



Fantasy: An Alternative World to the World of Reality in Kurt Vonnegut's *Galapagos*

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ABSTRACT

Fantasy is not absolutely the connotative association of something that is deviated from the reality. It is the negation of reality and not the opposite. It stands between the phase of reality and the phase of unreality. Fantasy is used with the purpose of bringing the reality that lays hidden under the veil of unreality. Vonnegut has used two fantastical elements that state the formula of survival: Natural Selection and Ghost narrator. Vonnegut uses the concept of Natural Selection which stands as a foil to Darwin's Theory of Evolution to bring out the reality that the world ought to be. His Narrator stands as a pinnacle of fantasy as he has called a ghost to narrate a story that will happen a million years later.

Fantasy is the most seductive subject both in literature and in others. Fantasy cannot be explained like any other terms in literature. Its connotative association with imagination and desire, indeed, has really made it a difficult area to explain and interpret. The word "Fantastic" is derived from Latin "phantasticus" which refers to all imaginary activities. Given such a scope, it has proved difficult to develop an adequate definition of fantasy as a literary kind. As a critical term, fantasy has been applied rather indiscriminately to any literature which does not give priority to realistic representation: myths, legends, folks and fairy tales. According to M. H. Abrams, fantasy literature is "deliberately designed by the author to leave the reader in a state of uncertainty whether the events are to be explained by reference to natural causes or to super natural causes" (237). The definition given by Abrams is very apt as it helps to explain the actual cause for the undefinable nature of fantasy. The fantasy in literature traces something which is very much unseen and unsaid in any work when it is read apparently. Fantasy literature, generally, refuse to observe the unities of time, place and action. The characters slide away from the chronological move of the story and the story fails to give a definite demarcation between animate and inanimate object. All these definite characteristic traits of fantasy literature make it an unexplicable subject to throw light on.

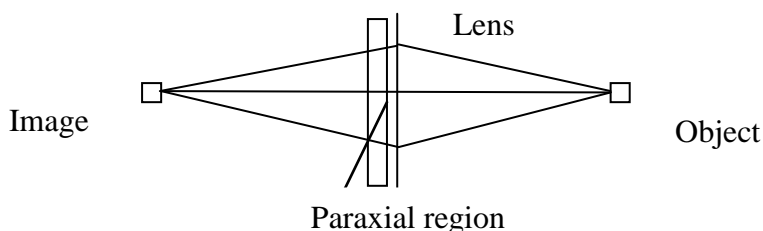
Fantasy is unfit for denotative definition but it is generally associated with something that seems to be unreal. It is always claimed that the literature of fantasy transcends reality, escapes the human condition and constructs the alternate world. But this connotative meaning of fantasy in association with unreality and alternative world should be discarded because the world of fantasy is neither unreal nor a secondary world which is alternate to the real world of human beings. Thus, "fantasy is not to do with inventing another non-human world: it is not transcendental. It has to do with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and *apparently* 'new', absolutely 'other' and different." (Jackson 8)

The ultimate aim and purpose of fantasy and realism are not very much different in literature. The realistic fiction is written to give the effect that it represents life and the social world as it seems to the common reader, evoking a feeling that its characters might exist. Fantasy literature also

achieves the same end by representing ordinary events and details together with fantastic and dream like element. “The fantastic circumstances can be viewed as an economical and effective means of revealing characters’ interests and emotions which would be disguised or modified in surroundings well ordered by comfort or customs” (Apter 1). From Apter’s words, it is obvious that fantastic circumstances bring out the real emotions and feelings of the characters that are often under cover in the normal atmosphere. A realistic plot also attempts to bring the real interest of the character. In this way the fantastic literature have the same purpose of realist’s plot of bringing the real interest of the character. For example, when GregorSamsa in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (1915) wakes to find himself transformed into a gigantic insect, his behaviour and his family’s subsequent behaviour reveals a great deal about Gregor’s pre-insectile state. Thus, Kafka successfully brings out the character’s real but hidden interest through implausible premise.

Fantasy in literature is used by the author for various purposes, which must be understood not as an escape from reality but as an investigation of it. The fantasy that is used in modern and postmodern fiction is entirely different from the fairy tale, myth or saga. The fairy tales, myth and sagas are enacted in a world separated from the mundane world spatially and temporally. But in the postmodern fictions, the fantasy is applied to the practical materialistic world without giving a feeling of transcending the mundane world. Thus, Kafka’s GregorSamsa in *Metamorphosis* transformed into a giant insect and that transformation obviously breaks the natural law but at the same time the tale occurs in the mundane world.

