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The Problem of Identity in American Postmodern Fiction

Case Study: Kurt Vonnegut *Breakfast of Champions*

A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of Letters and English Language in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master in Anglophone Language, Literature and Civilization

BOARD OF EXAMINERS

Chairwoman: Mrs. Nardjesse CHAHAT	(MAA)	University of 8 Mai 1945-Guelma
Supervisor: Mrs. Ahlem MAHTALI	(MAA)	University of 8 Mai 1945-Guelma
Examiner: Mrs. Lilia BRAHMIA	(MAB)	University of 8 Mai 1945-Guelma

Submitted by: **Supervised by**:

Sarra KIRATI   Mrs. Ahlem MAHTALI

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Dedication

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Abstract

Identity is one of the controversial notions in American Postmodern fiction. It gains importance as it becomes problematic in post-WWII America, due to the circumstances that characterized America in that period. Kurt Vonnegut is considered one of the best writers who tackles the issue of identity in depth especially in his novel *Breakfast of Champions* (1973). This study aims at investigating the issue of identity from different perspectives by using the sociological, psychological and existential methods. It also aims at showing Vonnegut's view on the American society, the individual's mind set and the process of identity construction and deconstruction after the Second World War.

Table of Contents

Introduction

      Literature has always been thought of as a reflection of the social conditions that shape it. Authors, through literature, attempt to reflect the state of being of people. The issue of identity is one of the controversial themes in literature in general and in postmodern literature in particular. In postmodern America, identity was influenced by many factors including the war. WWII affected every aspect of the American life and mindset especially people's identity. Identity construction is considered as a complex process due to the circumstances that characterize the post-WWII period. In this period, the process of identity construction often ends with self disintegration and loss of identity. The present thesis will highlight the issue of identity in American postmodern fiction and the conditions that shape the characters' identity in Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* (1973).

      The discussion focuses on the issue of identity from a postmodernist point of view. In order to analyze the issue of identity and the characters' identity construction and deconstruction in postmodern fiction the sociological, psychological and existential approaches will be used. Kurt Vonnegut is known for dealing with different themes, mostly the issue of identity in postmodern America. One of his literary works that best represent his view of the disintegration of the individual in the society and the loss of identity is *Breakfast of Champions* (1973). The novel also reflects his view about postmodern America and its conditions.

      This thesis will be divided into three chapters. The first chapter is a theoretical overview of the issue of identity in postmodernism. This chapter will deal with the problem of identity from sociological, psychological and existential perspectives respectively in order to understand the mechanisms of identity formation. In addition, it addresses identity crisis and its consequences on the individual in postmodern America.

The second chapter is a semi-theoretical one that focuses on Vonnegut as a prominent figure in the American postmodern literary scene. It will focus on his views about the issue of identity in post-WWII America and his response to the post-war American society. In addition to his nihilist and absurdist views and the techniques he uses to present such themes, as well as the reasons behind his characters' loss of coherent self.

The third chapter will analyze Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*, provide an overview of the novel as a work of social criticism and present Vonnegut's view about the American individual. Furthermore, it will focus on the two main characters' processes of identity construction and deconstruction.

Chapter One: Identity and Identity Crisis in Postmodernism

In relation to literature, identity is a problematic issue. It is often portrayed as either a source of power and self-pride or a source of weakness when the individual suffers from an identity crisis. In postmodern literature identity and identity crisis takes different forms and directions. The present chapter will attempt to approach the issue of identity from different perspectives. It will attempt to highlight it from the sociological, psychoanalytic and existentialist approaches in general and will focus on its conception within the postmodern context in particular.

1.   Towards Understanding the Issue of Identity

1.1.   Understanding the Issue of Identity from the Sociological Perspective

Identity is a problematic issue that resists a single definition. Etymologically, according to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, identity comes from the Latin word *idem* which means "the same" or "the qualities, beliefs, etc., that make a particular person or group different from others" ("identity"). A person thus is known for a particular identity with a set of same traits that distinguish him or her from everyone else. This implies that generally we have a unique identity that is consistent our whole life. This definition, however, is too limited and is a basic one.

People, actually belong to particular social or ethnic groups and this suggests that identities are not based solely on individual traits but also based on interactions within society. Sociologist Steph Lawler in her book *Identity: Sociological Perspectives* (2008) argues that identity is not separate from the social environment and that identities are constructed through social interactions. That is to say, interaction with others plays an important role in the process of identity formation. She says, "Identity needs to be understood not as belonging 'within' the individual person, but as produced between persons and within

social relations" (8). For example, sharing with others one's own memories, to which Lawler refers as an "autobiographical work," allows people to formulate their own identities (13).

Lawler, however, suggests that identity includes both difference from and similarity with other members of one's social/ethnic group (2). Similarity is in the sense that people are identical to themselves; a person keeps basic qualities throughout his or her life, from birth to death and s/he is also identical or similar to others since they are connected in a way or another to a particular social or ethnic group.

Identity, from the other side, involves difference since every person is different from the other members of his group in one or more aspects of his or her identity (2). In other words, a person may share different qualities with other people in terms of gender, nationality and culture, yet they possess properties that make them different from each other. Accordingly, a person's identity includes all those traits of sameness with one's social/ethnic group and also other traits that distinguish him/her from other members of this same group.

Fascinatingly, Lawler believes that "identities are asserted because people have 'obvious' differences" (Lawler 4). This statement suggests that our unique identity is what distinguishes us from other people. Differences between people emphasize their uniqueness. However, since differences are not always evident, conflicts among people such as those based on ethnic and religious differences may happen. People, therefore, attempt to magnify those differences in order to make them more obvious.

Lawler's theories about identity are even more complicated as she also suggests that a person may not have only one identity (3). A person can possibly acquire multiple identities in an "additive way". In other words, a person can have more than one identity and those identities are on top of each other; they interact with each other and are also dynamic. Such identities revolve around gender identity, race identity, religious identity … etc, as when we

refer to a particular person as a black Christian woman. Every description of this particular person evokes a set of properties.

Indeed, one of the other important social theories concerning identity is Tajfel and Turner's "social identity" theory which was developed in 1979. The theory suggests that individuals' sense of their identity depends on their belonging to a certain social group (Tajfel and Turner 7). Thus, this certain group provides a sense of social identity. Indeed, a person's identity is always, more or less psychologically, influenced by social belonging.

In this regard, Tajfel and Turner distinguish between two types of groups that people identify with the "in-groups" and the "out-groups" (Tajfel and Turner 7). The first group is when the person identifies himself with a specific group whether because of cultural, political, gender, social class, or religious backgrounds. When a person does not identify with a certain social group, this group is called the out-group and, as a result, people from this out-group will be discriminated by others members of the in-group. This process is responsible for group conflicts such as racism. Thus, "the more intense is an intergroup conflict, the more likely it is that the individuals who are members of the opposite groups will behave toward each other as a function of their respective group memberships" (Tajfel and Turner 8).

For example, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) depicts the cultural clash between African tribes and English missionaries. Before colonization, the tribe members were attached to their religion and history and used to have a shared identity. With the arrival of the colonizer and the missionaries, African people become lost and this led to an identity breakdown. This is illustrated by the character of Okonkwo who lives his life believing that he has a strong and respectable identity. His identity, however, becomes disintegrated once his whole society is disintegrated due to the coming of the missionaries and their influence.

Tajfel and Turner also suggest that there are three main processes that occur when the individual identifies himself with a specific group (Tajfel and Turner 13). First, social categorization in which the person uses the different categories as: black and white, male and female, Christian and Muslim and so on to give a full identification of himself and his supposed behavior. In this way "social categorizations are conceived here as cognitive tools that segment, classify and order the social environment, and thus enable the individual to undertake many forms of social action" (Tajfel and Turner 15-6). The person hence may belong to different social categories.

Second, conformity to one's society is a necessary process of identification. Tajfel and Turner believe that "social groups… provide their members with an identification of themselves in social terms" (16). This stage involves adaptation. Thus, after the person identifies himself with a certain social group or groups, s/he adopts his identity to the norms, and behaviors of the group s/he belongs to.

In the third stage, the person starts to compare the properties of the group s/he belongs to and the properties of the groups to which s/he does not belong. Through this process of comparison, the person competes to keep those properties and self-esteem of the group s/he belongs to. Thus, "The evaluation of one's own group is determined with reference to specific other groups through social comparisons in terms of value-laden attributes and characteristics" (Tajfel and Turner 16). In the process of determining their identity, people assure their individuality in terms of social belonging.

In literature, the issue of identity takes other dimensions besides social belonging. Characters' identities are built around not only social bases but also on other internal influences. Thus, Tajfel and Turner's theory of "social identity" is not sufficient for understanding the issue of identity especially when related to literary representation. Thus, in

our attempt to understand the influences on identity formation, we have to invade the field of psychology.

1.2. Understanding The Issue of Identity From a Psychological Perspective

Identity, and identity formation is an important issue that is largely dealt with in psychology. Many psychologists attempt different conceptions of identity. Peter Weinreich, in his book *Analyzing Identity: Cross-Cultural Societal, and Clinical Contexts* (2002), defines identity as "the totality of one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future" (80). According to Weinreich a person's identity is a combination of his past, present, and future conception of himself.

