A marked and well pronounced erosion of human behaviour, private, public, political and administrative, spills over from every page of this prismatic work. Fabulation in details of facts and incidents from Vonnegut's own life become the Icing on the cake. Right from the opening of the narrative, to its very end, what makes the author virtually angry and unforgivable, is the irretrievable degeneration of human ethical and behaviour.

As a thematic prologue to what the reader will have to encounter in this novel's narrative, the author announces his intentions his intentions, vis-a-vis the heroics of unmaking:

THERE IS NO REASON GOOD CAN'T TRIUMPH OVER EVIL IF ONLY ANGELS WILL GET ORGANIZED ALONG THE LINES OF THE MAFIA"

The narrative begins with a virtual mirror reflection [the 'mirror' being the author's mind and psyche] as a syntagm:

"OH, A LION HUNTER
IN THE JUNGLE PARK
AND A SLEEPING DRUNKARD
UP IN CENTRAL PARK
AND A CHINESE DENTIST
AND A BRITISH QUEEN

ALL FIT TOGETHER
IN THE SAME MACHINE
NICE, NICE
SUCH VERY DIFFERENT
PEOPLE IN THE SAME
DEVICE!" (BOKONMON)

Bokonon is a religious prophet in Vonnegut's highly apocalyptic novel of the 1960's, *Cat's Cradle* [1963], whose highly absurdist, ironic, and satiric credo "Bokononism" simply tears to smithereens modern man's totally irrational stupid and moronish thinking, utterly devoid of any rational, ethical and logical essence.

Bokonon composes calypsos to lay bare twentieth-century man's erosion of positive and progressive intelligence:

"Tiger got to hunt
Bird got to fly,
Man got to sit and wonder
'Why, why, why?'
Tiger got to sleep
Bird got to land
Man got to tell himself
He understand!" [Cat's Cradle]

The opening chapter of *A Man Without A Country*, becomes the normative sociology of the author's life as a kid, being the "youngest member" of his family. Says the author,

"As a kid, I was the youngest member
of my family and the youngest
child in any family is always
a joke maker, because a joke is
the only way he can enter into an
adult conversation.....[1]

Vonnegut revels in true fabulatory aesthetics of autobiographical narratology that he grew up
"at a time when comedy in this country was superb – it was the Great Depression....."[2]

As already stated, the very essence in terms of thematic symbology in *A Man Without A Country*, is Vonnegut's repeated refrain that the emasculation of contemporary man's ethical and moral thinking-cum-behavior is so appalling that only being funny can be the true antidote to this unnerving truth:

"When I'm being funny, I try not to offend...I don't think I have embarrassed many people or distressed them. The only shocks I use are an occasional obscene word ... And it's not possible for me to make a joke about the death of John F. Kennedy or Martin Luther King.... Total catastrophes are terribly amusing, as Voltaire demonstrated....

I saw the destruction of Dresden, I saw the city before and then came out of an air-raid shelter and saw it afterward and certainly response was laughter. God knows, that's the soul seeking some relief..."[3]

In fact, the Dresden experience became a permanent scar on Vonnegut's soul and he wrestled with this inner trauma for 24 years till the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five* [1969], in which the central protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, too, suffers the same agony, he like his creator, is in the city of Dresden when this beautiful German habitation is fire-bombed by Allied bombers. When Billy comes out of the underground meat-locker, he says "Dresden looked like the moon,"

Vonnegut goes on to recount his days as a young school boy in Indianapolis, taking about the terms "twerp" and "snarf". A twerp was a guy "who stuck a set of false teeth up his butt and bit the buttons off the back seats of taxicabs. And a snarf was a guy who sniffed the seats of girls' bicycles." [7]

Again resorting to "Bokanonomism" Vonnegut, as usual, puts in these words which simply constitute a barometer, depicting a total absence of any behavioural ethics in whatever, the so-called progressive and scientific man of twentieth-cum-twenty-first century, did or does:

"I WANTED ALL THINGS TO SEEM TO MAKE SOME SENSE SO WE COULD ALL BE HAPPY, YES, INSTEAD OF TENSE, AND I MADE UP LIES, SO THEY ALL FIT NICE AND I MADE THIS SAD WORLD A PARADISE" (6)

Continuing with his tirade against his fellow countrymen for their addiction to a demonic dose of unethical ways practices especially warfare and super-power bullying, the author says:

"What a mistake we are we have mortally wounded this sweet life supporting planet the only one in the Milky Way....Our government is conducting a war against drugs, is it? Let them go after petroleum. Talk about a destructive high !Hey as long as are stuck with homo-sapiens, why mess-around. Let's wreck the whole joint. Anybody got an atomic bomb? Who doesn't have an atomic bomb

nowadays?" [9]

The Dresden experience again haunts Vonnegut, in this novel, as well. Why? The answer is simple: the bombers of his own country and allies, napalm-bombed the denizens of a beautiful city, the author escaping certain death, by being lodged in an air-raid shelter along with other prisoners of war. What could be more atrocious, unethical and criminal than annihilating innocent people? For that matter, Vonnegut always considered World War II, or any other war as a blatant crime against humanity, totally unjustified and unacceptable:

"of course, as prisoners of war, we dealt handsomely with dead Germans, digging them out of basements because they had suffocated there, and taking them to a huge funeral pyre, And I heard-I didn't see it done-that they gave up this procedure because it was too slow.... the city was starting to smell pretty bad. And they sent in guys with flamethrowers.

