

**The War's Devastating Influence
on the Human Psyche
Kurt Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse-Five" or, The
Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death
and Muhsin Al-Ramli's "Scattered Crumbs"
A Comparative Study**

Assistant Professor Dr. Rafid Sami Majeed

College of Arts
Imam Jaafar Al-Sadiq University
E.mail : rafid.sami@ijsu.edu.iq

تأثير الحرب على نفسية الانسان / رواية كورت فونغوتز (دار
الذبح - خمسة) او صلب الاطفال : رقصة واجبة مع الموت ورواية
محسن الرملي (فتات مبعثرة) - دراسة مقارنة

أ.م.د. رافد سامي مجيد

كلية الاداب - جامعة الامام جعفر الصادق
البريد الالكتروني : rafid.sami@ijsu.edu.iq

Abstract

A comparative study of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* or, *The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* (1969) and Muhsi Al-Ramli's *Scattered Crumbs* (2000) (Translated into English in 2023 by Yasamen Hanoosh) reveal striking parallels in their depiction of war's devastating influence on the human psyche, despite their different cultural and historical contexts. Both novels employ unconventional narrative structures and dark humor to convey the absurdity and trauma of conflict.

Key words: devastating impact, human psyche, cultural and historical contexts, absurdity and trauma ,and conflict.

1.Introduction

To have a clear idea about the comparison between two great novels from two different culture by an American novelist Kurt Vonnegut's in his distinguished novel "*Slaughterhouse-Five*" or, *The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* that was written in 1969 as a semi-autobiographic science fiction-infused anti-war novel ,and an Iraqi novelist -Muhsin Al-Ramli in his distinguished novel "*Scattered Crumbs*" (in Arabic : Al-Fatit Al-muba'thar) that was first published in Arabic in 2000. The University of Arkansas Press awarded the Arabic Translation Award to the English translation of the book in 2003, the reader needs to have a vision about the circumstances and conditions that were portrayed in the two novels and put in mind that the characters are still humans with the same feelings and emotions that are affected whether they are Iraqi or American ones, yet the events they had been through are different from one country to another.

2. Short summary of both novels :

"*Slaughterhouse-Five*" tells the story of Billy Pilgrim, an American soldier who becomes "unstuck in time" after experiencing the firebombing of Dresden in World War II. He randomly travels through different periods of his life, from his childhood to his time as a POW to his post-war life and even to the planet Tralfamadore, where he learns about their philosophy of time and death. The novel uses dark humor, satire, and science fiction elements to explore the trauma of war, the absurdity of human conflict, and the nature of time and free will.

"*Scattered Crumbs*" tells the story of an Iraqi family struggling through decades of hardship under Saddam Hussein's rule and the subsequent wars. The central conflict is between a father, a staunch supporter of Saddam, and his artistic son, who rejects the oppressive regime. Through fragmented stories and dark

humor, the novel depicts the devastating impact of war, political oppression, and displacement on their lives, exploring themes of family conflict, loss, memory, and the search for identity in a fractured society.

3. Themes :

3.1. Trauma and Memory :

Both novels explore trauma and Memory as they portrait the fragmented nature of memory and the psychological trauma experienced by those who witness war. Billy Pilgrim's "unstuck in time" experience in "Slaughterhouse-Five" ,as Kurt wrote :

"Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time. Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding night. He has walked through a door in 1955 and come out through a door in 1941. He has gone back to bed and awakened in 1963. Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next, and the trips aren't necessarily fun. He is in a constant state of stage fright, he says, because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next." ("Slaughterhouse-Five" ,16) .

This passage establishes Billy's condition and highlights the lack of control he has over his own experience. The constant shifting between different time periods creates a sense of disorientation and reflects the fragmented nature of his memory. It also mirrors the disorienting and fragmented narratives in "Scattered Crumbs," where characters struggle to piece together their pasts and make sense of their present realities. Lynne Rogers(2004,p.87) writes that " This brief novel begins as a satire of life in an Iraqi village under an anonymous yet easily recognized dictator

and offers a poignant self-examination of impotency and exile. Unlike 154 many novels that deal with the despair of exile, "Scattered Crumbs" never loses sight of the horrific conditions in a lost homeland.'

