

**Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, a fictional framework of Posthumanism: The interdependent similarities between novel and the theory.**

J.X.Herbert,  
PhD Research Scholar, Bharathidasan University,  
Bishop Heber College, Tiruchirappalli-17  
[herbert.xavier7@gmail.com](mailto:herbert.xavier7@gmail.com)

and

Dr. Suresh Frederick,  
Associate Professor and UG Head,  
Department of English,  
Bishop Heber College, Trichy-17.  
[sfheber@gmail.com](mailto:sfheber@gmail.com)

**Abstract**

This paper is a close reading on Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* and its relevant ideas that are comparable to posthumanism. Posthumanism is an anthropocentric theory, a theory focusing on the future life of humans in a philosophical and scientific standpoint. The prime idea of posthumanism is to use science as an instrument to enhance and comfort the human species also by removing some of their self-made conventions. The novel, *Cat's Cradle* similarly deals with science influencing and affecting human life. Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* narrates the story of an apocalyptic event created by the mishandling of science by a scientist. Kurt Vonnegut's apocalyptic fiction is narrated by John, a novice novelist traveling for reliable information about the bomb blast in Hiroshima. The journey of John takes him to visit San Lorenzo Island and Felix Hoenikker's hidden scientific invention that disrupts the entire human life. This paper highlights every common aspect that connect the novel *Cat's Cradle* with the posthumanism theory.

**Key words: Posthumanism, Bokononism, War, Hiroshima, Atom bomb.**

Posthumanism is an emerging theory formulated at the end of 1990's and began evolving in the early 2000's. Posthumanism gives importance to humanity with the help of technology i.e. using

technology as a tool for the change of the humanity in the world. Posthumanism is the redefinition of human beings in the world as enhanced beings, thus it is a human centered approach that eliminates the dominance of human beings. Posthumanism, as a theory was first centered in the works of N.Katherine Hayles, Cary Wolfe, Neil Badmington and Elaine L. Graham. Francis Fukuyama's *Our Postmodern Future* has been a main reason for the attention and reception of the theory. Francis Fukuyama expounds on the "importance of new biotechnologies for a return of to the debate on eugenics opened up a more general philosophical and political discussions" (Herbrechter 6).

Later, Francesca Ferrando, a Posthuman philosopher has explored and re-defined Posthumanism with more specificity. Francesca Ferrando has categorized Posthumanist theory into seven attributes which are: 1) Anti-humanism 2) Cultural posthumanism 3) Philosophical Posthumanism 4) Post human condition 5) Trans-humanism 6) AI takeover 7) Voluntary Human extinction. Altogether Posthumanism's vital focus is on science especially on bio-, nano-, digital and information technologies.

Posthumanism's importance on the relationship between technology and human beings opposes dualistic, binary relativity as such factors have been a disintegrating factor among human beings; human as an individual dominant and unaware of their future. Post humanism insists on the unity of the human which is possible by technological usage and discoveries that enable the expansion of human existence. This excludes the distinction among human beings as they become a by-product of science which eliminate the inheritance of human's distinction and domination in terms of sex, religion, race, etc and enables a harmonic living of human beings in the world with them and all other living beings. Thus it is the relationship between humans and science technology for the betterment of human life. i.e., "the role of technology in the development" (Ferrando 6).

The theory of Posthumanism is present in many works of Literature before Posthumanism was formulated as a solid theory. There are abundant works possessing indirect, partial references or

thinking in a Posthumanist notion as those works had the elements and ideas of Posthumanism as their themes; like science, dualistic opposition, skepticism, de-centering of human beings, apocalypse, etc. Kurt Vonnegut's novels are one among such works questioning and raising questions on the earthly life and its meaninglessness especially in some deeds like science, war, anarchy, chaos, paranoia, religion, etc. Kurt Vonnegut is mainly distinctive for his imaginary creativity born out of his personal life. In his every work he creates a new fiction which has drawn his attention in the real world and that triggered his wonder and skepticism often. In *Cat's Cradle*, Kurt Vonnegut's creativity collides with the theory of Posthumanism especially by the fictional religion called "Bokononism". Bokononism is a religion which rejects all the formal religious beliefs; it is a religion centered on "man". "I passed quickly over the warning on the title page of The First Book: Don't be a fool! Close this book at once! It is nothing but foma! Foma, of course, are lies" (Vonnegut 190).