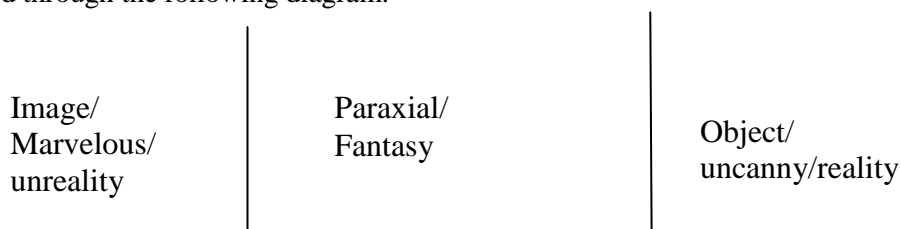
Rosemary Jackson, in her book entitled *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, in an attempt to explain fantasy in terms of reality explains it by using a technical term employed in optics, “paraxis”. “A paraxial region is an area in which light rays *seem* to unite at a point after refraction. In this area, object and image seem to collide, but in fact neither object nor reconstituted image genuinely resides there: nothing does” (Jackson 19).



Thus she takes the paraxial area to represent the region of the fantastic whose imaginary world is neither entirely ‘real’ (object), nor entirely ‘unreal’ (image). But it is located somewhere between the two. Todorov, a structuralist, offers an account of the genre of the ‘fantastic’ (le fantastique) which describes it as “bounded by the neighbouring genres of the uncanny (l’estrange) and the marvelous (le merveilleux) but never straying into either region, however much it may be drawn in one direction or the other, and indeed however much it may embody the tension that such a state creates” (Hawkes 81).



Todorov also places fantastic between ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ element. Thus, the place of fantasy can be illustrated through the following diagram.



From the definitions of Rosemary Jackson and Todorov, it is very evident that fantasy is not the opposite of reality but it can be called a negation to reality: not the exact opposite of reality at the same time it cannot be equated with reality. If 'B' is the opposite of 'A', then '-A' is not the opposite of 'A' but is the negation of 'A'. Similarly fantastic is the negation of reality but not the opposite. The exact opposite of 'real' is 'unreal' not 'fantasy'. Therefore, fantasy has nothing to do with unreality.

The world of fantasy is not an unreal world but is just an inversion of the real world in which human live. The mundane world is inverted as a world of fantasy for a specific purpose. But the purpose of using fantasy differs from writer to writer. The purpose of using fantasy by Stevenson in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) is to bring out the psychological aspect of split personality; while the fantasy in Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is to bring out the hidden truth which otherwise is impossible to see under the normal circumstances. Dostoevsky frequently writes of a fantastic literature as being the only appropriate medium for suggesting a sense of estrangement and alienation from natural origins. Similarly, Vonnegut has also used fantasy with the purpose of bringing certain facts to the readers. He intensifies the reality in his novels and makes it fantastic to show the readers the reality that ought to be. Fantasy is also a means through which he reveals his humanistic vision. He successfully did this by infusing reality into the fantasy in his fictions. Hence the reality in his fiction remains unseen and unsaid covered by fantasy.

According to Rosemary Jackson, fantasy can operate in two ways in expressing desire: it can manifest or show desire, or it can expel desire when the desire is a disturbing element which threatens cultural order and continuity. Vonnegut is a writer who belongs to the second type. By harping on fantasy, he tries to expel the desire for materialism and technology which destroys the 'real' of the reality. But he hides the reality within the layers of fantasy. The portrayal of reality can be classified into two distinguished categories: the portrayal of present phenomenon as it is and the depiction of the reality that ought to be. Vonnegut magnifies the evil elements in the portrayal of the reality in present phenomenon and makes it appear fantastic. The evil elements in the novel which brings chaos and confusions are intensified by the fantasy of Vonnegut. This ultimately results in finding a solution to the problem. This solution turns out to be the reality that ought to be. Thus, Vonnegut seeks the help of fantasy to bring out the reality. In *Galapagos*, Vonnegut evidently uses fantastic elements to explore the hidden reality. Vonnegut reinforces the fact that fantastic world that is found in the popular work *Galapagos* is not the "other" world but is an alternative world.

