

A RESTATEMENT OF DARWINISM IN A NEW WORLD – KURT VONNEGUT’S MISSION IN *GALAPAGOS*

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ABSTRACT

Darwin’s Theory of Natural Selection and Theory of Evolution find a new treatment in Kurt Vonnegut’s novel *Galapagos*. The story of the novel is told by a ghost that watched human (d) evolution from 1986 for a million years. Pan-human beings have died through manmade and natural disasters. The survivors adapt themselves to the environment and evolved themselves with fur, flippers and streamlined heads so that they can swim in cold water easily. Through this story Vonnegut has not just reinforced Darwinism but has restated it in his own style.

Galapagos is Vonnegut’s eleventh novel, and it is a wry account of the fate of human species told from a million years in the future by the ghost of the son of the Vonnegut’s alter-ego Kilgore Trout. This novel of Vonnegut is, in a way, a tribute to Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. The setting of the novel is the natural home of marine iguanas and larcenous frigate birds. Galapagos is itself, the same island visited by Charles Darwin in his process of exploration of the Theory of Natural Selection. The theme of the novel is also evolution. Therefore, Vonnegut’s *Galapagos* goes parallel to the Theory of Darwin’s Natural Selection. This paper attempts to explore Galapagos as a restatement of Darwinism in a new world rather than reinforcement.

Darwin noted that a kind of selection takes place in nature, but he wondered how. On deep analysis, Darwin saw that only the best adapted survived; the others did not. This was how natural selection worked. Thus, Darwin says, “This preservation of favorable individual differences and variations, and the destruction of those which are injurious, I have called Natural Selection, or the Survival of the Fittest.” (Darwin 40)

Darwin, however, did find that the differences between species could be correlated with the feeding habits of various species. He quotes the example of finches in his *Origin of Species*. Some ground finches with powerful beaks eat large seeds, while others with smaller beaks eat small seeds, and still others with fine beaks eat insects. These discoveries were the gem of the idea that differences between species originate from the fact that each species adapt to the conditions of a different environment.

The adaptation to the environment is the seed for the growth and development of Literary Darwinism. Literary Darwinism is a branch of study in literature in terms of evolution by means of natural selection. According to Literary Darwinism, the humans have evolved in an adaptive relation to their environment. The human behaviors, feelings, thoughts are all shaped by the characteristics of adaptation. *Galapagos* is a perfect illustration of Literary Darwinism. Peter J. Reed, in his review of *Galapagos* has asserted the novel as “evolution theory” and he equates it with what Jerry Falwell calls “Secular Humanisms.” (63)

The plot of *Galapagos* 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 only human descendants on the Earth turned into a seal like creature. This is a kind of parody to Darwin’s “Theory of Evolution.” The transformation of human beings into a seal-like creature can rather be called devolution. However, the concept behind the devolution is adaptation. The human creatures altered themselves in order to adapt to the environment for survival. The human beings evolved with fur, flippers and streamlined heads are the result of adapting to existence on a barren rock with fish as principal source of food. They are much happier, because without hands they cannot use tools or weapons. They shed the huge, over active brains that invented lies and caused trouble. This is because brain is no more useful to the human beings in an island which does not have any technologies. Even the most intelligent invention like Mandarax is thrown into the sea.

The narrator of the story is the ghost who has been watching over humans for the last million years. This ghost is the immortal spirit of Leon Trotsky Trout, son of Vonnegut’s recurring character Kilgore Trout. Leon is a Vietnam War veteran who was affected by the massacres in Vietnam and he finally settled in Sweden, where he worked as a shipbuilder and died during the construction of the ship, the *Bahia de Darwin*. It is only this ship that was used for the Nature of Cruise of the Century, which carried those ten people who are the forefathers of the seal-like human creatures. Kilgore Trout, the deceased father of Leon Trout appears in the novel and urges his son to enter the “blue tunnel” that leads to afterlife. When Leon Trout refuses, Kilgore pledges that he and the blue tunnel will not return for one million years, which leaves Leon to observe the slow process of evolution/ devolution that transforms the

human into aquatic mammals. The process begins when a Japanese woman (one among the ten people) on the island gives birth to a fur-covered daughter, Akiko.

Trout asserts that sorrows of human kind were caused by “big brains and fancy thinking” (Vonnegut 12). The natural selection ultimately puts an end to this problem, since the humans best fitted to Santa Rosalia were those who could swim best, which required a streamlined head, which in turn required a small brain. So, the evolved aquatic mammals adapted themselves to the need of the environment. This story of evolution of Vonnegut goes parallel with the example of finches given by Darwin in his *Origin of Species*. Further, the people with fur in the island lead a life of animals – copulating with anybody or anything including the animals and seals.

