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Omnipotent Wealth and Economic Disparity in America: An Analysis of Kurt Vonnegut's *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*

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Abstract:

Money has perpetually played a very significant role in America. It gradually came to be reckoned as a yardstick to determine the degree of success of American citizens. Whether it was the Wall Street Crash of 1929 or the stock market boom of the mid-1990s, economy has continued to remain an ever raging issue in the country. Although America recovered from the major economic upheavals, yet one of the major concerns, i.e., the ever increasing divide between the haves and the have-nots could never be bridged. *In God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965) Vonnegut addresses this issue and depicts how the economic divide spread its tentacles deep into the American society. Vonnegut portrays the absolute importance that most American citizens attach to money, the brunt of which is faced by the underprivileged. Apart from having internalized their demeaned position, they also undergo constant persecution and highhandedness by the elite class, so much so that candid attempts on part of the affluent to reach out to the downtrodden section of society are quite infrequent and are deemed unusual. The novel also deals with the crucial role that hereditary wealth and lineage plays in America.

Keywords: America, Wealth, Economic divide, Lineage, Discrimination.

Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) was an indigenous American writer who deals with numerous issues of his time in his *sui generis* way. He represents an American counterculture and has been variously called as “a fabulist, a fantasist, an absurdist, a humorist, a black humorist, a broken humorist, a satirist, and, perhaps most often, a science fictionist” as well as a “mythic writer” (Mustazza 15). Although his works can't be pigeonholed, yet there is a humanitarian strain running through all of his works. Vonnegut lays bare numerous loopholes in American society, economics and politics.

David Simmons categorizes *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965) as one of Vonnegut's “most well-known and widely read novels” (xii) along with *Mother Night* (1961) and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* the economic landscape of America is explored at various levels. It is pertinent to mention here that the 1960s was a decade of massive increase in the gross national product of the United States, yet the “families in the bottom 20 per cent of the income bracket were still, in 1960 earning only 4.9 percent of all income, while those in the top 20 per cent were earning 42 per cent.” (Snowman, and Bradbury 270). Written during this decade, this context of huge economic divide is crucial for understanding the novel.

Apart from this, Vonnegut in his essay collection *A Man Without a Country* (2005) renders his inference of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*:

He [Tocqueville] says, and he said it 169 years ago, that in no other country other than ours has money taken a stronger hold on the affections of men. (8)

The novel reinforces this notion and Vonnegut reiterates it through the characters of the novel as well as the story. It thus opens:

A sum of money is a leading character in this tale about people, just as a sum of honey might properly be a leading character in a tale about bees. (1)

Money is the pivot around which everything revolves in the novel. In fact, it is the only work of Vonnegut wherein an exceedingly strong driving force i.e. money works throughout the novel and brings it to its conclusion.

The sum involved is enormous i.e. \$87,427,033.61 [on June 1, 1946] producing an interest of \$3,500,000 a year and belonging to the Rosewater family, was the 14th largest family fortune in America before 1947. However it was mandated that the fortune must be inherited by the closest and oldest heirs of the creator of Rosewater Foundation [Senator Lister Amis] and the future presidents of the Foundation must be chosen by the same edict. However, other siblings of the president automatically become officers of the Foundation once they attain an age of 21. It is also mandated that the ones involved must be sane. Although the heir is barred from meddling with the foundations basic capital [which is taken care of by a corporation], yet the foundation makes enormous gains which can be utilized by the president as he wills. Eliot Rosewater becomes the president of the foundation in 1947. He is rumoured to be insane. Norman Mushari, an upstart lawyer who works for a firm of which the Rosewater family is the biggest client learns about both the decree [through confidential files] and the alleged lunacy of Eliot. Eliot is also called by ludicrous names in the firm and the fallout is his immense interest in Eliot.

The more Mushari rifled the firm's confidential files relative to the Rosewater foundation, the more excited he became. Especially thrilling to him was the part of the charter which called for immediate expulsion of any officer adjudged insane. (3)

Eliot does not have a child and hence a legal inheritor. Mushari sets out to prove that Eliot is insane for his vested interests. He intends to represent Eliot's distant cousin, Fred Rosewater as the rightful heir of the fortune and the presidency and have a chunk of wealth for himself. He attempts to look out for evidence of Eliot's lunacy to strengthen the case. Mushari is thus bent upon achieving for himself what wasn't granted to him by birth and is impeded by the prevalent class system viz. a fortune.