Kurt Vonnegut is an atheist who finds religion and human beliefs as fallacies which are sprinkled and had made the world blindfolded. This is reflected in the personal life of Vonnegut and is extended to his novels. The Fourteenth Book is entitled, "What Can a Thoughtful Man Hope for Mankind on Earth, Given the Experience of the Past Million Years?" It doesn't take long to read The Fourteenth Book. It consists of one word and a period. This is it: "Nothing"(Vonnegut 175).

In *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut's creative fiction states the human beings are created by God and the human beings have created their structure which is the cultural, traditional, religious, moral code which is ill-constructed and has to be deprived so that human beings can live in peace by a free form of living. "At another point in *The Books of Bokkonon* , he tells, 'Man created the checkerboard; God created the karass'. By that he means that a karass ignores national, institutional, occupational, familial, and class boundaries. It is as free-form as an amoeba" (Vonnegut, 2). The philosophies of Bokkononism and Posthumanism propose on embracing human integration by eliminating distinctions. Francesca Ferrando in her philosophy of Posthumanism stresses such spotlight by

referencing Vandhana Siva's environmental activism *Monocultures of the Mind* which has the same insisting of unity which can be created by monocultures from the human mind.

The main threat to living with diversity comes from the habit of thinking in terms of monocultures; from what I have called 'Monocultures of the Mind'. Monocultures of the mind make diversity disappear from perception, and consequently from the world. The disappearance of diversity is also a disappearance of alternatives .... Alternatives exist, but are excluded. Their inclusion requires a context of diversity. Shifting to diversity as a mode of thought, a context of action, allows multiple choices to emerge. (Shiva 5)

Kurt Vonnegut exposes the cultural segregation in a particular incident that equality, unity among the diverse beings is found to be just a saying. "'Likes and dislikes have nothing to do with it,' says Bokonon--an easy warning to forget" (Vonnegut 15). He displays the human relation biased and preferred on the basis of his heritage by an incident where John travelling in a plane to the Island of San Lorenzo meets Hazel Crosby. Hazel gets easily connected with John as he descends from a "Hoosier" family like her.

She grasped me firmly by the arm. "We Hoosiers got to stick together."

"Right."

"You call me 'Mom.'"

"What?"

"Whenever I meet a young Hoosier, I tell them, 'You call me Mom.'"

"Uh huh."

"Let me hear you say it," she urged.

"Mom?"

She smiled. (Vonnegut 64)

John's family name and its heritage is an elaborate incident pertains to be intentional by Kurt Vonnegut merges with the Posthumanist essence of the novel.

Posthumanism not only stretches any universe-centric perspective, but it “materializes the dissolution of strict binaries, dualistic modes and exclusivist approaches” (Ferrando 18).

Discrimination among human beings prevails in terms of caste, class, sex, social status, integrated lifestyle and peer unified living rather than dominance and differentiation among human beings.

Every major woman character in *Cat's Cradle* is exposed facing a domination or rejection by their own family and society. Angela Hoenikker, Felix's Hoenikker's daughter represent the voluntary submission of women; woman being bound to serve her family by sacrificing her happiness and future for the wellness of her family. Felix's daughter Angela acts as a mother figure serving and protecting the domestic life of Felix and her younger brothers Frank and Newton. “She was a mother to Frank and me, because our real mother died when I was born” (Vonnegut 11).

Angela Hoenikker sacrifices her role from the society by staying in her home caring and fulfilling the needs of her family, which every woman are held responsible; to act as a domestic being managing the domestic needs of their family. Likewise Angela isolates herself inside the house for the successful career of her and the future of her brothers. Her only happiness is playing an old game of string called Cat's Cradle which is a lone act; Angela alienates while playing the cat's cradle as it is a game involving more than one person, this act can be seen as a replica of women isolated losing their worldly pleasures and roles for the betterment of the family. In *Cat's Cradle* women characters holding major recognition are portrayed to be controlled and neglected, women are used as mere objects having no independence, no right to decision. This is very much evident in the character of Mona. Mona, daughter of Papa Monazo is used as an inheritance to rule the island, the freedom of right is controlled by the fictional religion which opposes human beliefs and focuses on man.