The entire plot runs parallel to the theory of Darwin. There are few analogies in the novel that goes hand-in-hand with the theory of Darwin. The most vital parallelism is the name of the novel itself, *Galapagos*. Galapagos is exactly the same islands that Darwin visited and observed the different kind of birds in it so as to evolve the Theory of Evolution. The hotel, El Dorado, where the people took their cruise stayed itself has a portrait of Charles Darwin. Vonnegut intentionally does it so that the reader can associate the island Galapagos with Darwin.

Finch is the next analogy found in the novel that goes along with the Theory of Evolution. Darwin had observed the finches so as to discover their adaptation. Mary (one among the ten people in Santa Rosalia) is a science teacher. She teaches her students the Law of Natural Selection. This enables the readers to understand the theory and associate it with the plot of the story. She demands comments from the students after posing the following questions,

...Darwin found them on a trip around the world. But his big brain had to wonder why the creator in the case of the Galapagos Islands would have given every conceivable job for a small land bird to an often ill-adapted finch?... If he thought a vampire was a good idea, why didn't he give the job to a vampire bat instead of a finch for heaven's sakes? A vampire finch? (Vonnegut 109)

When *Bahia de Darwin* ran aground, Mary goes ashore and stumbles. She gets injured and a bead of blood peeps out of her flesh. A finch sits on her finger and sucks the blood. She identifies the finch as one among the thirteen sorts of finches which Darwin observed.

The name of the ship *Bahia de Darwin* also literally associates Charles Darwin to the plot. At one point, Leon describes all the major figures in the novel as “nature's experiment” with various abstract qualities: Wait is greed, captain von Kleist is “ill-founded self-confidence,” mac Intosh the entrepreneur is

heartless and so on (Vonnegut 82). The term nature's experiment stands closer to what Darwin has called "Natural Selection." In Natural Selection, Darwin discovers characteristic behavior of each bird. Similarly Leon has used the term, "nature's experiment" to distinguish the traits of all the characters. Leon Trout, in the second part of the book calls captain a "male ape, evidently - who walked upright" (Vonnegut 215) which takes the readers back to Darwin's theory of evolution. So, all these minute descriptions in the novel give emphasis to Darwinism.

In spite of all these parallelisms, the novel *Galapagos* is not mere reinforcement of Darwinism. It is far beyond reinforcement; it is a sort of restatement as Vonnegut has adopted the tool of parody in the construction of the plot of *Galapagos*.

Parody as a postmodern phenomenon is employed to make an ironical stress on a point by repeating it. Linda Hutcheon has redefined parody as "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (Hutcheon 26). This definition of Hutcheon neatly fits into the novel of *Galapagos*. Vonnegut repeats the Theory of Evolution and at the same time he parodies it. The Theory of Evolution moves from ape to human beings but Vonnegut's (d) evolution starts from human beings to marine mammals. The real reason behind this parody is that Vonnegut wishes to restate a fact that people should adapt themselves to the environment and that they should not try to make the environment adapt to them by using their "big- brain" which will lead to devastation and destruction. In fact, this big brain is responsible for the destruction of human race which leads to the initiation of a new race with fur in the novel. Vonnegut wants to prove that the big brain would be thrown into trash in a dynamic ecosystem where change is the only thing that cannot be changed. Through the (d) evolution of million years of diminished capacity of the brain, Vonnegut wishes to show the follies of human beings when they had big brains. They once used their abilities to lie like Mac Intosh in the novel, to change their identities to suit the occasion like James Wait, and even some times they used their highly capable brain to destroy themselves with highly complex weapons. If intelligence becomes such a threat for survival, then the less intelligent will be more likely to survive. That is how the new world of (d) evolution is blessed with. They have only small brains but they are contented to live happily in the small island by eating fishes. Technologies and highly privileged machines meant nothing to them. They need food to survive and they got it from the ocean. In order to catch fishes they have to swim. They are readily blessed with flippers for swimming. To survive the coldness of water they got fur all over their body. They are much happier than their forefathers who happened to face the World Wars and the Great Depression.

Captain von Kleist throws a computer called Mandarax into the ocean. This incident proves that the new world neither needs intelligence nor the destruction created by the intelligence. Mary Hepburn,

the intellectual science teacher tries to save the device. She jumps into the ocean to save it but was eaten by a shark. It is very evident that Vonnegut wishes to portray from all these incidents that intelligence has nothing to do with survival. The real requirement of survival is adaptation and not intelligence. The shark ate Mary and the captain survived long without any evolution/ devolution but the human beings alone underwent both evolution and devolution. The human beings alone change because they do not fit into environment. They rather disturb the environment with all their inventions. No changes are required when the organism perfectly fits into environment. Therefore, it can be easily concluded that adaptation can only enable the creatures to survive. For the new human race, adaptation becomes life rather than living process. So it is evident that Vonnegut has not just reinforced Darwinism but he has restated a new concept of survival.

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