The past for instance is very important for one's sane identity. In Patrick Modiano's novel *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* (Missing Person) (1978) the protagonist Guy Roland suffers from an amnesia that leads to losing all his memories and thus his identity. Instead of adapting to the new identity, Roland tries to find his past and connects its pieces to retrieve his true identity. However, Roland's quest for identity turns out to be an endless journey.

One of Peter Weinreich's remarkable contributions in the field of psychology is Identity Structure Analysis (ISA) which is considered a framework of psychological concepts. ISA is an approach that aims to understand identity formation and development by providing "seamless interface between psychology, sociology and social anthropology , and related subject areas such as political science , economics, social policy, education , and so on" (Weinreich and Saunderson 1). This approach takes ideas and findings from different disciplines, sociology, psychology and social anthropology to investigate how society and the psyche of the individual interfere in the making of an identity.

Earlier, in the nineteenth century, Sigmund Freud saw that the psyche has three main aspects. These are the "id, the ego, and the super ego" which develop at certain stages in the individual's life (25). Each part of the psyche has specific properties yet all of the aspects contribute to a person's identity. The "id" is the unconscious part of the psyche; it is the unrealistic and unreasonable part that contains sexual and aggressive drives and longs to realize one's desires and wishes. The "ego" is that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world. It is developed in order to act like a bridge between the unrealistic id and the external real world. Its function is based on logic and reason. The "superego" contains the morals and the values of the society which the person learns through social interaction.

Kendra Cherry in "The Conscious and Unconscious Mind" says that Sigmund Freud is responsible for the popularity of the theory of the conscious vs. the unconscious. It is considered as one of the most influential contributions in the field of psychology. In relation to this theory, Freud believes that the process of identity formation results from interaction of psychological forces that function at three levels: the preconscious, the conscious, and the unconscious. Basically, the conscious mind includes things we are aware of, the preconscious contains thoughts and beliefs that are stored unconsciously at a certain time and can be retrieved easily, the unconscious mind, however, is responsible for our behaviors, decisions, and feelings, and includes dreams, memories, desires, experiences, and emotions.

Erik Erikson is one of the psychologists who study identity and its development deeply. Erikson deals with identity from a larger scope for he studies the cognitive social and cultural aspects of identity (Schwartz 11). During the war, the term identity crisis was used to describe a certain mental disorder. It was used to define the status of patients who "lost their sense of personal sameness and historical continuity" (Bauman 7). Erikson dealt with identity

crisis in his 1968 book *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, he is considered as the one responsible for the popularity of the two terms "identity" and "identity crisis".

C. George Boeree in *Personality Theories* (2004) argues that identity crisis is a stage in which the person feels uncertainty towards their role in the society. It mostly happens to adolescents as they start questioning who they are and how they can fit in their society. They feel uncomfortable with the way they look and, as a result, they start to look for answers to their raised questions. However, an identity crisis can occur at an older stage of life and this one is known as "midlife crisis". In "midlife crisis" the person starts to question the purpose of life and the purpose of his actions due to the continual changes as the person grows up in age. Successful people go through this crisis without any damages, unlike less successful ones (143-6).

The person with identity crisis is in continuous search for his true identity. However, this is considered as a phase in the psychological development of the person as Bauman clearly says "it is also a common yet passing stage in 'normal' personal development" (478). Nevertheless, it becomes a problematic issue when the person fails to find his true identity or constructs a weak one. Not finding his suitable psychological identity leads to losing this weak identity and searching for a new one (Radwan).

In Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, he states that identity crisis usually occurs in adolescence, when the teenager experiences role confusion in the society and their sense of personal identity. He argues that a successful identity is formed from different conflicts and this formation process requires a stage of identity crisis (261). He explains "The growing and developing youths… are primarily concerned with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are" (Erikson, Childhood 261) and this is

a sign of crisis, a confusional condition that adolescents suffer from while constructing their own identities.

In fact, C. George Boeree in *Personality Theories* (2004) says that Erik Erikson believes that, psychologically, people never stop developing. He thus proposes eight developmental stages in the process of identity formation and each depends on the other preceding ones. These are "trust vs. mistrust" in which the infant develops trust or mistrust through the interaction with its parents due to its dependency on both of them. The second is "Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt" during which the child starts exploring its surroundings but still dependent on the parents as they can help foster its autonomy.

The third stage is "Initiative vs. Guilt" in which the child becomes active and develops courage and learns to take the initiative for leadership. The fourth is "The Industry (competence) vs. Inferiority" in which the child learns new skills and the risk of failure and inferiority. It becomes more aware of itself and it starts to take responsibility. The fifth is "Identity vs. Role Confusion" a sensitive stage, where adolescents become confused about who they are as they move from childhood to adulthood.

The sixth is "Intimacy vs. Isolation" at this level the previous stage ends and the young adult has built his or her identity and must be ready to make commitments towards others. S/he blends his/her identity with others to form intimate relationships. However, if s/he fails to do so, they develop a sense of isolation. The seventh is "Generativity vs. Stagnation" where the main concern of the adult is how to be active agent in the society and help others. The eighth and the last one is "Ego Integrity vs. Despair" in which the person starts to question his past and his achievements. It usually occurs when the person feels that s/he is near the end of his/her life (8-13).

James Marcia extends Erikson's theory of identity crisis and identity confusion by suggesting four different phases of identity development (177). Those phases range from

undefined identity to a specific unified one including "Identity Diffusion, Foreclosure, Moratorium, and Identity Achievement" This model comprises of four phases and each phase describes a particular period of the identity formation (Bilsker 177). According to Bilsker, Marcia's model helps in the analysis of adolescent's identity.

In the first phase, called "Identity Diffusion" the adolescent has not made any choices or commitments yet (Bilsker 184). In The second one, which is referred to as "Identity Foreclosure", the adolescent is ready to make commitment regarding morals and values. In this phase, the adolescent has not yet experienced identity crisis since s/he is adjusting their behaviors to meet the expectations of others. The third status, known as "Moratorium" is when the adolescent experiences a crisis as he explores different identities and chooses one but is unable to stick to it.

During The last status, which is called "Identity Achievement" the adolescent who has already gone through identity crisis is now able to choose a particular identity and stick to it. According to Dan Bilsker "An Existentialist Account of Identity Formation" (1992) identity development is realized in terms of choices and commitments to those choices. An individual with a well developed identity has a clear sense of himself and his actions are consistent with his chosen identity. Similar to Erikson, Marcia believes that identity crisis plays a role in the identity formation that leads the person to question morals, values, and choices. Those crises help the person to become more aware of his choices and ready to commit to them. This understanding of identity finds its basis in the existentialist approach, the fact that makes it interesting for us to explore it.

1.3.Understanding the Issue of Identity from the Existentialist Perspective

Theories of identity have their roots in the existentialist thinking. Existentialism as a theory puts the individual at the center of focus rather than the society. Existentialism as a

philosophy gained importance in Paris, France, as "a side effect of the Second World War" (Natanson 102). Since then, many thinkers dealt with existentialism and tried to provide a sufficient definition. This created a kind of confusion over the term and many definitions and perspectives about the term emerged.

Existentialism dates back to the 1940s during which philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and other Parisian writers were interested in understanding the nature of the human existence. Sartre is well known in this matter through his lecture "Existentialism is a Humanism" (1946) which was later published as a book.

Sartre's existentialism relies on the idea that the individual's existence depends on the actions he chooses to make (Sartre 5). In addition, a person's existence precedes his own conception of himself. Mairet, for instance, explains that "Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards" (3). This implies that a person's definition of himself is a result of his sense of existence. A person, hence, is the one who decides his character and thus has to hold responsibility of his actions. Sartre calls this "anguish", which is an emotion that the person feels when he realizes he is responsible for his actions. Existentialists believe that the individual as such is responsible for his/her identity formation and s/he is free to decide who s/he is. Therefore, the human being is the creator of his own identity and identity is an individual choice.

Existentialism started as a philosophical movement and later influenced literature and literary theory with the introduction of important concepts. Existential notions such as the absurd, alienation and nihilism, were largely explored by twentieth century writers. They create alienated characters who are frustrated with the absurd world and try to find meaning out of nothing. Characters are hopeless and writers do not propose any solutions to their existential problems (Davachi 1-13).

Nihilism, which is a concept largely explored by postmodern writers, emphasizes that there is no absolute truth. It refers to the meaninglessness of the world in which the individual rejects any traditional values or religious norms (Moinao 1). The failure to find meaning to life leaves the individual in a nihilistic status in which s/he feels frustrated and hopeless. The thought of suicide can be considered a solution for him/her (Moinao 2-4).

The "absurd" is considered one of the famous concepts related to existentialism and an essential component to it. The "absurd" is defined as "the conflict between man's continual search for meaning and his inability to find any meaning in a cold, indifferent universe" (Roskowski 15). The person's desire to find meaning for his life and his inability to achieve it leave him in a strange state which is the absurd.

