

Influence of Culture in Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan*

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Culture is the social behavior and norms found in human societies, as well as the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities, and habits of the individuals in these groups. Jewish culture is the culture of the Jewish people, from its formation in ancient times until the current age. Jewish culture covers many aspects, including religion and worldviews, literature, media, and cinema, art and architecture, cuisine and traditional dress, attitudes to gender, marriage, and family, social customs and lifestyles, music and dance. Judaism is the world's oldest monotheistic religion, dating back nearly 4,000 years. Followers of Judaism believe in one God who revealed himself through ancient prophets. The history of Judaism is essential to understanding the Jewish faith, which has a rich heritage of law, culture and tradition. Judaism which spreads three beliefs such as Monotheism, identity and covenant (love of God). The most important teachings of Judaism is that there is one God who wants people to do what is just and compassionate. Judaism guides beliefs and practice of the Jews. Jews believe that God has given them a special job to repair the world. Their job is to make the world a better place with more good in it. They must use the things in the world to increase good and come closer to God. They call this "tikkum olam"-repairing the world. Jews sees themselves as God's partner to repair the world in a way they can; to find ways to lessen suffering of people and animal; to make peace and respect between people and to protect earth's environment from destruction. Jewish people believe there's only one God who has established a covenant—or special agreement—with them. Their God communicates to believers through prophets and rewards good deeds while also punishing evil. *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), touches upon religion, human search for meaning and purpose of life, fate and free will, message and messenger, Prophets and the Hebrew Bible, wanderer, homelessness and human identity, and protection of Earth and environment. These topics are the parts of the Jewish belief as well as the Jewish living which in turn form cultural ethos as defined in Judaism. Vonnegut employs all of them in the novel's narrative which evolves from the actions of the protagonist Malachi Constant of Hollywood, and other character, Winston Niles Rumfoord. The action of the

novel takes place at a time the narrator specifies as “the Nightmare Ages, falling roughly...between the Second World War and the Third Great-Depression” (Vonnegut 2)

The Sirens of Titan (1959), touches upon religion, human search for meaning and purpose of life, fate and free will, message and messenger, Prophets and the Hebrew Bible, wanderer, homelessness and human identity, and protection of Earth and environment. These topics are the parts of the Jewish belief as well as the Jewish living which in turn form cultural ethos as defined in Judaism. Vonnegut employs all of them in the novel’s narrative which evolves from the actions of the protagonist Malachi Constant of Hollywood, and other character, Winston Niles Rumfoord. The action of the novel takes place at a time the narrator specifies as “the Nightmare Ages, falling roughly...between the Second World War and the Third Great-Depression” (Vonnegut 2). It is the time when men did not know that “the meaning of life” was within themselves. Mankind is “ignorant of the truths that lie within every human being, looked outward. What mankind hoped to learn in its outward push was who was actually in charge of allcreation, and what all creation was about” (1).

The search for meaning in outward space turns out futile, consequently the search turns back. “Outwardness lost...Only inwardness remained to be explored...the human soul remained *terra incognita*”. This inward search, according to Vonnegut, is “the beginning of goodness and wisdom” (2). These ideas, put at the outset of the novel, give religious thrust to the novel’s narrative, and also provide the frame in which Vonnegut develops his characters whose actions bear cultural ethos. To the protagonist his name, Malachi Constant, bears significance because Malachi means “faithful messenger”, and even he explains this meaning to other people like Rumfoord. And what Constant has in mind, presumably, is “a first-class message from God to someone equally distinguished” (12). This sense of being a messenger of God dominates the mind of Constant and monitors his actions in the novel. In the *Hebrew Bible* the name Malachi refers to a Minor Prophet of the same name. The Biblical Malachi warns people of their neglecting the ritual and ethical laws. He also prophesies the coming of the messianic era, the days of judgment, and ultimate peace and harmony. Both the Biblical Malachi and Vonnegut Malachi have the same purpose, i.e., to deliver a message.

That Malachi Constant likes to be associated with Biblical messenger is proved again in his assuming the new name Mr. Jonah K. Rowley. On the way back after his visit to Rumfoord, Constant comes across a violent crowd. He remains cool and silent while passing through them. This posture of him surprises the chauffeur, “Man – you must have some kind of guardian angel

– lets you keep cool as a cucumber” (42). Malachi Constant thinks this comment as interesting because “it described well his attitude in the midst of the mob” (42). He is so engrossed in the thought of ‘a would be wanderer’ that he even forgets what pseudo name he has assumed. Later when the pilot tells him that he has “an unusual first name,” Malachi asks “What name’s that?” “Jonah” the pilot answers (44). Malachi Constant’s attempts to identify himself with Biblical messenger and his eagerness to deliver message is an expression of cultural ethos. Constant is the focal point for Vonnegut’s discourse on religion which reflects the cultural ethos in the novel. Vonnegut does not rebel against organized religion, “religion...remains at the center of his discourse” (Davis 40).