Al-Ramli uses a more fragmented narrative structure to depict the impact of war and displacement on Iraqi society. The novel is composed of interconnected stories and vignettes, each offering a glimpse into the lives of different characters affected by the conflict. These fragmented narratives mirror the shattered reality of war, where lives are disrupted, families are torn apart, and memories are fragmented. Al-Ramli encapsulates a recurring sentiment when he writes:

We, the scattered ones in exile, did not choose our current places; we arrived at them due to the explosions of smoke in the den of eternal fire. The suffocated ones, staggering, do not look at which spot their feet tread. We did not choose our new lands; we, who were kicked out of our old ones when they were ruthlessly trampled. Therefore, we endure our pains akin to skin being flayed alive. The earlier ones among us still open the faucets of their memories with talk, asking about the Azawi café, the winged bull, and the sleep of Basra. The later ones, their chests swelling with nausea from too much complaining, summarize: Whoever enters his grave is safe. ("Scattered Crumbs" 48)

This passage captures the central idea of fragmentation and the struggle to rebuild a sense of self and community in the aftermath of war. The characters are left with fragmented memories and a deep sense of loss, making it difficult to find stability and meaning in their lives. Both Vonnegut and Al-Ramli use fragmented narratives to reflect the psychological impact of trauma. Billy Pilgrim's time travel and the shifting perspectives in "Scattered Crumbs" create a sense of disorientation

and reflect the characters' disrupted lives. This narrative technique allows both authors to explore the ways in which trauma can shatter memory and create a sense of detachment from reality. Michael Standaert(2003) wrote “ the story could set equally well in any country where families are torn apart by war, jingoism, love of country and distrust of its leadership[which causes fragmentation”

3. 2. Absurdity of War .

To reflect the absurdity of War ,both Vonnegut and Al-Ramli use dark humor and satire to expose the senselessness and futility of war. The Tralfamadorians' detached perspective on time and death in "Slaughterhouse-Five" reflects a similar sense of detachment and disillusionment found in "Scattered Crumbs," where characters often resort to dark humor as a coping mechanism in the face of suffering.

Vonnegut uses the Tralfamadorians, alien beings who perceive time as a simultaneous, four-dimensional construct, to provide a detached and almost indifferent perspective on death and human suffering. This perspective underscores the absurdity of war by suggesting that death is not the end, but simply a moment in a larger, unchanging pattern. In this regards , Samet Kalecik (2023) writes “Wars cause trauma and disruption of temporal sequencing, leading to fragmentation of memory in survivors. This fragmentation leads to negative changes in the victims' posttraumatic relationships and character traits. The detachment allows Vonnegut to use dark humor to defuse the horror of war, making it both bearable and more profoundly disturbing. Vonnegut writes :

“The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only appears to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist. The

Trafamadorians can look at all the different moments just that way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever.”(
"Slaughterhouse-Five" (92)

This passage reveals the Trafamadorian view of death as simply another moment in time, devoid of the emotional weight humans place upon it. This detachment is both humorous and unsettling, highlighting the absurdity of human reactions to death in the context of war. Another example of this dark humor is the constant phrase "So it goes," used after every mention of death, further trivializing the act in a darkly comic way Harold Bloom writes (61) Nothing really prepares [the characters] for the momentous horror of Dresden and the unimaginable display of human cruelty and injustice offered by the war ."