Vonnegut uses scientific arena in *Galapagos* which was asserted by Allen in the following manner: "*Galapagos* reflects Vonnegut's knowledge of the work of scientists like Carl Sagan and Stephen Jay Gould and often reads like a text book in evolutionary biology." He also further adds that "excepting its supernatural narrator, it clearly belongs at scientific, realistic pole of science fiction" (Allen, *Understanding* 149). Thus, Allen is very sure that the introduction of ghost narration is the only element of fantasy in the text and the rest of the events are realistic in its approach.

Galapagos is wry account of the fate of the human beings told from a million years in the future by a ghost. The evolution of humanity is predicted for the next million years. It is also predicted in the novel that the species will be limited to the Galapagos Islands alone and that they evolve into creatures with flippers and fur. "If my predictions in the book are wrong, I will return all the money" says Vonnegut playfully (Berryman 188). According to the above mentioned words of Vonnegut, the entire story of *Galapagos* is a mere prediction and is not completely at the 'realistic pole' as Allen has asserted. Predictions cannot make reality. Thus, the story of *Galapagos* is just a prediction of Vonnegut which meant to imply that the story is not within the boundary of reality ('uncanny'). The (d)evolution may, or may not happen in the future. Therefore, the (d)evolution is just a probability and not the only possibility of human fate. So, it cannot be considered as a pure realistic element and at the same time, it cannot be dismissed as unrealistic element ('marvelous') also. When Charles Darwin's theory of evolution is accepted, one cannot deny the (d)evolution that takes place in *Galapagos*. Both the evolution of Darwin and the (d)evolution of Vonnegut in *Galapagos* are based on natural selection of order which is very appealing and logical. Therefore, the (d)evolution cannot be classed with unrealistic element also. Hence, the story of *Galapagos* lies somewhere in-between the state of reality and the state of unreality. This state of in-

betweenness is called the state of fantasy. Thus, not only the element of ghost narration is a fantasy in the novel as Allen emphasize but the entire story *Galapagos* is set in ‘fantastic genre’.

Rosemary Jackson has claimed that the fantastic world is not a world completely away from the realistic world but is merely an inversion of the real world. Thus, the world of fantasy is an alternate world to the real world with only a few changes. The history of human species told from a million years in the future is also an alternate world to the present realistic scenario. Therefore, the account of the fate of human species in Galapagos Islands can be considered as the world of fantasy since it depicts the inverted world of the real world.

Vonnegut, with the help of the scientific knowledge, attempts to create an alternate reality in his fiction: a possible world of humane happiness that depends on a different moral order. Vonnegut is tired of wars. In an interview with Allen, Vonnegut explains that “having seen where we’re headed, I don’t want to go that way anymore” (Allen, *Conversation* 292). Clearly, Vonnegut wishes to have nothing to do anymore with Vietnam War or Chernobyls. He has seen enough of atrocities created by man to realize that the complexity of human thoughts too often leads to destruction. Therefore, drawing on his trip to Galapagos Islands with his photographer wife Jill Krentz, Vonnegut takes as his model for human happiness the life of the seals he sees playing joyfully and peacefully. Vonnegut explains that “if you saw the seals and sea lions on the Galapagos Islands, that’s the life you would want. Gee, it’s an incredible, amusing life they have. They play practical jokes on the other animals; they don’t have that much to do. I mean, they’re quite smart, and they’ve got a lot of time on their hands. Sharks are what they have to look out for – and killer whales” (Allen, *Conversation* 258). Against the backdrop of wars and murders carried out on a planet that has become unfit for mammalian life, including human beings, Vonnegut sees the life of seals as an unusually attractive option. Thus, he had made the world of seals as an alternate world of human beings by transforming the human beings into seal-like creatures with a stream-lined head, fur and flippers.

Vonnegut seems to be burdened by the haphazard caused by the pollution to the environment. Deforestation, hunting, dumping the industrial waste into the sea, overpopulation are the few troubles that threaten Vonnegut to the core. Only at this point Vonnegut conceives the story “of a world of peace, one in which humans might coexist with each other and other life forms. Without wreaking havoc on such a scale that the very existence of the world is threatened. As a humanist, Vonnegut wants very much for the human race to survive, but as a postmodernist, he acknowledges the precarious instability of humanity” (Davis 354). Vonnegut’s premise in the novel is that unless human beings stop destroying their environment by polluting it with their own garbage and increasing its temperature then the beautiful fragile planet will become uninhabitable. Vonnegut has become progressively preoccupied with human destroying their natural habitation.