The novelist makes sure the reader understands that Malachi is a Jonah figure. In fact, Constant uses the name Jonah Rowley when he visits Rumfoord estate, thus preparing the reader for his anxious flight from Rumfoord’s prophecy. Stanley Schatt sees the parallel between Constant and the Biblical Jonah; he claims that, Constant undergoes unbearable torments, like Jonah, and loses all feelings of selfishness and callousness toward his fellow men (32). The Biblical Jonah is one of the twelve Minor Prophets who calls on the inhabitants of the city Nineveh to repent their ways, and dramatically illustrates how an entire city can save itself through repentance. That Constant desires to carry this Biblical message is made clear in his act of assuming the name of the Biblical Jonah. Vonnegut assigns the noble aspiration of carrying message to Constant, and makes him a centre to the moral of his story. In Malachi Constant’s attitude lays people’s need to make purposeful sense of their lives, as conventionally understood. The focus of the novel is upon the cosmological education of Constant, and through him the education of humanity. The entire book revolves around the misadventures of Constant in search of meaning in outward space such as Mars, Mercury, Titan, and Indianapolis.

Denton suggests that the earth is the most wonderful space ship in all creation and it out speeds any man-made space ship. The earth is God’s space ship which carries billions of men, women, and children, and they “can go swimming, and walk in the sunshine and play baseball and go ice skating and go for family rides...” (28). Denton emphasizes on Jewish living which requires love towards the Mother Earth and its protection as well. In order to achieve goodness and wisdom, Bobby Denton suggests a pattern of living available in the form of Ten Commandments in the *Hebrew Bible*. Breaking the sequence of the commandments, Denton puts them in the form of ten questions and seeks answers from the gathering. The Ten Commandments are called *mitzvot* in Judaism given by God to Moses at Mt. Sinai. They are the best commandments addressing the

central issues of human behavior toward God and with fellow human beings. These commandments are designed in two equal parts - first five commandments regulate conduct between humankind and God, and the second five regulate conduct between people. Denton focuses on the second five commandments by breaking their sequence and taking the second part first. The intrusion of Denton passage into the narrative

describing Malachi Constant-Rumfoord meeting is suggestive of meaning that Constant is after. The narrator describes Bobby Denton ending his speech about God's space ship blasting off after *ten things* are checked. It is implied that Denton speech is intended for Constant since his remark follows Denton's remark showing him in conversation with Denton and not with Rumfoord:

“Blast off!” shouted Bobby Denton joyfully. “Paradise, here we come! Blast off, children, and Amen!”

“Well” – murmured Malachi Constant... “it looks like the messenger is finally going to be used” (30).

This stylistic arrangement shows that Constant is in the gathering and responding to Bobby Denton, and not to Rumfoord. It also indicates Constant's involvement in religious matter. His aspiration to carry the message and his association with the Biblical messenger are strong indications on his part to live by cultural ethos.

Rumfoord's impression on Constant is so big that he succumbs to Rumfoord's invitation for space travels though at first he denies it. Rumfoord promises Constant entrance into a paradise of perfect peace, beauty, and understanding. From his omniscient point of view, that he calls “chrono-synclastic infundibulum,” and that provides him an overview of human destiny, Rumfoord explains that the events of Constant's life are inevitably structured to be the way they are, and submission to the view that “everything that ever has been always will be, and everything that ever will be always has been” (20) will bring him to paradise.

Rumfoord prophesies that Constant is predestined to be shot into outer space to Mars, Mercury, and Titan on the biggest spaceship. And he would be accompanied by his wife and his son Chrono, and more Constant will have true contentment. He further tells Malachi Constant that on Titan he will find “the most pleasant climate,” and women who are “the most beautiful creatures between the Sun and Betelgeuse” (31). He further entices Constant by slipping a photograph of three women – one white, one gold, and one brown - to him. Their beauty makes its effect on Constant:

They looked up at Constant, begging him to come to them, to make them whole

with love. Their beauty was to the beauty of Miss Canal Zone as the glory of the Sun was to the glory of a lightning bug” (33-34).

Despite Rumfoord’s temptation of beautiful women on Titan, Constant likes to be a messenger of God. On the way back, in order to avoid violence, he assumes a pseudo name Mr. Jonah K. Rowley suggesting his association with the Biblical prophet. It is not without intention that the narrator ends the first chapter with a huge billboard reading “Let’s take a friend to the church of our choice on Sunday!” while Constant passing by it (40). Judaism acknowledges prayer as a personal quest for friendship (Dosick 231).

On the other side, Beatrice Rumfoord, too, tries to escape her husband’s prophecy, from his design. Rumfoord has told her that life is like a ride on the roller-coaster that goes its way without our control. What Rumfoord means is that Beatrice cannot escape events that will be going to happen to her. In order to escape her fate linked with Constant, she has bought a capsule of cyanide, and intends to swallow it if she is forced to share with Constant (45). Despite efforts by Constant and Beatrice to avoid their fate, all their efforts turn out futile because they are governed by fatalism. It is Rumfoord’s fatalistic view of the world that - “everything that ever has been always will be, and everything that ever will be always has been” (20) – leaves no freedom of choice for Constant and Beatrice. The notion of free will becomes preposterous since everything is determined by chance.