Existentialists focus on the absurd because it is relative to their attempt to understand the nature of human existence. They believe that through self awareness and responsibility the person can find meaning to life. He is "an active agent" (Roskowski 16) in this process of pursuit of meaning in .But, at the same time, they believe that this life is meaningless (Roskowski 17). Facing such absurdity, the person has three choices, either s/he faces it, commits suicide or keeps his faith (Roskowski17).

One of the most influential writers of the absurd is Albert Camus. Camus's conception of the absurd expressed in his lecture "L'Existentialisme est Un Humanisme" (1946) has its roots in the philosophy which claims that the existence of God does not cause any change on the individual's life (Sartre 1-3). It claims that "if God existed that would make no difference from its point of view. Not that we believe God does exist, but we think that the real problem is not that of His existence; what man needs is to find himself again and to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God" (Sartre 11).

Similarly, Camus suggests "The absurd is born of the confrontation between the human need and unreasonable silence of the world. This must not be forgotten. This must be clung to because the whole consequence of life can depend on it, the irrational, the human nostalgia, and the absurd that is born of their encounter" (Camus 28). He thinks that the absurd is the result of the person's search for meaning and his inability to find it. He also thinks that life and the world are pointless because of the non-existence of God.

Though Camus refused to be categorized as an existentialist, his works are totally existentialist ones. In his works, he shows how human life is pointless. In his novel, *L'Etranger (The Stranger)* (1942), the character Meursault feels alienated from his society. He chooses not to believe in the existence of god and feels that life is worthless. The protagonist represents, as such, the sense of absurdity. Consequently, he acts carelessly throughout his life even when his mother dies (ÖZYÖN 90-103).

The concept of the absurd has later developed with the tragic consequences of the wars. A general feeling is that life has become worthless as people start to feel that their existence is meaningless. Moreover, the sense that the world and life are meaningless leads to the feeling of alienation (Slocombe 199-203).

An important existentialist writer of twentieth century is Frantz Kafka. The effects of the war had changed his view about life. Like many existentialist writers he explores existentialist issues in his writings. Novels such as: *The Trial (1925), The Castle* (1926) and *The Metamorphosis* (1915) portray characters who suffer from alienation in an absurd world. *The Trial* (1925), for instance, tells the story of Joseph K. who is arrested and named guilty for no apparent reason. Through his protagonist, Kafka tries to show the corruption of the judicial system and the absurdity that is represented through K's trial. The world is represented as being inhuman as K is put on trial without giving him any information. The novel shows the effect of the absurd on a man who questions his existence and purpose in life.

Postmodern literature is related, more or less, to social and historical development as writers tackle the issue of identity as a struggle to fit in the social and historical contexts (Rezaei 16). Postmodern writers tend to tackle serious issues like the war in a satirical and humorous manner so as to emphasize their view about the absurdity of the post-WWII world. They present the postmodern human conditions as the reasons behind the disintegration of the postmodern self (Rezaei 16). The following section will focus on postmodern writer's emphasis on portraying characters who suffer from identity crisis as a response to the postmodern conditions (both psychological and sociological ones).

1.4. Identity and Identity Crisis in Relation to Postmodernism

The issue of identity is pertinent to postmodernism. Robert G. Dunn states that the postmodern world after the Second World War has witnessed many serious changes especially due to cultural, political and social changes as an aftermath of the war. This led to an overriding interest in the problem of identity. He states that the problem of identity is related to postmodernism "Over time, my own readings made it increasingly clear that at the center of this intellectual movement was a vital but rather circumscribed preoccupation with the problem of identity" (R.Dunn 1). Identity problems, hence, are related to the conditions that characterize postmodernism.

Dunn argues that the problems of identity are a result of life conditions in post-WWII western societies. Postmodernism is a movement and style that mirrors the changes in culture and society in western world especially the United States. He considers postmodernism as a reaction to the failure of European Enlightenment Movement (R.Dunn 2).

Postmodernism is profoundly marked by skepticism towards absolute truths. This aura of skepticism has also affected people's conception of their own identity. People become skeptical towards having a coherent self in response to their loss of faith in a coherent society

(Identity and The Self). Thus, one of the aspects that characterize postmodernism is the absence of a coherent self.

Indeed, postmodernism is characterized by questioning the authority of established institutions such as law and religion. The shift from certainty to uncertainty engendered especially by WWII and the threat of nuclear war led to the loss of faith in truth, justice, equality and progress. The individual in postmodernism becomes hybrid as his identity becomes composed of different pieces. His/her identity is now more complex since it is made up of different parts (Identity and The Self).

Identity became problematic in postmodern times due to globalization that caused identity crisis. Identity crisis is a status in which the individual feels insecure and cannot recognize his/her own identity. In postmodern societies the individual is supposed to be "An active participant (i.e. as a subject), to develop new forms of self-identification in order to create autonomy" (Golubović 33). That is to say, Individuals develop their identities to become independent. However, globalization brings "conformity" along and promotes submission to certain standards, rules and behaviors that hinder self-identification and autonomy (Golubović 33).

The postmodern individual is no longer able to feel a sense of social belonging mainly because the world superpowers have imposed a model to be followed in the whole world regardless of a nation's culture and its members' freedom to choose their own identity and respect their cultural differences (Golubović 33). The individual faces identity conflicts because of the contradictions between the ideal model designed by the superpowers and the one that represents their own culture the thing that prevents them from constructing an independent identity. This leads to a sense of disappointment by individuals who later feel an identity loss (Golubović 33-4).

Zygmunt Bauman, in his article "From Pilgrim to Tourist- or a Short History of Identity" (1996), suggests that the process of identity construction in postmodern times is far more different than in modern times. He believes that the problem in modernity "was how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable" (2). The individual of early twentieth century wants to create a stable and strong identity. However, in postmodernity identity construction has become a matter of "how to avoid fixation" (2). Identity now is in a process of constant change, unstable and composed of different parts.

It is also maintained that there is no real identity since reality and truth are no longer fixed and absolute. Walter Truett Anderson in his book *The Future of the Self: Inventing the Postmodern Person* (1997) uses four terms to explain the postmodern self or identity. First, the word "multiphrenia" is used to mean that postmodern identity is shaped with different surrounding factors (37). Identity, therefore, is multidimensional and there is no more authentic self since we play different roles in different contexts. In other words, we doubt everything surrounding us and we act differently from one situation to another. Hence, there is no consistent self, but rather a multiple one "In the postmodern world, you just don't get to be a single and consistent somebody"(Anderson 38).

The Second is the "protean self" that changes depending on the situation (Anderson 38). The third is the "de-centered self" which reflects the absence of a constant coherent self. The Fourth one is the "self-in-relation" which means that individuals are related socially and culturally and that in order to find their selves, they need first to understand their social and cultural contexts. An important theorist in this regard is Stewart Hall.

Stuart Hall is a cultural theorist, sociologist, and a political activist. In *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1996), he distinguishes three perceptions of identity. These are "identity of the Enlightenment subject", the "sociological subject" and the "postmodern subject" (275). The enlightenment subject or individual is considered as a whole and centered person gifted

with reason and logic. Hall describes it as "an inner core which first emerged when the subject was born and unfolded with it, while remaining essentially the same - continuous or "identical" with itself - throughout the individual's existence" (Hall 597). This identity is stable and never changes throughout life. In other words, it is a unified and consistent one.

The sociological subject is a complex subject wherein the inner core is not a self-created one but rather created through interaction with others. This subject derives the morals and values from that society. Thus, there is a reciprocal relationship between the "subjects" and "the cultural worlds they inhabit" (Hall 597). Seen from this sociological conception, identity changes through time depending on the external world and the process of identity formation becomes endless and "Problematic".

The "postmodern subject" is conceived as a fragmented, unstable and a changeable one. Identity construction, in this case, is a never-ending one as it is always modified, from birth to death. It is, therefore, an un-unified one as the person changes his identity according to different social, historical and cultural contexts and acquires multiple identities (Hall 598).

Reading postmodern literature, one can simply understand these dynamic processes of identity construction and its problems. American postmodern writers, for instance, mostly portray characters with disintegrated selves; ones with multiple protein dimensions that change due to psychological, social and cultural influences.

Among the many American postmodern writers who successfully explored the multi-dimensional postmodern self is Kurt Vonnegut. A sufficient exploration of his works, especially those written in the three decades following WWII, allows us to explore highly fragmented individuals whose response to the contemporary world is a bizarre one due to the harms inflicted on their own conception of themselves. The following chapters, therefore, will attempt to explore Vonnegut's view about the contemporary human condition as reflected in his works in general and *Breakfast of Champions* in particular.

Chapter two: Kurt Vonnegut's Perception of the Postmodern American Society

Kurt Vonnegut is a prominent figure in the American literary scene who deals with the issue of identity in post-WWII America. His writings are considered to be among the most influential literary works in postmodern fiction. Therefore, the present chapter will attempt to investigate Vonnegut's view about the issue of identity in post-WWII America, the disintegration of the American society and his theory of the Loss of a Coherent Self.