In "Scattered Crumbs," the dark humor is often a coping mechanism for characters facing unimaginable hardship and loss. It's a way to find moments of levity in the midst of chaos and to maintain a sense of sanity in an insane world. The humor is often rooted in the grotesque and the absurd, reflecting the surreal nature of living through war. One example is how characters often joke about the constant threat of violence, using gallows humor to deal with the fear and uncertainty. They might make light of the absurdity of checkpoints, the constant sound of explosions, or the ever-present threat of death. These jokes are not meant to be genuinely funny in a lighthearted way, but rather to provide a momentary escape from the grim reality. Another example is the way characters find humor in the mundane details of daily life, even in the midst of war. They might joke about the lack of electricity, the

scarcity of food, or the absurd situations they find themselves in. This humor is a way of reclaiming some sense of normalcy in a world that has been turned upside down.

Thus ,while the source of the dark humor differs—the Tralfamadorians' detached perspective in Vonnegut versus the characters' desperate coping mechanisms in Al-Ramli—both authors use it to achieve a similar effect: to expose the absurdity and senselessness of war. By finding humor in the midst of tragedy, they challenge the reader to confront the horrors of war without being overwhelmed by despair. The humor acts as a buffer, allowing for a deeper engagement with the difficult themes. Both authors use this technique to make their respective anti-war statements more powerful and memorable. Al-Ramli writes :

"They used to joke that in Baghdad, even the stray dogs had learned to dodge explosions. It was a dark joke, of course, because many of them hadn't. But it was the kind of joke you told when you didn't know whether to laugh or cry, when the world had become so twisted that laughter was the only way to keep from falling apart. They'd sit in the dim light of a kerosene lamp, sharing stories of near misses and absurd encounters with soldiers and militiamen, their laughter echoing in the darkness like a defiant cry against the chaos outside." ("Scattered Crumbs" ,77)

This passage draws upon several key elements such as The juxtaposition of humor and tragedy as the joke about the dogs highlights the ever-present danger while simultaneously making light of it. This reflects the characters' tendency to find humor in the face of death and destruction. It also presents **the use of the grotesque**: The image of dogs dodging explosions is both darkly humorous and disturbing, reflecting the surreal nature of living in a war zone.

3.3. The juxtaposition of humor and tragedy :

Both novels depict **loss of Innocence and humanity** and **reflect** the loss of innocence and the erosion of humanity that result from war. The firebombing of Dresden in "Slaughterhouse-Five" and the various acts of violence and displacement depicted in "Scattered Crumbs" serve as stark reminders of the destructive power of conflict. Billy Pilgrim's journey, from a naive young man to a traumatized veteran "unstuck in time," embodies the loss of innocence. The horrific experience of witnessing the firebombing of Dresden strips him of any illusions about the glory or purpose of war. The Tralfamadorian philosophy, while offering a coping mechanism, also reflects a kind of detachment from human emotions and values, further highlighting this loss. The novelist writes :

"There were fire storms on Dresden. One fire storm was a spiral two or three miles in diameter. In the center, the air was so hot that the bricks glowed like charcoal. The flames ate everything organic, everything that would burn. It wasn't fire. It was hydrochloric acid. It was napalm." ("Slaughterhouse-Five",174)

This stark, almost clinical description of the firebombing emphasizes the sheer destructive power of the event, stripping away any romantic notions of warfare. It's a brutal depiction of industrialized killing, leaving no room for heroism or glory. The comparison of the flames to hydrochloric acid and napalm further underscores the dehumanizing nature of the attack.

In "Scattered Crumbs," the constant violence, displacement, and hardship experienced by the characters erode their sense of humanity. Saad Zaati Shamkhy and Lajiman Bin Janoory(2020) wrote “ They refused to live in a country in which the autocratic regimes making them living as a marginalized people. And this is a natural effect of this regime to marginalize all advocacy groups that were not

cooperate with his system. Thus, they left their country in which they lived their life with wars and conflicts caused by unfair governments; they fled from their country because they had faced extreme oppression under The [Evil] Party.” They are forced to make difficult choices, often compromising their moral values in order to survive. The fragmentation of society, the loss of trust, and the constant threat of violence create an environment where empathy and compassion become scarce .When reading following paraphrased passage , the pervasive sense of loss and erosion of humanity is reflected :

