Reorienting Historical Frames of Reference: An Appraisal of Kurt Vonnegut's *Jailbird*.

Iram Qureshi

Research Scholar (Integrated Ph.D.)

University of Kashmir

iramqureshi988@gmail.com

"Postmodern fiction" says Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* "suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (110). Falling within the gamut of postmodernism, historiographic metafiction refers to an amalgamation of history and fiction. Falling within the gamut of postmodern techniques, it vehemently interrogates the objectivity of historical discourses, so much so that some works of historiographic metafiction even subvert the long-held beliefs about well-marked historical events. Hence historiographic metafiction voices dissatisfaction against the knowability and certainty of the discourses of and about the past. As an art, it becomes interesting, intriguing, engaging and complex as it draws on cultural, socio-economic and political features and carries undertones of noncompliance within itself. While postmodernism challenges metanarratives as devious stratagems, historiographic metafiction in the same vein favours petite and subjective narratives, thereby problematizing the historicity of history. Rabeb Ben Hania elucidates:

> Such form of writing shows a substantial maturity insofar as it acknowledges that each discourse bears within it its counter-discourse, that within each history lies a silenced counter-history. . . . It is a resistant form of writing since it grants the voice to whoever yearns to speak. The historiographic metafiction . . . maps the newly-established 'liminal zone' where literature becomes a space of hybridity rather than hegemony, of negotiation rather than negation, and of democratic inclusion rather than exclusion. (1-2)

Many postmodern American novelists including Salman Rushdie, Orhan Pamuk, E.L. Doctorow, Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, Ishmael Reed etc., underpin the fact that history is a highly relative and malleable discourse. Linda Hutcheon states:

> Postmodern American fiction, in particular, sought to open itself to history, to what Edward Said (*The World*) calls the 'world'. But it seems to have found that it can no longer do so in any innocent way: the certainty of direct reference of historical novel or even the nonfictional novel is gone. (4)

www.tjells.com

American history is an enticing discourse for the indigenous writers to indulge in and the outcome is often a quintessential example of historiographic metafiction. Vonnegut delves deep in history in novels like *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Hocus Pocus*, *Jailbird* and *Mother Night* and adroitly weaves it with fictional narratives. He writes a counter discourse of numerous incidents of American history thereby revealing that there is no absolute truth but a certain degree of veracity in historical accounts. In the novel *Jailbird* (1979), Vonnegut resists the very idea of authenticity associated with American social and political discourses and in the process even questions the conventional ethos associated with the American dream. It is an incisive study of felonies and misdemeanors of American administration and officials carried out during the twentieth century. Being a self-consciously righteous person, Vonnegut also attempts to reconstruct history in order to highlight the acquisitive nature of American society and administrators that has been brushed aside or inadequately represented in the official discussions of American history. Vonnegut highlights/foregrounds what is usually back grounded in the traditional/official discourses of history. Vonnegut revisits the history of American labour movement and exposes its weaknesses, looks incisively at the American political system and at the American capitalism and communism. While the novel is a memoir of bureaucrat Walter F. Starbuck, a minor conspirator in the Watergate scandal and primarily recounts the first two days after his imprisonment, the novel is a subjective and compelling account of the most appalling periods of twentieth century America viz. the 1920s and the Great Depression, the 1950s and the practice of McCarthyism, the 1970s and the Watergate scandal. Vonnegut also casts a glance on the Pullman strike, the internal ailments during the Second World War and the Radium poisoning incident. Readers of the novel do not have to proceed very far to encounter classic examples of historiographic metafiction. Although the novel proper begins with the first chapter, the novel's epigraph delineates that while retaining its fictional space, Vonnegut situates the novel well within the historical discourse. Klinkowitz aptly analyzes:

> *Slapstick* and *Jailbird* feature a great deal of . . . tinkering, futuristic and historical. Their protagonists are tinkerers. . . . But in each novel there is another tinkerer involved, and that's the author, Kurt Vonnegut. . . . (72)

In the prologue Vonnegut audaciously reveals his contemptuousness of the FBI for killing John Dillinger. Dillinger was an infamous bank robber during the early twentieth century in America, who most likely had faced the brunt of the Great Depression before resorting to burglary. He had infamously fled from the jail in Indiana that was deemed escape proof. Vonnegut narrates:

> Crown Point is notorious for a jailbreak there by the bank robber John Dillinger, during the depths of the Great Depression. Dillinger escaped by threatening his jailor with a pistol made of soap and shoe polish. His jailor was a woman. God rest his soul, and her soul, too. . . . Dillinger was the Robin Hood of my early youth. . . . Dillinger was summarily executed by agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. He was shot down at a public place, although he was not trying to escape or resist arrest. (7)

However, *The New York Times* report of 23rd July 1934 read:

> John Dillinger, America's Public Enemy No. 1 and the most notorious criminal of recent times, was shot and killed at 10:40 o'clock tonight by Federal agents. . . . According to Melvin H. Purvis, chief of the investigating forces of the Department of Justice in Chicago . . . Dillinger attempted to put up a fight. 'He saw me give a signal to my men to close in,' Chief Purvis said. 'He became alarmed and reached into a belt and was drawing the .38-callibre pistol. . .'

While the FBI claimed that Dillinger was armed, Vonnegut disputes the heroics and credibility of the organization. Vonnegut also contests the notoriousness and much hyped crookedness of John Dillinger by depicting him in a more favourable light. Simultaneously, while historical accounts state that he used whittled wooden gun for the prison break, Vonnegut replaces it with a more amusing account of pistol made of soap and shoe polish. Vonnegut further conjoins self-reflexive, autobiographical and historical narrative in an unprecedented way. He writes:

> In it [the novel] is a . . . character, 'Kennth Whistler', inspired by an Indianapolis man of my father's generation. The inspirer's name was Powers Hapgood. He is sometimes mentioned in histories of American labour for his deeds of derring-do in strikes and at the protests about the executions of Sacco and Vanzetti, and so on. (8)

In the first chapter, the protagonist Walter F. Starbuck in an eclectic mixture of history and fiction lists his personal details. He mentions Harvard university as his alma mater, his service in the U.S. Federal government and his employment in the Nixon White House that later sent him to prison for his "preposterous contributions to the American political scandals collectively known as the Watergate" (37). Walter has a poor lineage, he is the son of a cook and a chauffeur who worked in Daniel McCone's mansion. Daniel McCone is the owner of the fictional Cuyahoga Bridge and Iron Company who terminates the employees as they assemble for a wildcat strike after their remunerations are reduced. Vonnegut deftly makes the reader aware of the quasi-historical

www.tjells.com

representation of the incident and draws attention to the work as a self-reflexive artifact:

> There is mentioned in this book a violent confrontation between strikers and police and soldiers called the Cuyahoga Massacre. It is an invention, a mosaic composed of bits taken from tales of many such riots in not such olden times. (17)

Vonnegut dates the strike back to October 1894, however one can find strong parallels between the Cuyahoga Massacre and the Pullman strike organized by the labourers in America in the same year which was the outcome of the "financial panic of 1893" and precipitated a "full-blown depression lasting five years" (Scheirov et al. 3). The Pullman Company enforced cuts in wages of the factory workers to compensate the reduced revenues of the company. Pullman and other companies were backed by the then U.S. President Grover Cleveland and the federal troops worked hand-in-glove with the companies to quash the strikes. However, rather than eulogizing the militia men as "skilled and trained to serve community and state" as the U.S. National Guard website portrays them, Vonnegut plays down and humorously ridicules their potential:

> They were farm boys from the southern part of the state, selected because they had no friends or relatives among the strikers. . . . They represented an American ideal: healthy, cheerful citizen soldiers, who went about their ordinary business until their country suddenly needed an awesome display of weapons and discipline. . . . They were supposed to appear as though from nowhere, to the consternation of America's enemies. When the trouble was over, they would vanish again. They were brought on special train. . . . They straggled out of the cars onto a loading platform as though they were ordinary passengers on various errands. Their uniforms were only partly buttoned, and often mis-buttoned. . . . Several had lost their hats. Almost all carried laughably unmilitary suitcases and parcels. (22)

While the company imposed cuts in inadequate wages of the workers, Vonnegut indicates that conversely the possessions of the company owner were not just immense but unaccounted for. Alexander McCone when questioned by Walter as to what had made him join his father's [Daniel McCone's] factory after returning from Harvard responds:

> I then believed that a rich man should have some understanding of the place from where his riches came. That was very juvenile of me. Great wealth should be accepted unquestioningly or not at all. (19)