1.   Kurt Vonnegut's View About The Disintegration of the American Society

Authors are considered the voice of the voiceless through their literature. Kurt Vonnegut like any author feels the responsibility to make readers aware of some problematic issues in their society. He reflects what he sees to the readers through his writings. He is well known for his satirical novels and critical writings about the 20th century American society (Loeb 1-2).

Vonnegut opposes Roland Barthes' theory of the "death of the author". Vonnegut believes that the author must be present in his works. In this way, he challenges modernist conventions that say that the author's role ends as soon as he finishes writing the book. He adopts postmodernist techniques that help him become part of his works and emphasize his importance in them. He uses alter egos and first person narrator to intrude the plots of his stories (Mayerchak 1-4). Through recreating himself as a character in his works he asserts his identity as an author (Mayerchak 6).

Kurt Vonnegut is regarded as a fatalistic writer. Fatalism is a philosophy which emphasizes that one's fate is predetermined and inevitable. Vonnegut sees people as machines without free will to control their lives. That is why in his novels the characters are portrayed

as machines who are unable to make decisions because they are controlled by larger entities namely religion, science and war that Vonnegut calls "enormous forces".

Vonnegut includes many of his life incidents in his novels. He either mentions them directly or he compares what happens to him to incidents related to his characters. His view about life is shaped by his psychological and emotional state. Vonnegut's life is full of tragedies such as his mother's suicide, the death of his father, his sister and witnessing the death of thousands of people during the war. Those tragedies are reflected in his works.

Vonnegut believes that depression plays a great role in the way he writes. He is influenced by the pains in his life and his difficult emotional status. He believes that writers of fiction cannot transmit the pains of people properly unless they are in pain. Vonnegut's view to life is shaped by his mother's suicide, his war experiences and the depression he experienced. Thus he becomes careless and he mocks life (Langdon 2).

Furthermore, Vonnegut is known for writing about the society. The Characters he uses represent people in his life but fiction gives him more space to manipulate their actions. Before publishing his first novel *Player Piano* in 1952, Vonnegut wrote short stories and articles about identity issues especially about those veterans who suffer to integrate in their society after the war. He also includes historical events and exposes faulty truths, as he believes that the writer is responsible for addressing important issues. His novels tackle different social issues, each novel focuses on a particular issue (Mayerchak 1).

Vonnegut uses fragmentation in his plots to reflect the conditions of people in the society and to show the confusion of contemporary life. In addition, fragmentation shows the nature of identities during that time. Identities are fragmented, incoherent and made up of different parts. Another aspect of fragmentation is his use of nonlinear plots. He jumps forward and backward from one story to another and from one idea to another. His conception of time shows his belief that there is no definite way of perceiving time. Thus, not using a

chronological order for the stories leaves the reader to connect the different pieces in the novel to understand the whole story (Loeb 21-4).

Moreover, postmodern writers treat serious issues in the society in a humorous way. Vonnegut makes use of a satirical style in order to emphasize his view about the absurdity of the post-WWII world. He includes satire and black humor in his novels to show that life is difficult. One feels that he is mocking even with Vonnegut's serious comments on the society, especially when he talks about serious matters like the Second World War (Mayerchak 1-5).

Vonnegut also uses simplicity, he simplifies problems that his society suffers from and makes them seem ridiculous. He presents them to the reader in a humorous way as he explains those issues to the reader as if the reader is from another planet and leaves him or her with the freedom to draw the whole picture of the society as Vonnegut sees it. The simplicity in presenting the issues provokes the reader's response and reaction (Langdon 2-13).

One of the recurrent themes in his works is loss of humanity. Vonnegut presents human beings as dispossessed from free will and unable to find meaning to life. They search for meaning to their lives because they are "generally dissatisfied with the human condition" (Schroeder 76). They are ungrateful for the fact that they are being controlled. Thus, the absence of free will makes the characters' search for identity and meaning to life pointless, they become passive and careless when they face the absurdity of life (Schroeder 74-7).

Additionally, identity is a prominent theme in Vonnegut's writings, he writes about characters who suffer to find their identity and purpose to their existence. Those characters recognize their society's issues, but they refuse to do anything about them. Through his characters Vonnegut releases problems mainly identity problems and his thoughts about the post-WWII American society (Mayerchak 5).

Vonnegut's style and techniques have evolved throughout his literary career. At first, he adopted modernist techniques and later used postmodern ones. His thoughts on his society and the criticisms get intense with every novel he writes. He becomes more present in his works as he emphasizes the importance of his role in the novel rather than creating the literary work and disappearing, especially in novels such as *Mother Night*, *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse Five*. In this respect, the next section is devoted to show Vonnegut's characters loss of coherent self and the reasons behind it in these novels.

2.   Vonnegut's Theory of the Loss of a Coherent Self

Kurt Vonnegut through his most misunderstood novel *Mother Night* (1961) criticizes the prejudgments of people on each other in the society. Vonnegut shows that the real battle any person may have must be within himself, rather than with other people who are considered enemies just because they have different identities and belong to different race or ethnicity (Marvin 59-60).

The novel tackles the Second World War directly through which Vonnegut shows how morals and ideals are sacrificed by human beings during wars for their own benefits. He shows how people manipulate their true identities and play different roles that sometimes they become what they pretend to be. He also explains the danger of role-playing and how people end up being the roles they play (Marvin 60).

Howard W. Campbell Jr the protagonist of the novel is "citizen of nowhere" an American spy who lives in Germany. He changes his identity to become a Nazi broadcaster and propagandist during WWII to serve his country's interests, through putting secret messages in his broadcasts. He mostly does it because he loves acting as he says "As a spy of the sort he described, I would have the opportunity for some pretty grand acting. I would fool

everyone with my brilliant interpretation of a Nazi, inside and out" (41). He is a playwright

and to be a secret agent for the United States is an opportunity to be a hero of a story.

When the war ends, he goes back to New York so that he will not be captured by the

Germans, but he does not feel comfortable being there. He considers it as a purgatory, a place

where sinners spend time to work past their sins, he says "it was hell for me—or not Hell,

something worse than Hell.' 'What could be worse than Hell?' he said. 'Purgatory,' I said"

(85). After the war, he lives in a lie with people around him as a Nazi. He hides his truth about

being an American spy even from his wife Helga and his parents and only three people know

his true identity.

Having two identities is very hard for him to handle. He is confused but he knows he

does it for the good of his country. He starts to feel guilty when he remembers how Germans

treat him with respect and they consider him one of them, but he is never able to be himself

and show his true identity in front of them. Sometimes he is confused about his belonging and

feels that he has no identity. He has wars inside of him and distressed by all what happens to

him.

The protagonist is uncertain about his true identity. He is torn between his real identity

and the roles he plays. After his wife's death, he feels that he is alone and he says "And so,

with my Helga presumed dead, I became a death-worshipper, as content as any narrow-

minded religious nut anywhere. Always alone, I drank toasts to her, said good morning to her,

said good night to her, played music for her, and didn't give a damn for one thing else" (47).

As a result, he turns himself in to Israeli agents due to his despair and need to take

responsibility of his bad choices. In the Israeli prison, while waiting for his trial he starts to

write his life story. Writing it makes him think about what he did and whether pretending to

be a Nazi was the right thing to do. He starts to question whether he is really a Nazi or an

American spy or someone else. As a result, he starts to feel guilty about being behind the death of thousands of people because he becomes what he pretends to be.

Due to the different identities he owns and the way he is able to convince people of each identity make him doubt that they are not fake identities. As a result, Campbell starts to suffer from schizophrenia. He is unsure whether he is real or not and whether his actions are coming from an American spy or a Nazi. He is confused about whether he is a good person or an evil one (Tally 42-6).

At the end, Campbell faces the absurdity of the world. He is left alone with no identity and country, he says "I am an American by birth, a Nazi by reputation, and a nationless person by inclination" (17). After being freed from the prison he feels stressful and decides to hang himself not for the crimes he committed during the war against innocent people but for the crimes against himself, the narrator says "I will hang Howard W. Campbell, Jr., for crimes against himself" (192).

Vonnegut's experience in the war and being a soldier shape his pacifist views. The bad memories of the destruction during the war keep hanting him. Moreover, he insists that people do not learn the lesson from the nonsense of the war. In *Cat's Cradle* (1963) Vonnegut criticizes set of beliefs that human beings surround themselves with namely religion, science, nationality and race. He considers them as institutions that control the human being's life, manipulate his thinking and destruct his identity. The person holds to them but when s/he finds that they are meaningless and manipulative s/he loses trust in everything even himself/herself (Hanuman 1-2).

Vonnegut in the novel introduces a religion called Bokononism. Although it is full of lies and the first sentence written in the book is "All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies" (5). People still believe in it and they refuse to see the truth. They think in this way they can bring comfort to their lives, the narrator says "Truth was the enemy of the

people, because the truth was so terrible, so Bokonon made it his business to provide the

people with better and better lies" (172).

Vonnegut explains through the novel that people grow up tied to impediments like

religion and science. They provide only some truth and answers while giving more lies. He

also shows that human's greediness for power turns him/her into a destructing machine that

destroys life and nature. The wars, the destruction of Dresden and the Atomic Bomb on

Hiroshima are examples of such greediness. He also criticizes religion, science and scientists.