Vonnegut renders Eliot as being a "flamboyantly sick man" (16). The most ostensible reason for his lunacy being his guilt-ridden conscience:

"Perhaps life itself has become hopeless for this character, demoralized since an incident in World War II, when, as a combat infantryman, he shot and killed presumed dangerous enemy soldier who turned out to be a young boy." (Klinkowitz 48)

However his insanity turns out to be saner than most of the apparently sensible people around. On one level it can also be deduced that it is because of his lunacy that Eliot is not dehumanized. Eliot is an altruist who tries to reach out to people in need and lend a helping hand. He has a strong sense of empathy for the poor. He renounces his luxurious life and goes out of his way to achieve his utopian vision of a hospitable world and apart from his compassionate nature, he attempts to use his money to achieve this goal. Money is an intense force in the novel and has “a sterilizing effect on everyone it touches in the novel” (Schatt 76). He is keenly aware of the sense of awe which is associated with wealth. He conveys to writers in Milford:

You don't have to go to planet Tralfamadore in Anti-Matter Galaxy 508 G to find weird creatures with unbelievable powers. Look at an Earthling millionaire! . . . He paused to make a very impressive demonstration of his magical powers, writing a smeary check for two hundred dollars for every person there. ‘There's fantasy for you,’ he said. ‘And you go to bank tomorrow, and it will all come true. It's insane that I should be able to do such a thing, with money so important.’ (14)

Eliot is also quite concerned about the unequal and unfair distribution of wealth in the country, where some are bereft of the basic amenities while others have more than they can use. He opines that the government must take an initiative to divide the wealth equally. He realizes how the destitute are almost a non-entity and even the attempts to civilize or provide for the poor is not for their sake but ironically to render them worth beholding by the rich.

I think the main purpose of the Army, Navy, and Marine corps is to get poor Americans into clean, pressed, unpatched clothes, so rich Americans can stand to look at them. (23)

They are not only discriminated against but they are deemed to be “better off dead” (31). Apart from helping the fire department, he sets up a helpline for the downtrodden and distressed and attempts to address their problems. He frequently speaks to them humanely to subdue their fears and grief. Diana Moon Glampers, a domestic servant in a mansion of Eliot's father [Senator] who calls Eliot for help is aware that Eliot could well be living an utmost luxurious life with all the wealth he has. She reverts him for being compassionate towards the non-privileged. She conveys to Eliot:

You could have been off in some big city. . . . You could have been so high and mighty in this world, that when you looked down on the plain, dumb, ordinary people of poor Rosewater County, we would look like bugs. . . . You gave up everything a man is supposed to want, just to help the little people, and the little people know it. (49)

The lines from *Slaughterhouse-Five* are quite pertinent in this context: “It is a crime in America to be poor. . . . They mock themselves and glorify their betters” (88). Vonnegut elucidates it through *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. In fact the words of Diana stem from the perception that Eliot is being exceedingly kind towards the “little people” which certainly isn't the norm. Some of the have-nots who do not approach Eliot for help out of pride and look out for jobs in Indianapolis or Chicago or Detroit can barely find steady work in those places. This is in concurrence with the notion of “Money River” (75) which Eliot believes is the source of wealth for the rich. The “Money River” symbolically stands for the undeserved, easy and enormous

money which the rich make and the poor are barred from. Eliot refutes his father's notion that the poor can go to work and thereby earn a good living and opines that the have-nots are eternally relegated to the inferior positions which they can hardly overcome. Eliot comprehends that many people prefer to "close their eyes to the obscene extremes of wealth and poverty" (Farrell 166).

The out of work eighteen-year old saw maker Eliot beholds in Iowa is a prototypical example of the underprivileged people who are rendered jobless due to increase in automation. Money and usefulness is essentially what makes people acceptable in the American society. Eliot being a philanthropist and intimately sympathizing with the predicament of such people conveys to his wife [Sylvia]:

I look at these people, these Americans . . . and I realize that they can't even care about themselves any more—because they have no *use*. . . . I'm going to love these discarded Americans, even though they're useless and unattractive. (27)