Boaz, the young black soldier and Unk’s buddy, who tries to help Unk to regain his memory back.

The major concern of Boaz has been to help Unk to regain his memory in order to establish Unk’s identity. It is Boaz’s need to do so because in a prospective attack on Earth, Boaz is dependent on Unk’s help. Boaz is recruited as an orphan at the age of fourteen, and he does not “have the haziest notion as to how to have a good time on Earth” (119). Boaz asks Unk, “You want to know who you are – where you come from – what you were?” (119). These are the questions which direct to the identity crisis that Unk does suffer from. Identity crisis has been remained a part of cultural ethos of Jews since Biblical times. Homeless and in a foreign land, Jews lost their identity, and in order to gain it, they search their past in the form of memory. In Unk’s case, Earth is the place that he is brought from; it is the place where Unk was “one of the luckiest men ever lived” (119). The next thing that helps Unk to regain his memory, and provides him with an understanding of life is the letter he has written on Mars before his memory is cleaned out.

Unk tells his son that he is his father but Chrono responds by a question “So what?” (146). Chrono does so because:

He had never received any instructions, had never seen an example in life, that would make him think a father was of any importance. On Mars, the word was emotionally meaningless (147).

This quote brings the cultural ethos at the surface of the narrative of the novel. Respect the parents and set it as an example for children is an injunction for Jewish way of life. Mars is not the congenial place for a family to live, and since Chrono grows there, he grows void of

emotions so that Unk’s weeping appalls him. Chrono has “never seen a man weep before. He never wept himself” (148). The only person he knows is his mother Bee.

In taking up the issue of identity, Jews were the travelers from nation to nation seeking shelters and trying to identify with them. They change their identity as required for survival; changing identity becomes their strategy for survival. Constant, too, is entwined with this cultural ethos. During the stay on various planets, one of Constant’s objectives has been to establish his true identity and his proper place in the world. It is his modest expression of cultural ethos which cradles in his mind. Constant loses an identity which is basically uncertain because it only relies on social position. Men like Rumfoord and Constant’s father prevent Constant from seeking answers to basic questions. They have patterns which provide fake and not authentic identity. Rumfoord conducts all human affairs on an abstract level. He forces Constant into a role in which he changes his identity like a chameleon (Robson 48).

Malachi Constant’s mission to Earth parallels to that of the Biblical Malachi’s in the past. Constant plays the role of a modern Malachi journeying somewhat reluctantly to the Ninevites. The similarities between the Biblical Malachi and fictional Malachi Constant are both ironic and revealing (Robson 52). Malachi’s mission to the Israelites contains in the Book of Malachi is for the purpose re-kindling in them a desire to practice their faith. He advocates the restoration of ritual while emphasizing that inner commitment must accompany religious rites. In the Bible Malachi addresses himself to the doubting mind. Men ask how it is that the good suffer while the evil prosper. Malachi Constant has opposite experience at the hands of Rumfoord that evildoers do not escape punishment. It is important to note here that the Biblical prophet’s messages parallel Constant’s messages to the mob who gather to see him. The Biblical messages are about faithfulness to God and to one another.

To save environment is a part of Jewish way life, and it is not surprising that *The Sirens of Titan* is full of passages which contain the message to save earth and her environment. The novel records the hero's journey to Mars, Mercury, Earth and Titan but it is on Earth that the hero is comfortable because Earth has "gaseous envelop" (11) which other planets lack. Earth is above all precious for it is "the most wonderful space ship in all creation" (27). Bobby Denton criticizes the fad for space exploration and suggests that Earth itself is a planet in space. It must be noted that Rumfoord persuades Constant to go to Titan for its "most pleasant climate" (31) since the one Constant having is not comfortable to him. In his reckless days, Constant does not care the environment around him, and neglects the maintenance of his swimming pool which becomes the wide gutter:

...the breeze revealed a pool bottom paved with broken glass, cherries, twists of lemon peel, peyotl buttons, slices of orange, stuffed olives, sour onions, a television set, a hypodermic syringe, and the ruins of a white grand piano. Cigar butts and cigarette butts, some of them marijuana, littered the surface (49).

This garbage makes the "swimming pool looked less like a facility for sport than like a punchbowl in hell" (50). Malachi Constant's father, Noel Constant, too, was not serious about the environment around him. One of his regular visitors to his Room 223 observes the squalor and disease in it.

Naming of the protagonist of the novel *The Sirens of Titan* as Malachi Constant is appropriate for it helps Vonnegut to focus on the larger issue of the Jewish cultural belief. Malachi refers to the twelve minor prophet described in Judaism who is a messenger from God. Even he himself explains the meaning of his name that it means "faithful messenger." In his moments of depression, we are told, "Constant pined for just one thing – a single message that was sufficiently dignified and important to merit his carrying it humbly between two points" (12). Further, Constant has designed a coat-of-arms, complete with the motto, *The Messenger Awaits*. *The Sirens of Titan*, the novel deals with Jewish history, particularly with the Holocaust (i.e. the systematic attempt by the Nazis to murder every Jew on the face of the earth), and Jews' responsibility in that nightmare.

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