He questions their usefulness for human existence in post-war societies through the

protagonist John or Jonah (Hanuman 5).

Jonah struggles with truth and lies, real and unreal things in his society. He has an

identity crisis. He is not sure about which religion to follow. At the beginning he lives as a

Christian man but he is not sure about Christianity so he becomes Bokononist. Bokonism

encourages people to be passive and surrender to destiny. Moreover, it convinces them that

their destiny has been already chosen by God and they cannot do anything about it. Jonah sees

that such thinking makes people like puppets, the narrator says "*Busy*, *busy*, *busy*, is what *we*

Bokononists whisper whenever we think of how *complicated* and

unpredictable the *machinery* of *life really* is" (65-6). Thus at the end of the story, Jonah

decides to live with no religion because he cannot find truth in any of the religions.

Science is one of the fundamental institutions that people rely on to get answers. John

always searches for meaning and due to his dissatisfaction with religion in providing him with

answers, he turns to science. He questions the role of science in the progress of human beings

as he believes that science is a mean to harm and put life on earth in danger. Its dangers are

more than its benefits, he says "*Every question I asked implied that the creators of the atomic*

bomb had been criminal accessories to murder most foul" (39). He believes in the absurdity of science. Thus, he decides to write a book entitled *The Day the World Ended* in which he talks about dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima during the Second World War. In his attempt to write the book, he tries to interview the creators of the bomb to know what their thoughts were when they created it.

John starts to lose himself and his faith as he gathers information about Felix Hoenikker, the creator of the atomic bomb but his search leads him to Hoenikker's children. Everything start to get clearer in Jonah's head once he talks to Hoenikker's children in order to know more about their father. He starts to see the truth of science and technology. Precisely scientists like Felix whom people admire, he says "how the hell innocent is a man who helps make a thing like an atomic bomb?" (52).

He also finds out that Felix invented the ice-nine. It is a special kind of ice that turns water into ice. It is the invention that later in the novel throws the world into an ice age, with only few survivors and Jonah is one of them. They struggle to stay alive but the novel ends with Jonah reading the book of Brokonism that tells him to commit suicide at the top of the mountain. Jonah discovers the corruption in the government and how scientists serve its interests, he says "Another guy came in, and he said he was quitting his job at the Research Laboratory; said anything a scientist worked on was sure to wind up as a weapon, one way or another. Said he didn't want to help politicians with their fugging wars anymore" (26).

The absurdity in Cat's Cradle lays in the name itself. The narrator says "No damn cat, no damn cradle" he uses children's string game to explain the institutions that control humans in the world such as religion, war and science. The game does not contain a cat or a cradle, rather some X's between a person's hands that can be undone in seconds, the same way the institutions can end the world like the ice-nine ends life in the novel.

Vonnegut grew up in Indianapolis, Indiana, in a time when the Great Depression pervaded the United States in 1934. Later, Vonnegut joined the U.S. Air Force. In 1945 he was captured during the Second World War by the Germans. His participation in the war and the kidnapping affect him, that is why he writes about his war experiences and expresses his thoughts on the war and politics.

In *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) Vonnegut tells his kidnapping and war events through the protagonist of the novel, the narrator says "All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true" (1). Billy Pilgrim is an optometrist in the making but had to quit school in order to join the army. He later goes to Germany during the Second World War and witnesses the firebombing of Dresden. He struggles with his war trauma and his imprisonment even after going back home (Loeb 12).

Characters in Vonnegut's novels are portrayed as naïve people. Pilgrim is an example of those people who go blindly after things like the war and religion as they believe in their legitimacy. They think that religion can provide them with answers and stability. An example is Pilgrim's mother who is "Like so many Americans, she was trying to construct a life that made sense from things she found in gift shops" (49). She is not sure about what religion to follow but she puts a crucifix above Pilgrim's bed anyway, she feels a kind of stability in doing it (Gallagher 27).

People like Pilgrim are deprived from their free will. They are controlled machines and puppets. He is not the right person to be in the army to participate in the war. He is not able to hold guns or fight as the narrator says "He didn't look like a soldier at all. He looked like a filthy flamingo" (42).

Pilgrim suffers from schizophrenia as an aftermath of what he witnesses during the war. With this psychological disorder he becomes detached from the real world. He starts to imagine unreal things and to have weird dreams that contain incidents from the war and the

bombing. He relives the incidents of the war almost every day for the rest of his life. He suffers from hallucinations like imagining dead people and hearing and seeing unreal things. As a result, he starts to travel through time to his childhood and the war. He can be considered as the voice of Vonnegut through which he can talk about his war experiences indirectly since the novel is not an autobiographical work (Langdon 18-21).

Pilgrim is psychologically disturbed, but even the closest people to him his wife Valencia does not know about his struggle. Thus, in order to escape his struggles, he uses imagination and time travelling as a refuge to his psychological disorders and anxiety (Vees-Gulani 176- 7). He also makes use of science fiction to re-invent himself and his world like many people who were part of the war, they "were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help" (101).

The Tralfamadorians help Pilgrim comprehend his conditions through accepting them in order to move on. He uses Tralfamadorians' beliefs like their conception of time. They live all the moments simultaneously similar to Pilgrim's life after the war. He lives the past and the present at the same time through dreams and imaginations. He lives his past over and over again till he becomes stuck in time. Vonnegut through this shows how Pilgrim cannot escape his Dresden experience (Gallagher 25).

He also uses their way of dealing with death in order to get less stressful about it, he says "Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead. I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is 'So it goes'" (27). He starts to feel that it is unnecessary to feel bad for dead people and mourn because he says that "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 people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist" (16).

The protagonist is emotionally damaged. He is considered a fatalist person since he believes that he is hopeless and powerless to change his life. As he gets older he becomes more passive and feels guilty about the past. His passivity towards everything is the result of his frustration with what happens in his life, stress, guilt and war nightmares (Schroeder 82-3).

Pilgrim suffers from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which is an aftermath of the war on those who were part of it, due to their exposure to situations that include death or injury. The person with such disorder cannot cope with stress since it is uncontrollable. It affects the person's daily life and even causes nightmares. During the panic attacks the person goes through extreme fear (Vees-Gulani 176- 7).

One of the symptoms of the PTSD is avoidance. Pilgrim avoids telling anyone about what he went through in Germany during the war. This avoidance is due to the difficulty to speak about those thoughts and translate the bad feelings into words. As a result, he becomes careless about the world surrounding him and he "never got mad at anything" (30).

The conditions surrounding him in his society do not help people with such psychological disorders, because the society chooses to ignore them. But the process of recovery necessitates talking about those issues. As a result, he becomes numb and careless about the world surrounding him. He becomes passive as he believes that it is the best way to protect himself and to survive.

The PTSD disorder makes Pilgrim feel that he has not left the war. Thus, he exists in two worlds one of the war and the other of the postwar, the narrator says "He has gone back through that door to find himself in 1963. He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between. He says. Billy is spastic in time, has no control over where he is going next" (23). The war experiences are present even in his dreams. Moreover, certain sounds and colors trigger the person with this disorder (Vees-

Gulani 177). For Pilgrim, colors such as navy, blue, orange and black and sounds like the sirens trigger him and make him more stressful, the narrator says "A siren went off, scared the hell out of him. He was expecting the Third World War at any time … Billy closed his eyes. When he opened them, he was back in the Second World War Again" (58).

Furthermore, the protagonist has an identity crisis. His identity is unstable. He is not sure about his role in the society and how he can fit in the society after coming back from the war. He is in a continuous search for his true identity. Moreover, he constructs weak identities that do not last so long. He is drafted to serve in WWII without his will and he is a husband to a wife who he does not love and so on. Those weak identities Pilgrim builds vanish and leave him in a constant search for a new stable and true identity.

The protagonist is dispossessed from his right to choose his role in the society. His identity is shaped by his surroundings. Throughout his life, Pilgrim is forced to play roles he does not choose such as a soldier, a husband to a wife he does not love, an employer… etc (Fatma 86). He is in a constant fight with himself because he is not able to decide on which personality to use. Thus, his identity is deconstructed due to his inability to have a stable identity and integrate with people in his society.

Pilgrim's mental health starts to get worse every time he has to shut himself down. At a moment he felt he is going insane, so he reaches out to a mental hospital for help. Unfortunately, that does not work very well for him. Actually doctors think that the reason behind his disorder is due to childhood bad incidents not because of the war itself. Pilgrim has to work on something to help himself cope with the conditions surrounding him, since he is not able to find any help or answers to his questions in real world. Thus, he starts to imagine unreal things like being kidnapped by aliens from a planet called Tralfamadore. He believes that they keep him in a zoo to entertain people. In this way, he starts to get less stressful about death and his bad memories (Vees-Gulani 178- 181).

Moreover, some of his psychological issues are related to his childhood. His mother's uncertainty concerning what religion to believe in affects him. Like many Americans, she believes in things just to have a stable life not because she believes in them. Thus, he becomes uncertain about his life and his identity. He destructs himself by being passive (Gallagher 27-8).