Vonnegut simultaneously sheds light on other dark phases of labour struggles. As there were no unions, some companies functioned as self-proclaimed labour unions. However, these companies

on the contrary worked to procure cheapest labour for the corporations. They thus corrupted what was considered as a noble undertaking and strengthened the corporate monopoly. Vonnegut aptly retains the historical year 1894 to depict how it is linked to the subjugation of workers. While the year does not figure in official details as the year of Pullman strike and the subsequent 30 deaths of the workers, it is conventionally passed off as a year when the previous measures to appease the demand of the Labour Day obtained a federal status. *The Bridgeman's Magazine* published:

> Officials sought congregational legislation to make Labor Day a legal national holiday, in conformity with the resolution of the 1884 convention. The bill became a law ten years later. It passed Congress on June 28, 1894. (444)

However, the readers of the novel can deem the day to be the result of the consequent political compulsion, an election year priority, rather than an attempt to mitigate the sociopathic indifference meted out to the labour class. Vonnegut further conjoins the historical and the fictional narrative by depicting how out of quality American corporate world resulted in death of Mary Kathleen O'Looney, a fictional character in the novel. She contracts radium poisoning while working for Wyatt Clock Company that had resulted in numerous tragic deaths around 1925 in America thus foregrounding the apathy and inefficiency of the U.S. Department of Labour. Vonnegut also voices resentment over the injustice meted out to Sacco and Vanzetti, the two anarchists who were electrocuted over false allegations of two unresolved murders in 1927. Vonnegut terms it as "the most spectacular, most acrimoniously argued miscarriages of justice in American history" (17). Vanzetti was also accused of robbery. Vonnegut states:

> Was Vanzetti guilty of this lesser crime? Possibly so, but it did not matter much. . . . The judge who tried the case said it did not matter much. He was Webster Thayer. . . . He told the jury, 'This man, although he may not have actually committed the crime attributed to him, is nevertheless morally culpable, because he is the enemy of our existing institutions.'(183)

They are hence depicted as victims of class verdict and red scare. Vonnegut treats the case as a paradigm of "radical activism" rather than a trial after determination of "guilt or innocence of convicted men" (Farrell 209). Vonnegut portrays a thought-provoking collage of history and fiction through the ruminations of Walter, the protagonist. While, there was a political consensus in America that "the nation [America] harnessed its industrial might and entrepreneurial ability into the greatest military machine ever known, and that effort resulted in victory in all theatres of battle" (Winkler 54), Vonnegut dissipates this by depicting concomitant insecurity that loomed

www.tjells.com

large in America. The cognizance of predicaments had fallen wayside due to an all pervasive political rhetoric. Walter makes the reader aware of the sense of grinding poverty, unease and hysteria that the young generation of America grappled with during the Second World War and the Great Depression and the period in-between:

> College boys . . . who with a Great Depression going on and with a Second World War coming . . . had reasons to be petrified of all the things that women of that time would expect of them. Women would expect them to earn good money after they graduated, and they did not see how they could do that with all the businesses shutting down. Women would expect them to be brave soldiers, and there seemed every chance that they would go to pieces when the shrapnel and the bullets flew. . . . There would be flame throwers and poison gas. There would be terrific bangs. The man standing beside you could have his head blown off and his throat would be a fountain. (44)

The description is emblematic of the internally troubled state of affairs as a consequence of the US external policies. While president Roosevelt "in a speech to congress early in 1941 . . . spoke of the 'four essential freedoms': freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear" (Winkler 55), Vonnegut dissipates this by depicting a sense of concomitant insecurity that loomed large in America. Although a "poll in 1937 revealed that 94 per cent of Americans favoured a policy aimed at keeping the country out of foreign wars" (Willett, White 240), this consensus had gradually fallen wayside due to an all-pervasive administrative rhetoric. Walter recounts his experience as a civilian employee of the Defense Department in Germany after the war. Walter terms it as "a war for natural wealth and markets" (47) which resulted in unparalleled "wreckage" (51) abroad. While the American government romanticized war, Walter notices the entrenched divide of racial segregation among the American military personnel and trespassing of customary notions of military discipline in Germany:

> The street was . . . blocked by rubble here and there. It was being cleared by German prisoners of war, who laboured, as it happened under smoldering gazes of black American military policemen. The American Army was still segregated those days. Every unit was either black or white, except for the officers, who were usually white in any case. (51-52)