“Well, if you're going to be President, I think you really ought to marry Mona. But you don't have to, if you don't want to. You're the boss.”

“She would have me?”

“If she'd have me, she'd have you. All you have to do is ask her.”

“Why should she say yes?”

“It's predicted in The Books of Bokonon that she'll marry the next President of San Lorenzo,”  
said Frank. (Vonnegut 144)

Mona is found bounded to the words of Frank after giving her hand to marry him. Mona is submissive to every man she woos. Mona being engaged to Frank agrees to marry John as Frank is not interested in marrying her. Frank is ambitious to achieve his father's feat by employing himself in new scientific technologies whereas Mona exchanged as an object or an asset to rule San Lorenzo.

“I love you.” She said it simply.

“What a fool Frank was!”

“Oh?”

“To give you up.”

“He did not love me. He was going to marry me only because 'Papa' wanted him to. He loves another.”

“Who?”

“A woman he knew in Ilium.”

The lucky woman had to be the wife of the owner of Jack's Hobby Shop. “He told you?”

“Tonight, when he freed me to marry you.” (Vonnegut 148)

The female characters of “*Cat's Cradle*” are found having no future unlike every male characters in a pursuit of achievement; John's exploration for his carrier as a debutant novelist, Frank striving become a successful prodigy of Fank Hoenikker. Thus Subjugation of women's freedom and rights is portrayed to be inevitable in the present society. “Posthumanism, after all, is aware of the fact that hierarchical humanistic presumptions cannot be easily dismissed or erased” (Ferrando 15). Posthumanism is appreciated for the rejection of authority or hegemony by man on himself but it doesn't assure its remedy on the dominance of human beings. At the same time Posthumanism has

no control over the proper usage and the aftermath of technology as it depends on the usage of human beings.

... posthuman cannot be accounted only in relation to the human or to technology, but it should be engaged *per se*. Posthumanism is an onto-epistemological approach, as well as an ethical one, generated as a philosophy of mediation which discharges any confrontational dualisms, as well as any hierarchical legacies. Posthuman cannot be accounted only in relation to the human or to technology, but it should be engaged. (Ferrando 23)

*Cat's Cradle* has been a coincidental merge of Posthumanism as Kurt Vonnegut uses the branch of science which has been flourishing during the 20<sup>th</sup> century for the development and comfort of human life to be a disastrous under the wrong hands. This is used as one of his themes in his other novels *The Slaughter house-Five*, *The Sirens of the Titans* and *Player Piano* which expose the paranoia of the contemporary society in the developing society born out of the chaotic human condition.

Kurt Vonnegut offers contemporary readers universal considerations of the complexities inherent in the human condition (his persistent wrestling with free will, for example), and his works create numerous alternate universes that are essentially mirrors of our real world, focusing often on humans creating our own suffering because of our habitual weaknesses as humans. *Cat's Cradle*, for example, uncovers the frailties of the human heart within the family unit, and it examines a grand and sweeping exploration of humanity's ability to destroy ourselves permanently because of our enormous brains. (Simmons 28)

To conclude, Kurt Vonnegut in *Cat's Cradle* portrays the tampering of science could abolish the entire human race, but he paves hope towards the end with a new start, a new living by beginning it all again. This technique differs Vonnegut from being a usual contemporary writer with his unique portrayal of an issue drawn from the real world has a solution or hope which might not be realistic but is accepted to be possible in the upcoming days.

**Works Cited**

Ferrando, Francesca. *The Posthuman: Philosophical Posthumanism and Its Others*. Diss. Università di Roma Tre, 2013. Print.

Herbrechter, Stefan. *Posthumanism – A Critical Analysis*. New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2013. Pdf

Shiva, Vandana. *Monocultures of Mind*. UK: Zed Books, 1993. Print.

Simmons, David Ed. *New Critical Essays on Kurt Vonnegut*. New York: Macmillan, 2009. Pdf

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Cat's Cradle*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2008. Print.