Pilgrim's kidnapping by aliens and time travelling rise some existential questions in his mind. He wonders about life and whether people have free will to choose their actions. The Tralfamadorians live the past, present and the future at the same time, thus, he concludes that there is no free will since there is no action in the past or the present that will affect the future. In this way, Vonnegut shows that there is no free will and the wars and especially the Dresden Bombing would have happened no matter what.

At the very end of the novel, he decides to do something and stand for himself by breaking out of the mental hospital. He decides to speak in a radio show for people who are suffering in silence like him. He goes public and talks about his struggles with the war and his kidnapping by the Tralfamadorians (Schroeder 84-7).

Slaughterhouse Five can be considered as a self treatment for Kurt Vonnegut. Through writing he believes he can recover, but it is a very painful task to do because it took him along time to be able to share his stories in a novel. He writes about his own experiences but he keeps himself distant through science fiction by using the character of Billy Pilgrim. Through writing the novel, Vonnegut makes issues in his society and the bad aftermaths of wars public (Vees-Gulani 182-3). Vonnegut through Billy Pilgrim shows that ignoring all kinds of problems in the society and the bad aftermaths of war cannot solve any of them, rather delaying and ignoring the problems makes them worse (T.Dunn 120-1).

Vonnegut is considered one of the best writers who criticize the society with no limits. His writings reflect his views towards his society and the individual's mind set. He tackles serious issues such as the war and the issue of identity from his own perspective. He mocks and makes fun of such issues and presents them with simplicity. He uses different techniques such as satire, fragmentation and simplicity to present different themes. Focusing on three of his most influential novels *Mother Night*, *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse Five*, one can understand more his techniques and his conception of the issue of identity in post-WWII America.

Chapter Three: The Deconstructed American Identity as Seen in Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*

This chapter will attempt to examine identity problems, including identity construction and deconstruction, through the analysis of Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* (1973). In this work, Vonnegut provides what can be considered as a commentary on the deconstructed American identity in postmodern America. Therefore, the focus will be put on the two principle characters' process of identity construction and deconstruction through providing an overview of the novel as a work of social criticism and presenting Vonnegut's view about the American individual and showing Hoover's identity problems as a response to the post-WWII American life.

1. A Reading of the Novel as Social Criticism

Breakfast of Champions or Goodbye, Blue Monday! (1973) is a satirical novel written as the fiftieth birthday gift from Vonnegut to himself (13). The novel contains twenty-four chapters preceded by a preface. Each chapter includes different sketches that have certain significations for the story. Gareth Langdon, for instance, describes such sketches as "satirical, illustrative, humorous and sarcastic, and they add what I would consider a unique dimension to the novel" (43).

The novel follows the story of a meeting of two old men, Kilgore Trout and Dwayne Hoover, a meeting that was so instant but changed both of them completely. Before their meeting, Trout was an underrated science fiction writer until he receives a fan letter from Eliot Rosewater in which he is invited to attend an Arts Festival in Midland City, Hoover's home town. Hoover, the successful business man, owns much of Midland City. He suffers from a mental disorder in which chemicals in his brain control much of what he says and

does. His mental health gets worse and keeps getting worse after his wife commits suicide and his only son abandons him.

After a long trip full of adventures Trout arrives to the hotel. Dwayne approaches Trout in the cocktail lounge. He reads Trout's book and believes that the creator of its universe is addressing him as the only creature that has free will while the rest are considered as machines created to serve him. Dwayne suddenly loses his temper and starts beating his son. Trout tries to stop Dwayne so he ends up with a bitten finger. Dwayne continues beating other people until the police arrives and arrests him ending him up in a mental hospital. Dwayne's behaviors in public were acceptable until he meets Kilgore Trout when his madness reaches its climax.

The Arts Festival is cancelled because of what happened, but Trout does not know so he walks out of the hospital towards it when suddenly the narrator approaches him. The narrator informs Trout that he created him and that he will set him free along with the other characters. Both of them starts a conversation that ends with Trout crying and begging the Narrator to make him young again.

Throughout the novel, the focus shifts between the two characters and other secondary characters related to the two of them. It follows each of the two protagonists' journeys to find who they are and find meaning to life. Their journey ends with the encounter of each other in Midland City, Indiana "This is a tale of a meeting of two lonesome, skinny, fairly old white men on a planet which was dying fast" (16). Their lives change completely after their short encounter.

The encounter between the two protagonists has a different impact on each one of them. On the one hand, Kilgore Trout who is described as "a nobody at the time" (16) becomes famous writer and wins a novel prize. Even after his death people still care about what he said; "By the time of Trout's death, of course, everybody called mirrors *leaks*. That

was how respectable even his jokes had become" (25). As a consequence of the meeting, Trout becomes one of the most beloved and respected human beings in history. On the other hand, Hoover goes insane and loses his success and fame.

The story takes place in the Unites States of America during the 1970s, a Period when different political and social movements took place such as the Civil Rights movements and women's uprising. Materialism has become the dominant aspect of the American life and a person's success depended on the amount of his wealth rather than his efforts or intellectual worth. The novel shows how such materialistic society affected people's life. On the one hand, it changed their life to the better by making it luxurious and easier and, on the other hand, people lost their sense of morality or happiness.

Dwayne Hoover the successful businessman represents materialism as he owns much of Midland City. He is a wealthy, powerful and respected man. People envy him for what he owns. However, even though he has money, Dwayne is a lonely and sick man. He lives alone with his dog Sparky "Dwayne's only companion" (24).

Materialism dominates people's life in the novel. They care more about money than morals. They seek to own wealth and luxurious houses, as they see them in magazines. One of the characters, Patty Keene, Dwayne's waitress at the Burger Chef believes that money is the solution for her problems. Dwayne's financial and social status make her think that "Dwayne could do for her what the Fairy Godmother did for Cinderella, if he wanted to" (112). She is ready to do anything for Dwayne so he "could give her a fine house and new automobiles and nice clothes and a life of leisure, and he could pay all the medical bills" (112).

Despite its sense of humor, the novel is considered by Roberto Serrai as one of "Vonnegut's most destructive, pessimistic and nihilistic works" (21) for Vonnegut's reliance on using black humor in responding to tragic events and their impact on the individual's identity. When the narrator describes Dwayne's mother death, he says "She was a defective

child-bearing machine. She destroyed herself automatically while giving birth to Dwayne"
(44).

Most important, in this novel, Vonnegut expresses his thoughts about the American
identity through its characters as the novel provides a sample from the American society of
the1970s. For instance, the narrator says:

> I think I am trying to make my head as empty as it was when I was born onto this
> damaged planet fifty years ago. I suspect that this is something most white
> Americans, and nonwhite Americans who imitate white Americans, should do.
> The things other people have put into my head, at any rate, do not fit together
> nicely, are often useless and ugly, are out of proportion with one another, are out
> of proportion with life as it really is outside my head. (14)

This quote reflects the sense of chaos that the narrator feels about contemporary America and
its people.

The narrator also reveals to us what he thinks about the American history, society and
politics and their impact on shaping the American identity. He comments on the American
anthem, flag, and the dollar bill which are basic components of the American identity. For
instance, he comments "If they studied their paper money for clues as to what their country
was all about, they found, among a lot of other baroque trash, a picture of a truncated pyramid
with a radiant eye on top of it" (17).

The narrator tries also to tell us what really happened when the America was
discovered and how the European Pirates treated the Native Americans. He believes that
much of what Americans learn about the American history is nonsense. He says "Here was
another piece of evil nonsense which children were taught: that the sea pirates eventually
created a government which became a beacon of freedom to human beings everywhere else"
(19). He also explains:

Actually, the sea pirates who had the most to do with the creation of the new government owned human slaves. They used human beings for machinery, and, even after slavery was eliminated, because it was so embarrassing, they and their descendants continued to think of ordinary human beings as machines. (19)

Slavery was legal for centuries in the United States under inhuman laws that were created by those in power.

Obviously, Vonnegut claims that many Americans are being fooled by the things they learn in schools or from the media. He criticizes how historians honor the horrible crimes of European colonizers against the Native Americans. The colonizers killed thousands of the original inhabitants. He believes that history is manipulated by those who have power. "That [1492] was simply the year in which sea pirates began to cheat and rob and kill them" (18). Thus, 1492 is not actually the year the new world was discovered, but rather the year when killing and stealing others' rights started.

Moreover, the novel shows how people are being brainwashed and manipulated by what they read and see in media. They are influenced by the violence found in the books they read. As a result, one of the things that are becoming worse and uncontrollable in America is Violence. In the novel it is manifested through the possession of guns whose only purpose is "to make holes in human beings" (47).

The narrator describes American people, especially women, as machines. He says "they [women] trained themselves to be agreeing machines instead of thinking machines. All their minds had to do was to discover what other people were thinking, and then they thought that, too" (112). They are tied to the presence of men and dependent on them. Women feel that they are worthy only beside their men and believe that they live only to serve men. For instance, Francine believes that God created women only to make men feel better yet she was

happy about that. She tells Dwayne "I guess God made women so men could relax and be treated like little babies from time to time" (124).