The readers can also behold the economic expansion that followed the Second World War through a critical lens. While the website of the U.S. Department of State expounds that the "pent-up consumer demand fueled exceptionally strong economic growth in the post war period",

Walter is highly skeptical about the ways and means that brought about abrupt proliferation of wealth:

> I am now moved to suppose, with my primitive understanding of economics that every government is of necessity a Ponzi scheme. . . . How else am I to explain . . . what United States was like in the nineteen-thirties, when its owners and politicians could not find ways for so many people to earn the most basic necessities, like food and clothes and fuel. It was pure hell to get shoes! And then suddenly there were formerly poor people in officers club, beautifully costumed and ordering fillets mignon and champagne. . . . A man who two years before had patched the holes in his shoes with cardboard suddenly had a jeep or truck or an airplane or a boat, and unlimited supplies of fuel and ammunition. He was . . . immunized against every imaginable disease. No matter where he was on the planet earth a way was found to get hot turkey and cranberry sauce to him on Thanksgiving and Christmas. What had happened? What could have happened but a Ponzi scheme? (77)

Walter holds the position of President's special advisor on youth affairs during the Nixon's tenure. The novel counters the notion that Nixon won the elections by wooing voters for restoration of law and order or by popularizing the phrase "silent majority". On the other hand, it posits that Nixon cashed upon the anti-communist sentiments that were running high in America during the twentieth century. Through the fictional communist character of Leland Clewes, Walter disputes the presidential selection and competence of Nixon:

> He [Nixon] would almost certainly never have become President, of course, if he had not become a national figure as the discoverer and hounder of the mendacious Leland Clewes. (74)

Watergate scandal transpired to be a watershed in American political history and Walter critiques not only the illegal espionage but the modus operandi of the Nixon administration as well:

> When I was Richard M. Nixon's special advisor on youth affairs . . . nobody ever asked me for facts or opinions or anything. I need not even have to come to work. . . . (47)

Walter later holds the position of vice president in a corporation before being again jailed for unlawfully concealing a will but as Farrell states he seems to be "the victim of large forces beyond his control" (211). In the novel, Vonnegut pays attention to period details, blends it with fiction and uses his astute subjective perspective yielding a richer representation. He also counters models of linear history and goes back and forth in time. He uses intertextuality and self-

www.tjells.com

reflexivity extensively that further obscure the barriers between history and fiction. Walter's escapades in the past are primarily driven towards analyzing how dynamics of power have functioned in history and might hence function in the contemporary world. *Jailbird* can hence be deemed to be a quintessential example of Historiographic metafiction as it flouts the shackles of history and flaunts its unfettered narrative capacity.

Works Cited

"Dillinger Slain in Chicago." *New York Times* 23 July 1934, late city ed.:1. Web. 5 Apr. 2017.

Farrell, Susan. *Critical Companion to Kurt Vonnegut: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*. New York: Facts on File, 2008. Print.

Hania, Rabeb Bin. "The Historiographic Metafictional Writing of Power and the Power of Writing Historiographic Metafiction in Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49." Proc. of International Conference on Power and Counter-power, Tunis, Tunisia. Research Gate, Apr. 2014. Web. 17 Apr. 2017.

"History of the Labor Day." *The Bridgeman's Magazine* Jan 1921: 444. *Hathi Trust Digital Library*. Web. 8 April 2017.

Hutcheon, Linda. "Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History."*Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*. Eds. Patrick O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989. 3-32. Print.

Klinkowitz, Jerome. *Kurt Vonnegut's America*. 2009. United States: University of South Carolina Press, 2010. Print.

Schneirov, Richard, et al. Introduction. *The Pullman Strike and the Crisis of the 1890s: Essays on Labor and Politics*. Eds. Schneirov et al. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999. 1-19. Print.

"The Fighting Foundation of the Guard." *Infantry | National Guard*. N.p., n.d. Web 15 Apr. 2017.

"The U.S. Economy: A Brief Overview." *Outline of the U.S. Economy*. U.S. Department of State, n.d. Web. 16 Apr. 2017.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Jailbird*. 1979. Great Britain: Granada Publishing Limited, 1981. Print.

Willett, Ralph, and John White. "The Thirties." *Introduction to American Studies*. Eds. Malcolm Bradbury and Howard Temperley. London: Longman, 1981. 220-242. Print.

Winkler, Allan M. "1942-1950." *A Companion to 20th-century America*. Ed. Stephen J. Whitfield. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007. 54-70. Print.

****