"They had seen so much death, so much destruction, that it had become a part of them. They had witnessed acts of cruelty that they could never have imagined, and they had been forced to do things that they would never have thought themselves capable of. The war had taken something from them, something essential, and they knew that they would never be the same again." ("Scattered Crumbs", 76)

This passage illustrates how the constant exposure to violence and hardship has desensitized the characters, forcing them to confront the darker aspects of human nature. The war has not only destroyed their physical surroundings but also their inner selves, leaving them scarred and changed forever.

In this way , both novels depict war as a force that strips individuals of their innocence and erodes their humanity. The firebombing of Dresden and the pervasive violence in Iraq serve as powerful symbols of this destruction. While the specific contexts differ, both novels offer profound insights into the psychological and emotional toll of war, highlighting the enduring impact of conflict on the human spirit. The loss is not just of lives, but also of something intangible – a sense of hope, trust, and the belief in human goodness.

4. Narrative and Structure:

4.1. Non-linear Narrative:

Both novels employ non-linear narrative structures, reflecting the fragmented nature of memory and the characters' attempts to cope with trauma. Billy Pilgrim's time travel and the shifting perspectives and timelines in "Scattered Crumbs" create a sense of disorientation and reflect the characters' disrupted lives.

4.2 .Dark Humor and Satire:

Both Vonnegut and Al-Ramli use dark humor and satire to convey the absurdity and horror of war. This approach allows them to address difficult subjects in a way that is both engaging and thought-provoking.

5. Metafiction:

Both novels engage in metafictional elements, blurring the lines between fiction and reality. Vonnegut's presence as a character in "Slaughterhouse-Five" and the self-reflexive nature of some of the narratives in "Scattered Crumbs" draw attention to the constructed nature of storytelling and the limitations of language in representing trauma.

6. Cultural Context:

6.1. "Slaughterhouse-Five" is rooted in Vonnegut's personal experiences as a prisoner of war during the firebombing of Dresden in World War II. It reflects the disillusionment and anti-war sentiment that emerged in the United States in the aftermath of the war.

6.2. "Scattered Crumbs" is deeply embedded in the context of the Iraq wars and their aftermath. It reflects the suffering and displacement experienced by ordinary Iraqis as a result of decades of conflict.

7. Stylistic and word choice:

As for stylistic and word choice, distinct stylistic approaches that contribute to the overall themes and tone of each work are noted in both novels:

7.1 Kurt Vonnegut in his "Slaughterhouse-Five":

7.1.1. Simple and Direct Language: Vonnegut employs a deceptively simple and direct style. His sentences are often short and declarative, avoiding complex vocabulary or elaborate metaphors. This simplicity creates a sense of detachment, mirroring Billy Pilgrim's own disassociation from the horrors he witnesses. It also makes the horrific events he describes even more impactful in their starkness.

7.1.2. Repetition and Catchphrases: The frequent repetition of phrases like "So it goes" after every mention of death serves to trivialize death while simultaneously highlighting its pervasiveness. This creates a darkly comic effect that underscores the absurdity of war.

7.1.3. Juxtaposition of the Mundane and the Horrific: Vonnegut often juxtaposes mundane details with horrific events, creating a sense of surrealism and highlighting the disconnect between human experience and the reality of war. For example, he might describe a scene of intense violence with the same detached tone he uses to describe Billy's everyday activities.

7.1.4. Use of Understatement: Vonnegut frequently uses understatement to describe horrific events, allowing the reader to fill in the gaps and imagine the full extent of the horror. This technique is particularly effective in conveying the trauma of the firebombing of Dresden.