Why my fellow prisoners of war and I weren't killed, I don't know." [18]

These words amply illustrate Vonnegut's intrinsic hatred of war and brutal killings and torture of humans as a type of collective hubris, an Orpheus who sings on a lyre without strings. The ethics of super power hegemony and bamboozling is simply a kind of "Witches" Sabbath", with Scylla and Charybids manning the Orchestra and Faustus playing the host. In *A Man Without A Country*, only the Gorgon Medusa of global war and superpower musical chairs, rule the roost. Who bothers about ethics? It is the world of Orwell's "Big Brother", with "War as peace" being the determining factor.

In section after section, Vonnegut steps on the accelerator of absurdity, illogicality, meaninglessness, hopelessness, despair, and above all irretrievable erosion of ethical rationality and convincing logic, vis-a-vis the monltrous crimes committed against humanity and the fraternity of mankind, Again, to illuminate the apotheosis of a world of tribulation, apostasy, and damnation, the author talks about Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis", and the hero of this immortal work, Grogor Samsa:

"Now there's a Franz Kafka story..... A young man is rather unattractive and not very personable. He has disagreeable relatives and has had a lot of jobs with no chance of promotion. He doesn't get paid enough to take his girl dancing or to go the beer hall to have a beer with a friend, One morning he wakes up, it's time to go

to work again, and he has turned into a cockroach.... It's a pessimistic story." [31-32]

Obviously, Vonnegut in this last novel of this feels so overwhelmed, distressed, and depressed with all that has been going on in the world during the last 50-60 years, that not to talk or imagine about anything ethical or justifiable and rational, it is now certainly the "world of the nightmare and the scapegoat.....instruments of torture and monuments of folly..." It is "the hell man creates on earth" [Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 148-150]. The demonic human, animal, vegetable, and mineral worlds, have made a Satanic mishmash of everything that could be, or can be, conceived as progressive, healthy, contributive, or evolutionary. The author's disillusionment with everything can be gauged from these words, he writes in one of the sections of this novel:

I DON'T KNOW

ABOUT YOU

BUT I PRACTICE

A DISORGANISED

RELIGION

I BELIEVE IN AN

UNHOLY DISORDER

UNHOLY DISORDER

WE CALL OURSELVES...." [38]

Ostensibly, as an apocalypticist, he in the beginning of the twenty-first century feels the futility of hanging on to a forlorn hope of being a gradualist. The power of gods has certainly come in the hands of children, with George Bush as the Secular Satan, the perfect confidence Trickster of them all:

"George W. Bush has gathered around him upper-crust

C-students who know no history or geography, plays....

white supremacists, aka Christians... plus most

frighteningly psychopathic personalities, or PPs

the medical term for smart personable people who have no consciences".[99]

Vonnegut also coins a term the "Guessers," who know everything and decide everything. "Persuasive guessing,' says the author, "has been at the core of leadership for so long.....It is now their turn to guess and be listened to". [82-83]. Needless to say, it is not only Bush's "Guessers" who decide and formulate policy matters for him, the advisors, defence and foreign

secretaries, bureaucrats, etc; these "Guessers" can be easily identified in any country these days. But "the guessers, in fact, know no more than the common people and sometime less...." [82]. The "Guessers," Vonnegut firmly believes are presently the curse that has befallen mankind, that's why the author again coins a Bokonon calypso, to symbolize the colossal absurdity surrounding us, on the occasion of his eighty-second birthday on November 11, 2004, Yet, says Vonnegut, "No matter how corrupt, greedy, and hear less our government, our corporations, our media, and our religious and charitable institutions may become, the music will still be wonderful." [66]

And again:

"If I should ever die, God forbid, let this be my epitaph:

THE ONLY PROOF HE NEEDED
FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD
WAS MUSIC" [87]

As an incorrigible apocalypticist, Vonnegut firmly believes that very few people believe that there is going to be a world for their grandchildren: "I know of very few people who are dreaming of a world for their grandchildre" [67]

