

COMMUNICATION WITHIN FRAGMENTATION IN KURT VONNEGUT'S "GALAPAGOS"

S. Priyadarshini

Assistant Prof. in English, VELS University, Chennai

Abstract

Galapagos is Kurt Vonnegut's eleventh novel which eventually marks a return to science fiction for the first time since *Slaughterhouse-Five*. One million years in the far future, the ghost of Leon Trout, son of hack writer Kilgore Trout, looks back at a key moment in human history: preparation in 1986 for the "Nature Cruise of the Century" from mainland of Ecuador to the Galapagos islands. It is a voyage coinciding with a worldwide apocalypse that will prevent humanity from reproducing. Amidst the increasing chaos in Ecuador, those planning to go on the cruise cope with calamities before finally managing to embark. With cruise participants representing humanity's final hope for survival, Mary Hepburn plays the role of Godmother by taking the Captain's sperm and inseminating other females on board. Over the next million years, humans on the Galapagos islands undergo evolution, growing furry skin and flippers to aid in fishing for food and gradually losing their intelligence. Finally, Leon Trout decides to stop lingering on Earth and goes onto the next world, leaving humanity behind.

Introduction

Through the novel, '*Galapagos*' Vonnegut wishes to convey adaptation is the best possible way to survive. He has also stressed that human intelligence is the only reason for all the calamities. According to him, intelligence without adaptation is vain. This is illustrated in the novel when the Captain throws the Mandarax into the ocean. Vonnegut wants to communicate all these messages to the reader. He has succeeded in his communication by making a ghost narrator to narrate the plight of human beings for a million years. Vonnegut himself explains the reason for which he came with the ghost narrative in the following lines: "I had the technical problem of point of view. The problem was who's going to watch for a million years? A difficulty with writing novels is that the reader inevitably is going to ask, who's telling this? You wish he wouldn't but he does." (Allen 152)

Indeed, Vonnegut's selection of ghost narrator for *Galapagos* is right. Through Leon Trout, Vonnegut successfully voices out all his opinions. Leon as a narrator is fully useful in the structure of the novel. As he is a ghost, the flash backs and the foreshadings are easily dealt about. He moves freely within the story and even sometimes enters into the mind of the characters in the story. This

narrative style establishes a tune to the novel but at the same time the method of narration brings fragmentation also into the novel. *Galapagos* comprises two narratives: Leon's story which gives a detailed record of human history in Santa Rosalia, and Leon's history which gives a brief account of his life. These narratives are often broken by the introduction of the characters who are about to set sail in the cruise. The frame of Leon's history is broken by the initiation of another frame that comprises of the characters which is broken very soon by another frame which tells the story of Leon Trout. Thus, no frame is complete in *Galapagos*. The requirement of wholeness: a beginning, a middle and an end, is lacking in the novel *Galapagos*.

Vonnegut seems unable to decide whether to pursue Leon's story, a central event of which was his participation in a massacre of civilians in the Vietnam War, or simply to have him function as an observer of the human history. This vacillation of Vonnegut brings fragmentation in the novel. In spite of this fragmentation, Vonnegut is able to communicate his message: the futility of the War, and adaptation for survival, through the technique of metanarrative which is adapted by the narrator ghost in the novel.

David Lodge has defined metafiction in the very first line of his chapter "Metafiction" in his prominent book *The Art of Fiction*. According to him, metafiction is "fiction about fiction: novels and stories that call attention to their fictional status and their own compositional procedures" (206). By telling a fiction about fiction, *Galapagos* becomes a metafiction. As the narration is by a ghost, it reminds the reader of the novel's fictional status. Therefore, the narrative in *Galapagos* is metanarrative. Emile Benveniste has distinguished two orders of language use that can bear on narrative discourse: *historie* and *discourse*. *Historie* stands for historical utterance characterizing past events, without any intervention of the speaker. Everything will be impersonal and the present moment of utterance will be completely excluded. A *discourse* is always in present tense- the present moment of utterance. In a simplified form, *historie* is always used to describe events in chronological order while *discourse* brings the 'meta' level of language.

Vonnegut notably combines the two forms to bring out the messages in *Galapagos* in a best way as John Fowles did in his popular novel, *The French Lieutenant Woman* while describing the Toby Jug. The narrator ghost in *Galapagos* has both *historie* and *discourse* of its own. The *historie* is the personal story of Leon Trout. He is the son of Kilgore Trout, an eccentric writer of science fiction. Leon is also a Vietnam Veteran and deserter from the United States Marines who was granted political asylum in Sweden. There, he relates, "I became a welder in a shipyard,...I was painlessly decapitated one day by a falling sheet of steel while working...the Bahia de Darwin"(Vonnegut 219), the vessel that would take the first settlers to Santa Rosalia. While narrating the *historie*, Leon Trout describes his traumatic episode in Vietnam. In Vietnam, he shoots a Vietnamese grandmother who had killed his best friend with a hand grenade. After he shot the Vietnamese woman, he rejected his life as "a meaningless nightmare," wishing he were "a stone at the service of the Natural Order" (G 127). This shows the futility of War. Futility of War is one important aspect which Vonnegut wishes to focus in all of his novels. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he has declared that he is not going to glorify the War, "...If I ever do finish it, [the book]

though, I give you my word of honor: there won't be a part for Frank Sinatra or John Wayne." (SHF 11). The *historie* part of Leon Trout comes to an end when Leon confronts the spirit of his father, who urges him to give up his ghostly existence on Earth and enter the "blue tunnel" leading to afterlife.