Francine Pefko, Hoover's secretary, represents this type of women who feel inferior to men. It can be seen in her way of treating Hoover. She feels that "it was her duty" (120) to make him feel better whenever he is depressed and she does it without thinking. She tells Hoover "If I was a man, I'd be tired and nervous, too" (124).

Vonnegut argues that one of the basic aspects of life missing in America is culture. The narrator says "I have no culture, no humane harmony in my brains. I can't live without a culture anymore" (14). This absence is the reason behind the conflicts between people. Media sheds light on things that are unimportant and meaningless. For instance, magazines compete to share unuseful news and topics instead of tackling issues that are crucial for people. Kilgore Trout, as a writer, deals with culture and reason but his writings are ignored and instead of giving them importance they are used in porn magazines or are thrown away. This shows how people are careless about crucial issues in their society and drifted by silly ones.

Vonnegut believes that Americans are so fascinated by the life they read in books to the point that they want to imitate it. Vonnegut states that the problems people face are the results of their greediness for perfection, for owning everything (Serrai 27). Like Francine who thinks that the wealthy Dwayne Hoover can make her dreams come true and "solve so many of her problems with the money and power he had" (112). She believes that money can solve all of her problems. Hoover can buy her a house, a car and pay all of her bills.

Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of champions* is remarkably a work of social criticism of the post-WWII American society. In it, Vonnegut addresses different social issues and conditions that shape the individual's identity. The following section will focus on Dwayne Hoover's Identity Problems as a Response to the Post-WWII American Life.

2. **Dwayne Hoover's Identity Problems as a Response to the Post-WWII American Life**

Robert T. Tally in *Kurt Vonnegut and the American Novel: A Postmodern Iconography* (2011) suggests that schizophrenia is the novel's dominant theme (85). Dwayne Hoover suffers from schizophrenia, which is a mental disorder that affects the way a person thinks, feels and acts. It also "involves a dissociation between words and their meanings" (Tally 87). The person with such a disorder cannot understand what is real as s\he starts to speak and enjoy life less. He suffers from a division in his emotions and actions, so he becomes delusional and cannot differentiate reality from imagination and as a result, his brain becomes fragmented.

Dwayne Hoover is a "fabulously well-to-do"(21) Pontiac dealer and a wealthy old white man. He owns much of Midland City, but he suffers in spite of his richness and his influence. Hoover is psychologically disturbed due to the tragedies he goes through, mainly his mother's and wife's suicide.

Hoover suffers from schizophrenia. The bad chemicals in his brain control what he says and control his actions. The narrator comments on Hoover's situation saying "incipient insanity was mainly a matter of chemicals, of course. Dwayne Hoover's body was manufacturing certain chemicals which unbalanced his mind" (21). He starts to imagine unreal things and say unreasonable things. He sings random songs in public, talk to imaginary people and wonders in the streets without a goal.

Hoover is unable to differentiate reality from hallucinations. One morning he meets Wayne Hoobler -the black ex convict who hopes to work for Hoover- but he is not sure whether Hoobler is real or imaginary , Hoover says "Good morning," … He said it softly, so his voice wouldn't carry very far, in case he was conversing with an hallucination" (83).

Furthermore, Hoover becomes depressed, stressful and moody due to the bad effects of the chemicals on him. Sometimes he gets too emotional over simple matters and other times he gets too careless. His is not an easy person to deal with because of his changeable mood. As a result, his relationship with people around him gets more intense as his mental health gets worse, especially with his sales manager Harry LeSabre, who is the only person who notices Hoover's illness.

Hoover suffers from echolalia, which is a psychological disorder that makes the person repeats noises, words and phrases s/he hears. The person with such disorder cannot fully express himself/herself since s/he is busy repeating what is sais instead of producing utterances on his/her own. The narrator says "Hoover starts to lose control over himself as echolalia takes control over what he says. He starts to repeat the last word anyone says to him. When he is listening to the radio the radio told him, "You can always trust Dwayne," he echoed the last word. "Dwayne" (108).

Moreover, when he talks to his waitress Patty, he starts to repeat her last words:

"Anyway," she said, "it certainly is an honor to have you visit us, and those aren't the right words, either, but I hope you know what I mean." "Mean," said Dwayne. "Is the food all right?" she said. "All right," said Dwayne. "It's what everybody else gets," she said. "We didn't do anything special for you." "You," said Dwayne. (116)

Although he repeats her last words, Patty does not think that Hoover has issues. Rather she continues talking to him like nothing happens.

The unconscious mind according to Freud is responsible for the person's behavior and it contains the dreams, memories, desires, experiences and emotions. Hoover's bad and sad experiences especially during his childhood such as his mother's death affect his behaviors and feelings towards life when he gets older. Hoover's bad memories are stored in his preconscious, and they are retrieved whenever he is triggered by subjects like suicide. Thus,

they affect his identity and make it vulnerable and they lead to his mental collapse at the end of the novel.

Suicide creates a complex to Hoover. His mother's suicide when he was a child and his wife's suicide later in his life greatly influence his attitude towards everything around him, including his relationships. He feels that life is meaningless and he starts to lose trust in everyone, especially his secretary Francine who thinks that she takes advantage of him, when he "thought Francine was hinting that he should buy her a Colonel Sanders Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise" (126).

People around Hoover think that his behaviors are normal. When he sings out loud, Francine thinks he is happy. The narrator states "Here is what made Francine think he was becoming happier: Dwayne began to sing songs which had been popular in his youth, such as "The Old Lamp Lighter," and "Tippy-Tippy-Tin," and "Hold Tight," and "Blue Moon," and so on. Dwayne had never sung before. Now he did it loudly as he sat at his desk" (41). When he repeats others' final words due to the effect of echolalia on him, people question what they say and apologize. When he talks rudely to people, they reevaluate themselves. Instead of questioning Hoover's behaviors, people choose to ignore them.

Bad chemicals, however, are not the only reason behind Hoover's madness. He suffers from midlife crisis. He does not know what his purpose in life is and where life is taking him. He starts to question his existence and to look for answers to his questions in order to find meaning to life but he cannot find what he is searching for and understand his role in this world. He says "I couldn't help wondering if that was what God put me on Earth for—to find out how much a man could take without breaking" (133).

Hoover thinks that his life is meaningless and he feels lost in the obscurity of life and cannot manage to ask anyone for help, he says "I've lost my way," said Dwayne. "I need

somebody to take me by the hand and lead me out of the woods … "I can't sleep," said Dwayne, "until I get some answers" (133).

Out of his depression and despair, Hoover wants to end his misery by shooting himself. The narrator says ""Dwayne's bad chemicals made him take a loaded thirty-eight caliber revolver from under his pillow and stick it in his mouth. This was a tool whose only purpose was to make holes in human beings" (47). He attempts to commit suicide but it is a failure. He "held the muzzle of his gun in his mouth for a while" (48). However, he gives up and decides to "shoot up one of his tiled bathrooms instead" (48).

Furthermore, Hoover's helplessness directs him to his secretary Francine Pefko. He reaches out to her hoping to find some answers. He begs her for answers, he says "Tell me what life is all about" (132). She is not able to provide him with any help so she tells him "Only God knows that" (132). In fact, her answer leaves him in more uncertainty and wonder than ever before. Despite his uncertainty, he has hope that one day he will get the answers he needs. He says "I can't sleep," said Dwayne, "until I get some answers" (133). He believes that the Arts Festival is a good opportunity to end his confusion and find people who can guide him. He tells Francine "The Festival could give me a brand new viewpoint on life!" (134).

Hoover at the very end of the novel meets Kilgore Trout. The meeting does not take too long before Hoover loses his temper when he reads Trout's book. It is entitled *Now It Can Be Told* but it "wasn't addressed to Dwayne alone. Trout had never heard of Dwayne when he wrote it. It was addressed to anybody who happened to open it up" (22). The purpose of the book is to see how anyone can react to being the only person with free will on earth and everyone else on planet is created to serve him/her. Dwayne Hoover reads:

You are surrounded by loving machines, hating machines, greedy machines, unselfish machines, brave machines, cowardly machines, truthful machines, lying machines,

funny machines, solemn machines," he read. "Their only purpose is to stir you up in

every conceivable way, so the Creator of the Universe can watch your reactions. (197)

However, Hoover takes this too seriously and believes that the creator of its universe is

addressing him. He supposes that he is the only person with free will. The narrator says the

book "was a tour de force. It was a jeu d'esprit. But it was mind poison to Dwayne" (22).

Hoover loses his sanity and starts to beat everyone in the cocktail lounge including his son

and he even attacks Kilgore Trout.

The bad chemicals in Hoover's brain and his psychological disorders in addition to the

bad ideas found in the book cause significant damage on him. They turn him into a maniac

because the narrator says Hoover "needed some bad ideas, too, so that his craziness could

have shape and direction" (21).The book tells him "You are pooped and demoralized," read

Dwayne. "Why wouldn't you be? Of course it is exhausting, having to reason all the time in a

universe which wasn't meant to be reasonable" (196). When he faces and confirms the

absurdity of life, he ends up with a deconstructed identity and he spends the rest of his life in

a mental hospital.