For instance "The airplane was losing altitude. It was full of hot gasoline. It was losing altitude. The German guns below were aiming at it. The airplane was losing altitude .The repetition of "The airplane was losing altitude" creates a sense of inevitability, while the simple phrase . Another example is the expression "So it goes" after mentioning the imminent danger of being shot down creates a chilling effect.

7.2. Muhsin Al-Ramli in his "Scattered Crumbs":

7.2.1.Fragmented and Poetic Language: Al-Ramli's language, even in translation, tends to be more fragmented and poetic than Vonnegut's. This reflects the fragmented nature of memory and the characters' disrupted lives. The language is often evocative and sensory, capturing the sights, sounds, and smells of war-torn Iraq.

7.2.2.Use of Dialect and Colloquialisms: Al-Ramli incorporates elements of Iraqi dialect and colloquialisms (where the translation allows), adding authenticity and grounding the narrative in the specific cultural context. This also contributes to the sense of intimacy and connection with the characters.

7.2.3 Imagery of Decay and Destruction: The novelist uses vivid imagery of decay and destruction to depict the physical and psychological impact of war. This imagery is often visceral and disturbing, conveying the pervasive sense of loss and trauma.

7.2.4.Blending of Reality and Surrealism: While rooted in realism, Al-Ramli's writing sometimes incorporates elements of surrealism, reflecting the surreal nature of living through war. This blending of reality and surrealism creates a sense of disorientation and highlights the absurdity of the situation. For instance ,the novelist writes "The dust swirled like ghosts in the empty streets, carrying the scent of burnt metal and decay. The sun beat down mercilessly, turning the city into a furnace. The air was thick with the silence of fear, broken only by the occasional

distant explosion." This passage uses sensory details and imagery to create a vivid picture of a war-torn city, emphasizing the pervasive sense of loss and destruction.

When Connecting the two styles by the two novelists , it is noted that while Vonnegut's style is characterized by its simplicity and detachment, Al-Ramli's style is more fragmented and poetic. However, both authors use their respective styles to achieve similar effects: to convey the absurdity of war, the fragmentation of experience, and the psychological impact of trauma. Vonnegut's "So it goes" and Al-Ramli's "evocative imagery" both serve to underscore the pervasive presence of death and loss. Both writers, in their own ways, use language to create a powerful and lasting impression on the reader.

8.Conclusion:

While separated by geography, time, and specific historical contexts, Kurt Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse-Five" and Muhsin Al-Ramli's "Scattered Crumbs" offer strikingly similar insights into the devastating effects of war on the human psyche and society. Both novels transcend traditional war narratives by employing unconventional narrative structures, dark humor, and a focus on the psychological and emotional toll of conflict.

Both "*Slaughterhouse-Five*" and "*Scattered Crumbs*" offer powerful and moving portrayals of the human cost of war. Through their unconventional narrative structures, dark humor, and focus on trauma and memory, both novels challenge traditional war narratives and offer profound insights into the human condition.

Ultimately, both novels stand as powerful testaments to the enduring impact of war on the human spirit. They offer profound insights into the psychological and emotional consequences of conflict, reminding us of the importance of empathy, understanding, and the pursuit of peace.

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مستخلص

تكشف الدراسة المقارنة بين رواية "المسلخ الخامس أو حملة الأطفال الصليبية: مهمة الرقص مع الموت" لكورت فونيجت (1969) ورواية "الفتيت المبعثر" لمحسن الرملي (2000) (ترجمت الى اللغة الانجليزية في (2023) ترجمة ياسمين حنوش)، عن تشابهات مذهلة في تصويرهما لأثر الحرب المدمر على النفس البشرية. وعلى الرغم من اختلاف سياقاتهما الثقافية والتاريخية. تستخدم كلتا الروايتين هياكل سردية غير تقليدية وروح الدعابة السوداء لنقل عبثية الصراع وصدمة. الكلمات المفتاحية: التأثير المدمر، النفس البشرية، السياقات الثقافية والتاريخية، العبث والصدمة، الصراع.