The narrator’s description of the perfect happiness that has come to human kind on Santa Rosalia one millions years hence is a blissful Eden of blue lagoons, coconut palms, and broad white beaches where people lie around in a state of innocence and relaxation they have never known before. In order to bring an equivalent harmony of humanity with the rest of world, Vonnegut seeks the aid from the law of natural selection. The Natural Selection has made few changes: It has turned the dreadful hands of human beings which often use grenades, guns and weapons to flippers; the natural selection has also made those ‘big’ heads of human beings which resulted in discovery of machines like Mandarax and Gorkubi into stream-lined heads which provide no space for the brains that cause destruction. By having, the law of natural selection as the solution Vonnegut tries to balance humanity with other “denizens of this planet” (Broer 155). “We see that the law of natural selection may be responsible for better teeth, but the average life span has decreased to thirty years. Nobody

starves and the problems connected with aging are unimaginable. But its killer whales and sharks that keep the population manageable.” (Broer 155). Thus, Vonnegut has created an alternate world of the real world in Galapagos and that alternate world represents the fantastic element of the novel which is created by the craving desire of the author to have a perfect harmless world. The alternate world is a satire made on the real world. By portraying seal-like creatures far more superior than human beings, Vonnegut satirizes the real world. As satire is meant to correct the follies of the world, it naturally implicates the real world. Thus, Vonnegut creates alternative world to depict the real world in the tone of irony.

Apart from the alternative world of human beings created by Vonnegut, the other commonly accepted fantastic element in the novel is the narrator ghost Leon Trotsky Trout. Leon Trout was the son of Kilgore Trout, an eccentric writer of science fiction who is very familiar with the reader of Vonnegut as they can recall him from some of the earlier novels of Vonnegut. Leon is a Vietnam War veteran and deserter from the United States Marines who was granted political asylum in Sweden. He relates, “I became a welder in a shipyard in Malmo. I was painlessly decapitated one day by a falling sheet of steel while working inside the hull of *Bahia de Darwin*” (G 177). Vonnegut explains the reason for creating the ghost narratives as follows: “I had the technical problem of point of view. The problem was, who’s going to watch for a million years?” (Allen, *Understanding* 152). But Vonnegut has created Leon Trout’s ghost for the purpose of unraveling the reality. Leon gets admitted in political asylum partly because of his haphazardous life in his childhood and partly because of the traumatic experience of war. Leon’s parents had diametrically opposed temperaments and attitudes towards life. In their son’s succinct characterizations, he calls his father “Nature’s experiment with cynicism” and his mother “Nature experiment with optimism” (G 71). Leon’s naïve belief that his father was a great writer led him to become co-conspirator in driving his mother away forever. When he was only sixteen he realized that Kilgore Trout was a disgusting failure writer. With that rejection of his father, Leon also left home, to embark on a fruitless quest to find his mother. His aimless drifting ultimately led him to Marines.

Though several critics have interpreted *Galapagos* in different perspective, all their ideas converge at one point: the fantastic element in the novel is portrayed by Vonnegut through creation of ghost narrative. Having created ghost as a narrator, Vonnegut gets the advantage of generating various social reality. It is not known whether Leon Trout is really a ghost or has he imagined himself to be a ghost. But there are several clues in the novel that hint the readers that Leon imagines himself to be a ghost. Leon’s unhappy childhood and his killing of a Vietnamese old lady are the two emotional parallels that lead to nervous exhaustion. That confession is made to Swedish doctor who was treating him for syphilis contracted in Saigon. From Saigon, where Leon was hospitalized for the nervous exhaustion he suffered after he killed the old woman, he was sent on furlough to Bangkok. There the doctor astonished him by asking if he was related to “the wonderful science-fiction writer Kilgore Trout” (G 236). The discovery “that in the eyes of one person, anyway, my desperately scribbling father had not lived in vain,” moved Leon to cry like a baby (237). With the re-establishment of emotional bond with his father made him to feel something which he never felt before.