Kilgore Trout suffers from midlife identity crisis. He questions his role in the society

as he is invisible to everyone and his books never receive recognition, instead they are sold in

pornography stores and they change their titles, the narrator says "Pan Galactic Straw-boss,"

for instance, became "Mouth Crazy" (26). He confuses how he perceives himself with how

others see him. He believes in his self worth, but he is faced with neglect. Whenever he

contacts publishing houses, they do not give importance to his writings. Thus, Trout starts to

wonder about his purpose in life and questions his true identity. He also questions his past and

his achievements. His inability to find answers to his questions places him in a sensitive state

that leads to his disintegration from the society.

Trout faces the absurdity of life, when he does not receive recognition and appreciation, he deserves by his society for his valuable writings. He believes that his existence is meaningless and he "considered himself not only harmless but invisible. The world had paid so little attention to him that he supposed he was dead. He hoped he was dead" (21). Facing such absurdity leads to alienation, so Trout decides isolate himself from everyone else.

As a result, pessimism characterizes Trout's life. One time he talks to his parakeet Billy about the end of the world he says "the end is close … "Any time now," he would say. "And high time, too" (25). He believes the world will end because the "atmosphere would become unbreathable soon" (25). He supposes that "humanity deserved to die horribly, since it had behaved so cruelly and wastefully on a planet so sweet" (25).

Trout's unconscious mind contains memories from his childhood. As a child he works with his father Leo Trout for the Royal Ornithological Society in Bermuda. Trout's job is to measure the wingspreads of the dead sea eagles. Those birds extinct eventually and they leave an eternal scar in his psyche. He is affected by witnessing their death and extinction. Trout becomes sad and depressed because he is in front of death almost every day of his childhood, the narrator says "As a child, Trout had seen those Erns die, one by on" (34). His childhood memories and feelings affect his behaviors and thoughts when he gets older and make him a pessimistic person.

Furthermore, Trout becomes a nihilistic person as a result of his pessimism and depression. He feels hopeless and considers life meaningless when he faces disappointments in his writing career and underestimation by people. But depression affects not only Trout, but also everyone around him including his only son Leo and his three wives. Although they "[his wives] had been extraordinarily patient and loving and beautiful. Each had been shriveled by his pessimism" (92). They are affected by his depression. The narrator says "Kilgore Trout

had a depressing childhood, despite all of the sunshine and fresh air. The pessimism that overwhelmed him in later life, which destroyed his three marriages, which drove his only son, Leo, from home at the age of fourteen, very likely had its roots in the bittersweet mulch of rotting Erns" (34).

Trout lives on his own and in isolation. When he receives the fan letter to attend the Arts Festival, he feels anxious and stressed, the narrator says "The fan letter came much too late. It wasn't good news. It was perceived as an invasion of privacy"(34).He considers it as an invasion of privacy, so refuses to go to the festival because he is too afraid to face people, he tells his parakeet "I'm not going, Bill. I don't want out of my cage. I'm too smart for that. Even if I did want out, though, I wouldn't go to Midland City to make a laughing stock of myself—and my only fan" (38). Trout adapts himself to feel comfortable not talking to people as he loses confidence in himself. However, the invitation makes him anxious about talking in public because he thinks people will not take him seriously and make fun of him.

In the novel, the atmosphere of post-WWII America is seen through Trout, when he explores the bad side of America during his trip to Midland City. He witnesses the destruction of nature and the recklessness of people. People are careless, dumb and driven by their desires. He says "The planet was being destroyed by manufacturing processes, and what was being manufactured was lousy, by and large" (73). He also says:

> I used to be a conservationist. I used to weep and wail about people shooting bald eagles with automatic shotguns from helicopters and all that, but I gave it up. There's a river in Cleveland which is so polluted that it catches fire about once a year. That used to make me sick, but I laugh about it now. When some tanker accidently dumps its load in the ocean, and kills millions of birds and billions of fish, I say, 'More power to Standard Oil'. (73)

He cares for nature but not anymore, he becomes careless about everything. To emphasize his fatalism he says" I realized…that God wasn't any conservationist" (73). He believes that it is waste of time and that everything is planned by God, therefore, all events are inevitable.

During his trip, he also notices how people become careless about everything and how they are driven by their desires for wealth and power. Moreover, he sees the destruction of West Virginia by the government and its people, the narrator says The demolition of West Virginia had taken place with the approval of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the State Government, which drew their power from the people" (99).

At the end of the novel, Trout's encounter with Hoover reflects positively on Trout's life. He becomes a successful man and a well known science fiction writer. After he spends his life in shadows, he wins a Nobel Prize in medicine and has "a reputable publisher" (224). At the end of the novel, Trout learns the lesson from Hoover's madness and regrets living his life passive and dehumanized. He wishes he could become young again, he cries out to the narrator "*Make me young, make me young, make me young*!" (227).

Tally states that Vonnegut in his novels shows how the characters suffer to put together their fragmented identities. Tally considers the novel as "Vonnegut's boldest and most ambitious novel, as well as the one most likely to be considered postmodern" (86). Vonnegut sheds light on important issues in postmodern America such as the issue of identity, racism sexism and corruption. Those issues have a tremendous impact on people's identity.

Kurt Vonnegut is considered one of the writers who successfully dealt with the issue of identity in post-WWII America. *Breakfast of Champions* provides a sufficient understanding of the individual's fragmented identity and his/her response to the conditions following the end of the WWII. The process of identity deconstruction is understood through the two principle characters of the novel Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore Trout. Vonnegut shows

what happens when people look for their identity, they can either end up with a deconstructed identity or they can find what they are looking for.

Conclusion

Identity has always been a controversial notion in literature especially in postmodern fiction for the problematic issues it raises in accordance with this period in America. WWII affected every aspect of the American life especially their identity and the way of thinking about their true identity. As has been shown in the main discussion, the American Postmodern individual suffers from a fragmented identity along with a skeptic vision towards the past and everything surrounding him as notions such as justice, truth, and progress are suspected. People are confused about their belonging to a certain group or ethnicity.

As the first chapter demonstrated, after WWII, identity became more dependent on the societal interactions among individuals in addition to personal experiences that contribute in the process of identity formation. The postmodern individual's identity is torn between different parts and related to the different social relations one may have. Moreover, the psychological state of the person contributes to the process of identity formation. The person's identity is accordingly shaped by different factors and becomes unstable and constantly changeable.

As the second chapter emphasized, Vonnegut explores the circumstances of the post-WWII American society and the individuals' issues of identity through different techniques. Techniques such as fragmentation, black humor, satire and science fiction enable him to express his thoughts without boundaries. They also give him the opportunity to be involved, either directly or indirectly, in his stories. In his literary works, Vonnegut tries to unveil the different aspects of the new fragmented, changeable, and sometimes bizarre American identity. As has been discussed in chapter two, his works are the result of his experiences and personal view to the world, as he was part of the war and suffered from its aftermaths in addition to influences of his personal life. Through his novels he sheds light on important issues Americans miss and ignore.

As the third chapter demonstrated, *Breakfast of Champions* is a satirical and ironic novel which is considered as one of Vonnegut's best representations of the issue of identity. It is the representation of how Vonnegut sees his society through mocking and commenting on how it is shaped. It demonstrates the conditions that shaped the mindset of the American people during that period. Through his novel Vonnegut shows how the characters suffer from psychological disorders and existential crisis such as the schizophrenia. Moreover, the two protagonists Dwayne Hoover and Kilgore Trout represent the two processes of identity construction and deconstruction.

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الملخص

تعتبر الهوية واحدة من المفاهيم المثيرة للجدل في الأدب الأمريكي ما بعد الحداثة. اكتسبت أهمية لأنها أصبحت تعتبر إشكالية وذلك بسبب الظروف التي ميزت الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية. يعتبر الروائي الأمريكي كورت فونيغوت واحدا من أفضل الكتاب الذين تناولوا قضية الهوية بعمق وخاصة في روايته "إفطار الأبطال" (1973)(*Breakfast of Champions*). تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التعرف على مفهوم الهوية من وجهات نظر مختلفة باستخدام المنهج الاجتماعي والنفسي والوجودي. كما تهدف أيضا إلى إظهار وجهة نظر فونيغوت حول ظروف المجتمع الأمريكي بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية وطريقة تفكير الفرد وعملية بناء هويته و تفككها.

Résumé

L'identité est l'une des notions controversées dans la fiction Américaine postmoderne. Il prend de l'importance à mesure car elle devient problématique au cours de la Seconde Guerre mondiale aux États-Unis, en raison des circonstances qui ont caractérisé l'Amérique au cours de cette période. Kurt Vonnegut est considéré comme l'un des meilleurs écrivains qui abordent la question de l'identité en profondeur, en particulier dans son roman « Petit-Déjeuner de Champions » Breakfast of Champions (1973). Cette étude vise à étudier la question de l'identité à partir de différentes perspectives en utilisant les méthodes sociologiques, psychologiques et existentielles. Elle vise également à montrer la vision de Vonnegut sur la société américaine, l'esprit de l'individu et le processus de construction et de déconstruction de l'identité après la Seconde Guerre mondiale.