The *discourse* part of Leon Trout is his narration of the story of action and the characters involved in it. Metafictional *discourse* in traditional novels occurs in "the form of asides, describing character and action" (Lodge 207). Similarly, in *Galapagos*, *discourse* consist of the journey on "Nature Cruise of the Century" and the characters who undertake the voyage. Through the *discourse* of Leon Trout, Vonnegut brings out the (d)evolution of human beings by emphasizing adaptation for survival. Vonnegut, through his narrator has also emphasized the fruitlessness of intelligence and big brains of humans. The *discourse* recounts the intricate coincidences whereby ten people end upon Santa Rosalia, one of the Galapagos islands, after a global financial crisis has crippled the world's economy. Shortly, thereafter the insidious virus ends the human race, not in the usual apocalyptic style; but by bringing a disease that renders infertility to the human beings. A million years later, their descendants, the only fertile humans left on the planet, eventually have evolved to have fur, flipper and streamlined heads like seals. The evolution of human beings with flipper and fur are the result of adapting to existence on a barren rock with fish as principal source of food. Thus, Vonnegut emphasizes the need of adaptation for survival through the *discourse* mode of ghost narration.

On intersecting the *historie* and the *discourse* of the novel, it is not very hard for the reader to trace out the messages Vonnegut wishes to convey. He wants to bring out the futility of War and fruitlessness of intelligence. He also wants to enforce the fact that adaptation is the only possible way for survival. The devastation and destruction caused by the War is due to the big brain of human beings. It is only these big brains that make the nature to adapt human beings rather than human beings adapting to the environment which eventually lead to devolution and degradation of human kind. Thereupon, Leon Trout functions both as the reporter of the event and also as an

unequivocal critic of contemporary society. Thus, Vonnegut gives his messages through metanarrative in spite of the fragmentation in the novel.

Even though, one frame in the story is broken by the initiation of another frame, it is obvious that all the frames are muted in order to communicate the message of the writer. Though the story of Leon Trout, his opinions and prolepsis fragments the action that takes place in Santa Rosalia, Vonnegut does not intend to make fragmentation though it appears to be so. Rather Vonnegut wishes to keep the reader within the framework of the messages he wishes to communicate. His historie always ends with a note on futility of War while his discourse always has a contempt for human brain. The broken frames or the fragmentation in *Galapagos* works as Goffman puts it, "...the continuity and viability of the established frame. Indeed the disattend track specifically permits the occurrence of many out-of-frame acts, provided only that they are 'properly' muted, that is, within the disattend capacity of the frame" (qtd.in Waugh 31). Thus, the metanarrative in *Galapagos* helps Vonnegut to communicate within the fragmentation.

Roman Jakobson demands six elements for a successful communication,

The ADDRESSER (sender) sends a MESSAGE to the ADDRESSEE (receiver). To be operative the message requires a CONTEXT referred to (The "referent" in another, somewhat ambiguous, nomenclature), graspable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized; a CODE fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and addressee (or in other words, to the encoder and decoder of the message); and, finally, a CONTACT, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication.(1260)

The addresser in the novel is Leon Trout. It is not sure whether Leon Trout is a ghost or he is a madman imagining himself to be a ghost. So, the addresser in the novel is not very obvious. The next element that is required according to Jakobson is addressee. Since addresser himself is not very clear about his status addressee shall also be dismissed. The next element is the context, that is,

the referent. The referent sometimes refers to the past, sometimes to the present and many a times to the future. Therefore, the context is also multiple. The code is the next element. The novel takes the readers to the fantasy world, though not entirely. The narrator often talks about blue tunnel and afterlife which is beyond the human comprehension. Thus, the code can also be repudiated. The next element is contact, through which a psychological connection is made between the addresser and addressee. Since all other elements of Jakobson are dismissed in the novel there is all possibility to dismiss this element, too. But the message is successfully communicated in the novel without these six elements. In each fragmentation of the novel a complete message has been stressed.

Conclusion

Thus, with the historie of Leon, he is not quite satisfied while in the discourse, he raises an optimistic hope by making Santa Rosalia a Utopia. As its positive result communication in *Galapagos* is made successful only with tuning its structure with fragmentation.

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