One can visibly see that Vonnegut is a committed humanist, excessively worried about the future of mankind upon this planet. In an earlier work, *Breakfast of Champions* [1973], it is again an appalling absence of ethical conduct and thinking, which makes the hero of this novel, Dwayne Hoover, a multimillion Pontiac dealer, hell bent upon finding out the meaning of life. In *A Man Without a Country*, the author feel so disgusted with the absurdity and hopelessness, itinerant in every human endeavour and enterprise, as to declare:

"WE ARE HERE
ON EARTH
TO FART AROUND
DON'T LET
ANYBODY
TELL YOU
ANY DIFFERENT" [54]

These words amply illustrate Vonneguts abysmal disgust with the demonic absense of ethical and rational existence in a world, which is increasingly becoming more and more Kafkaesque. In fact, for this very reason, Vonnegut eulogize music as the perfect antidote to the colossal ennui unleashed by unethical practices and policies. He says:

"Back to music. It makes practically everybody founder of

life than he or she would be without it. Even military bands....always cheer me up. And I really like Strauss and Mozart and all....

.....That specific for the worldwide epidemic of depression is a gift called the blues. All pop music today jazz, swing be – roll, Elvis Presley, the Beatles, the stones, rock-and-roll, hip-hop and on and on- is derived from the Blues." [68]

That postmodern homo-sapiens, has become more unethical than even animals, can be gauged from these words Vonnegut uses about his own country, America:

"But I know now that there is not a chance in hell of America becoming humane and reasonable. Because power corrupts us and absolute power corrupts us absolutely, Human beings are chimpanzee who get crazy drunk on power. By saying that our leaders are power-drunk Chimpanzees, am I in danger of wrecking the morale of our soldiers fighting and dying in the Middle East. Then morale, like so many lifeless bodies is already shot to pieces. They are being treated, as I never was, like toys, a rich kid got for Christmas." [72]

War is a human virus, believes Vonnegut, and he wonders Abraham Lincoln are Mark Twain would say about their country, were they alive today? Slavery, practiced by Americans in the nineteenth century, was not only a beastly and grossly inhuman and unethical practice, but it was Lincoln's eagerness to abolish slavery as an Abolitionist, that eventually cost him his life. Vonnegut feels totally obsessed with this demonic erosion of ethical values and principles, which makes him take to task, the President of his own country, George W. Bush:

"Speaking of plunging into war, do you know why I think George W. Bush is so pissed off at Arabs? They brought us algebra. Also the numbers we use, including a symbol for nothing, which Europeans had never had before. You think Arabs are dumb? Try doing long division with Roman numerical." [77]

Vonnegut's disgust with the grossly unethical practices and in American administration, including White House politics, is so striking that one is reminded of Irving Howe's well read

and realistic observations about "Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction". when he defines our present day "Mass Society" as "a relatively comfortable, half-welfare and half-garrison society in which the population grows passive, indifferent atomized, in which traditional loyalties, ties and associations become lax or dissolve entirely....in which man becomes a consumer, himself mass-produced like the products, diversions and values that he absorbs. "[Irving Howe, "Partisan Review," 26, 426-36]. From a conscientious reader's perspective, one can observe that, as a novelist Kurt Vonnegut has been able to deal successfully and scathingly with recent American life. In *A Man Without a Country*, what the author feels most offended about is the brazen, corrosive and shameless exhibition of hegemonistic appropriations by the "Guessers" who control and shape the global policies of the U.S. President, besides implementing the "Witches Sabbath" to make "rabbit republics" fight proxy wars, simply to add to the so-called awesome global stature of the Orwellian "Big-Brother". What could be more nauseatingly unethical than this? At least, it fact, he even speaks about Hamlet's sighting the Ghost of his murdered father and confronting his uncle Claudius about it, killing Polonius mistakenly, presuming it is the former hiding behind the curtains? Is George W. Bush the postmodern Claudius, who has unethically "slain" the author's "father"? who is these symbolic, Thematic "father"? of course the mother and father rolled in one : the once defined as the land of hope, Promise and Faith : Thomas Jefferson's, Benjamin Franklin's and Jonathan Edwards' America, a "Secular Garden of Eden", in which the American Adam would earnestly aspire to, and believe in, recapturing the : Original State" of " "Innocence, purity, and Heroism"! Paradoxically, ironically, and above all, unethically, this land of "Hope and Promise,' which appeared after the attainment of American Independence to be "poised on the threshold of infinite and wondrous possibilities for the future," now, at the dawn of the 21st century, sunk irretrievably into a stinking quagmire of apostatic, unethical and tribulatory policies and practices.

Before concluding his vitriolic and highly scathing indictment of American policy makers and practitioners, percolating down from the White House to the lowest echelons of American bureaucratic governance, Vonnegut wonders as already mentioned, what would Mark Twain and Abraham Lincoln do, had they been alive today to witness the mess their country was in, now?