Leon did not go crazy simply for a while. With the return of the emotions repressed since childhood also came the reawakened consciousness of guilt. To escape the horrors of the present, Leon took refuge in Sweden, but he could not leave behind his past – with its accumulated guilt. Unable to cope rationally with his tortured history, he took refuge in his imagination. Acting as a ghost at the service of the Natural Order, he denied his corporeal existence and created a story that envisioned a species to which not only familial life and human affection but also the common ills of twentieth-century society were unknown. It is

not known exactly whether the narrator is really a ghost or is it just his hallucination. Broer, too, considers the history of human species in Galapagos Islands to be a hallucination. "...the narrator's dystopian vision of life on earth in One Million A. D., which may in fact be only the hallucinated vision of a very sick ex-soldier, writing, as he says, with 'air on air'" (157). It does not matter whether Leon is a ghost or is a mad man who imagines him so, but he is considered to be the element of fantasy in the novel. Vonnegut attempts to show the destructive nature of human 'big brain' through him. According to Leon, it is only the 'big brain' that is responsible for wars and devastations. When the human beings are metamorphized into sea-mammals Leon feels happy because no one is smart enough to make destructive weapons anymore. "The painful complexity of human identity, emotional volatility, and the anguish of choice have ceased to be. In fact, no one thinks at all anymore, and everyone is same" (Broer 156). Through Leon's narrative, Vonnegut advocates the futility of war. The paranoid headless narrator is traumatized by the Vietnam War like the author's other war-scarred heroes.

The bitter relationship between father and son is also projected through Leon Trout. Something closer to home other than war has created narrator's wellness to live. His parents are not made for each other and they made each other miserable by getting married. The family has been called the "giant shock absorber" of the society because "it is the place to which all bruised and battered individual returns after doing battle with the world around" (Toffler 238). When this giant shock absorber itself gets shattered by worn-out relationship between its members, the place which is considered to be the rescuer from the battle outside itself turns out to be a battlefield. This is the case with Leon Trout. He, once, admired his father. On realizing that his father is a repellant failure both as a husband and an author, he ran away from his home at the age of sixteen. His hatredness towards his father is seen when Leon refuses to enter blue tunnel. His father asked him to enter the blue-tunnel (afterlife) which otherwise cannot be entered for the next million years. But Leon refused because he did not like his father.

And one reason, surely, that I found it hard to take another step in his direction was that I did not like him...I had run away from home when I was sixteen because I was so ashamed of him... If there had been an angel in the mouth of the blue tunnel, instead of my father, I might have skipped right in. (G 204)

Leon is not just the only character in Vonnegut's novel to hate his father. Paul Proteus in *Player Piano* also hates his father just like Leon. Dr. George Proteus was Paul's father and he had almost complete control over the nation's economy and was more powerful. As its first director, Paul's father was widely regarded as the father of the unified industrial system that was created during the Third World War. Paul was expected to follow in his father's footsteps. At the young age of thirty-five, Paul was already in charge of an enormous automated factory. But in spite of his good fortune, Paul was vaguely dissatisfied with industrial system because of his hatred towards his father. Paul was charged for being rebellious against the industrial society. In the trial, "Paul is unable to deny that his hatred for the system is based on his hatred for his father, who was too busy running the country to attend to Paul when he was a boy" (Marvin 28). In the novels following *Breakfast of Champion*, especially *Slapstick* and *Deadeye Dick*, the destructive father-son relationship becomes still more ominous – the moribund father infecting the protagonist with his own disillusionment and cynicism.

Bellow also depicts the acrimonious relationship between father and son with realism in his novel *Seize the Day* (1956). Adler, an old man in his eighties cannot understand his feelings when Wilhelm asked his father for money he sought a sign that would indicate paternal love, or at least concern for his welfare. But Adler refused to give money and seemed unable to show any affection for him. At the end of the novel, when Wilhelm

demanded some kind of gesture of love from his father, Adler completely repudiated him and his intensity of hatred was especially evident in the first draft, "You want to make yourself into my cross. But by Christ, I'll see you dead first, you soft bastard dummy" (Bellow 99). According to Wilson, "... Dr. Adler is presented as a ruthless, hard-nosed realist who berates and batters his son accusing him of irrationality.... The adolescent Wilhelm, who would blame any body but himself for his own ills, does make what appears to be tiresomely exorbitant demands on his father" (97). Just like Bellow, Vonnegut also wishes to establish the role of expectation and demands within father-son relationship. The expectation of Leon on his father to be a successful science fiction writer on one hand and the artistically failed father infecting his son Leon with his own bitterness, on the other spoils the healthy relationship between father and son. The strained relationship between father and son becomes universal social issue just like the destruction caused by war. Vonnegut successfully brings this realistic social issue through his fantastic character Leon Trout.

Throughout the novel, Vonnegut uses his fantasy to bring out the realistic social issues of twentieth century like the horrors of war, the survivor's guilt, the ecological issues, the super industrialization and the technological development. Through the introduction of a fantastic character, Leon Trout and by transforming the real world into an alternate world, he attains the pinnacle of success in portraying the reality through fantasy.

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