Fred Rosewater, the distant cousin of Eliot is yet another victim of the system and is devoid of the Rosewater fortune as his great-grandfather had relinquished it due to a misunderstanding. He is unaware of the relation with Eliot until brought to light by Mushari. However before the revelation he feels like an "ordinary or less-than-ordinary" (81) man whose prospects of succeeding in life are marginal. He works as an insurance agent and can't make much money. He even contemplates suicide and attempts it. Fred's wife Caroline pities herself for being married to a poor man and is avidly attached to her wealthy friend Amanita Buntline. She is high-handed towards Fred and therefore their marriage suffers considerably. She is not able to come to terms with the fact that she is an indigent. She is "unable to entertain" (95) the fact that she is practically as impoverished as her husband. Fred's shins are described as being "covered with scars and scabs, as though he had been kicked and kicked and kicked every day of his life" (97). Although they are a result of poor household management of Caroline, yet it symbolically represents the gruesome troubles, neglect and humiliation he constantly undergoes in his life. Fred has a deep cut on his chin because of his stumbling over an obsolete vacuum cleaner which Caroline has subconsciously sworn she will not do away with till she is not rich. This signifies her absurd obsession with acquiring immense wealth.

Quite antithetical to Fred's life is that of the Buntline's. The locality the Buntlines dwell in has "utopian lanes" and the overall quality of life of the inhabitants is remarkable:

Every house . . . was a very expensive dream come true. The owners of the houses did not have to work at all. Neither would their children have to work, nor want a thing, unless somebody revolted. Nobody seemed about to. (100)

Amanita's husband Mr. Buntline churns a lot of money out of the firm in which his inheritance is deposited. Ironically he has no idea about his business except that it runs well. This again is in stark contrast with the few dollars which Fred rarely makes and for which he has to strive really hard. Buntline was in the past assisted by McAllister, one of the lawyers of the same firm in which Rosewaters have invested their inheritance. Buntline, in the same vein as Eliot wanted to help the needy through his fortune. However McAllister sturdily warned him against it and the

significance of wealth in the American society can be inferred through the warnings he reiterates to him:

Giving away a fortune is a futile and destructive thing. It makes whiners of the poor, without making them rich and even comfortable. And the donor and his descendants become undistinguished members of the whining poor. . . . Your fortune is the most important single determinant of what you think of yourself and what others think of you. Because of money, you are extraordinary. (104)

The Buntlines also own an orphanage. Selena, the young maid of the Buntlines who formerly lived in the orphanage feels dejected by the treatment meted out to her and writes a letter to Wilfred Parrot, the head of the orphanage. The letter not only exposes the discourteous nature of Amanita but her haughtiness as well. She reiterates to Selena that she is “ungrateful and impertinent” (117). She hollers crazily without any consideration of civility when they attend the sailboat race in which her daughter participates. Selena writes to the head, “She looked like a witch with rabies” (118). This exposes the banality of their sophistication. Selena also mentions in the letter that Amanita commands credit for meagre things. She even wants Selena to be grateful for everything under the sun. When she brings her out to behold the sunset, Selena appreciates the scene, however Amanita under the façade of hospitality bizarrely demands gratitude.

Mrs. Buntline made me come out on the back porch and look at the sunset. So I did, and I said I liked it very much but she kept waiting for me to say something else. I couldn't think of what else I was supposed to say, so I said what seemed like a dumb thing. ‘Thank you very much,’ I said. That was exactly what she was waiting for. ‘You are entirely welcome,’ she said. I have ever since thanked her for the ocean, the moon, the stars in the sky, and the United States Constitution. (119)

Hence Selena deems her attitude to be a part of the larger ambit of how the haves assess the have nots—“It's the way they [rich] have of thinking that everything nice in the world is a gift to the poor people from them or their ancestors” (119). This brings into question the very nature of help and compassion from the affluent people.

The novel also refers to Norman Mushari's various attempts at collecting evidences through various sources to substantiate Eliot's lunacy. However, at the end of the novel Eliot resolves the issue of inheritance and deflates Mushari's endeavors as well. Although he does not have any child, he asks the lawyer to acknowledge that the fifty-seven children whose mothers have falsely claimed Eliot to be their biological father are Eliot's and must be provided the full rights of inheritance of the fortune. Therefore the need to probe his status of mind stands annulled. He leaves generous amount for Fred by writing a cheque for him, thereby resolving everyone's issues in his idiosyncratic way.

Hence the novel unveils the numerous ways through which money governs almost everything for the large chunk of the American society. John Tomedi has rightly pointed out:

Beginning with *Player Piano* (1952), Vonnegut explores the increased mechanization of society, especially as it displaces human beings from meaningful work and, therefore, meaningful existence. The same loss of dignity is portrayed in *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater* (1965), where money and material objects dictate the lives of so many, and simple decency toward one another is possible only at the edge of sanity. (3)

McAllister, the lawyer seems to be the mouthpiece of this society. The description of money as “dehydrated utopia” (105) by him probably best describes how the American public at large envisions it.

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