"Where are Mark Twain and Abraham Lincoln now
when we need them?..... both of them made the
American people laugh at themselves and appreciate really important, really moral
policies. Imagine what they would have to say today" [75]

Needless to say, Kurt Vonnegut has often been called as the modern and postmodern Mark Twain, the contemporary Huck Finn, who earnestly desire to "light out for the territory." He feels neither a "sense of social release nor a feeling of personal joy," instead there is an increasing awareness of "social dependence and powerless." Vonnegut feels that passivity has become, in his country, a widespread social attitude. Not only this in Bush's America, "Opinion tends to flow unilaterally, from the top down, in measured quantities, it become a market commodity". [Irving Howe, 426-36]

In the climactic sections of *A Man Without A Country*, Vonnegut's apocalyptic mood mellows down and donning the concern of an incorrigible gradualist, he in a veiled manner, muses over the grossly unethical state of affairs, vis-a-vis the people who govern his country:

"Well, one wishes that those who took over our federal government and hence the world, by means of a Mickey Mouse coup d'etat, who disconnected, which is to say the House and Senate, and the Supreme Court and We, the people, were truly Christians. But as William Shakespeare told us long ago, "the devil can cite Scripture for his purpose." [111]

The author also talks about, in fact reproduces, some lines from a letter a man from San Francisco Wrote to him:

"How can the American Public be so stupid? People still believe that Bush was elected, that he cares about us and has has some idea of what he is doing. How can we "save" people by killing them and destroying their country? How can we strike first on the belief that we will soon be attacked? No sense, no reason, no moral grounds have gotten through to him. He is nothing but a moron puppet leading us all over the precipice. Why can't people see that the military dictator in the White House has not clothes?" [111]

The author told the letter writer that "if he doubted that we (the Americans) are demons in Hell, he should read *The Mysterious Stranger* which Mark. Twain wrote in j1898." [111]

The implication is obvious: Bush had not only made America.... the most unethical nation in the world, bullying and mentally bludgeoning smaller and weaker nations to fall in line, but rendered the people of his nation as veritable demons, "let loose in a demonic human world." In Twain's classic work about a Secular Satan on the rampage among humans, to create

mayhem and anarchy, the thematic essence focuses upon the fact, as Vonnegut says, "that Satan and not God created the planet earth, and he demned human race." [112]

Finally, Kurt Vonnegut believes that we humans have treated the planet earth so unethically, cruelly, and thoughtlessly that the planet immune system is now planning to get rid of us though AIDS and even natural catastrophes like tsunamis, quakes, typhoons, etc. The author quotes his own hero, Eugene Debs Hartke, the central protagonist of an earlier work, "Hocus Pocus," [1997] again to highlight the blatantly ignored truth that how essential and central to human conscience and behaviour, is the decisive and structuring role of ethical action and thinking :

"As long as there is a lower class, I am in it.

As long as there is a criminal element,

I'm of it.

As long as there is a soul in prison, I am

Not free" [10]

Vonnegut's disgust with animal humans, spills over in his mind and psyche. He ends *A Man Without A Country* – With a "REQUIEM." which goes like this:

"The crucified planet Earth, should it find a voice and a sense of irony might now well say of our abuse of it,

"Forgive them Father, They know not what they do."

The irony would be that we know what we are doing.

When the last living thing has died on account of us, how

poetical it would be if Earth could say in a voice floating

up perhaps from the floor of the Grand Canyon,

"It is done".

People did not like it here," [137]

The element of heteroglossia coupled with the author's awesome self-reflexivity, is so overwhelming in *A Man Without A Country*, as to make him entertain the innovative idea that had God been alive today in his own nation, he would have to be an atheist. The implication is obvious : America as a country, has buried ethical policies and conduct, fathoms deep, and the Americans as humans, being yoked to an existence subscribing to a "world of the nightmare and the scapegoat.....instruments of torture and monuments of folly" [Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 147-149] Kurt Vonnegut's admiration of Mark Twain borders upon sheer veneration, as Twain also detested highly the loss of ethical values and conduct in all human activity, The very quintessential matrix of *Huckleberry Finn*, *A Man Without Country*,

as a work of innovation and renovation, creation and recreation, thematically, symbolically as well as imagistically, subscribes to Twain's abhorrence of the unethical called homo sapiens. Perhaps Mark Twain famous definition of man may have been echoing in Vonnegut's mind:

"Man is a museum of diseases whose only function is the entertainment and nourishment of microbes. He begins as dirt and departs as stench...." *A Man Without A Country*, epitomizes the thematic essence of Twain's vitriolic rather Swiftonian definition of man.

Notes

- 1- Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man Without A Country*, Dell Publishing House, New York, 2005, 3. All further quotes are paginated from this very edition.
- 2- Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton Univ, Press, 1973, 147-149.