



The Religion of 'Bokononism' as the Prime Mover of Action in Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*

¹ Emad Kamel Salami, ² Dr. Mekhala Venkatesh

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, ²Associate Professor and Research Guide,
^{1,2}Department of English, Jain (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, India
Email – ¹ emadsalami500@gmail.com, ² v.mekhala@jainuniversity.ac.in,

Abstract: The current paper examines the fictional religion, Bokononism, and explores its role in Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* by serving as a primary element in driving the narrative forward and shaping the actions and fates of its characters. Vonnegut utilises the religion of Bokononism as a tool to arrange the outline of the novel's events, criticise the futility of human life, and challenge the traditional religious human beliefs. The paper focuses on how Bokononism, despite its paradoxical practices and beliefs, serves as a force that encourages the characters, emphasize the meaninglessness of life and eventually results in the disastrous end of the world. Moreover, the research also conducts a review of some previous scholarly articles on the topic and identifies the gap in them, trying to offer a brand new and fresh approach to Vonnegut's way of employing religion in *Cat's Cradle*.

Key Words: Bokononism, Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*, Religion, Postmodernism, Satire.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Bokononism, a fictional religion invented by Kurt Vonnegut, plays a pivotal role in formulating the narrative as well as the characters' actions in his novel *Cat's Cradle*. Bokononism is founded on lies and serves as a satire towards constituted religion, the human credulity, and seeking to find a meaning in a meaningless world. *Cat's Cradle's* portrays the apocalyptic results of a scientific invention, ice-nine - a disastrous substance that freezes any water body upon touch. Moreover, the novel utilizes Bokononism as both a philosophical lens and a narrative technique to shape the characters' lives and actions. This paper seeks to investigate how Vonnegut has used the Bokononism religion to proceed with the events of his novel and shape its plot, as well as to explore the significant role of this religion in formulating the postmodern narrative structure of the novel.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

A number of multi-approach studies has been conducted on the role of Bokononism and its significance in *Cat's Cradle*. According to Babaei and Yahya (2013), Vonnegut utilises Bokononism as a tool to investigate the constituted nature of beliefs and creeds. It is completely founded on "shameless lies" and harmless untruths confirming that it is a false religion. However, it still provides happiness and comfort to the Bokononists. The two authors portray Bokononism as a 'metareligion' – a term that reflects the idea of metafiction that classifies itself as an artefact in a self-conscious way (228). The religion does not hide its constructed nature. However, it openly tells people about it, particularly to criticize other religious beliefs that are built on absolute truths.

Through the technique of metafiction, Vonnegut attempts to portray Bokononism, like any narrative, a constructed social belief. He shows it as an artificial religion as a highlight that the other world's religious beliefs may be a human-made construct in order to fulfil social restrictions and psychological desires. Bokonon himself has admitted in his Calypso prayers that this religion is completely founded on lies, and this is what provides people a life free from troubles. Babaei and Yahya have stated that Vonnegut utilises Bokononism as a technique to both deconstruct the grand narratives of the American culture, and reflect the concept of postmodern skepticism towards the absolute universal truths. Moreover, Bokononism functions as a tool to criticise how any religion can be manipulated by superstructures as has been portrayed in the novel with the comparison between Papa Monzano, a dictator in San Lorenzo, and the religious teachings and sermons of Bokonon. (232).



Similarly, Hanuman (2011) demonstrates that Kurt Vonnegut's utilisation of Bokononism in his novel serves as a satirical commentary which critiques all the religious structures, highlights how humans can follow comforting lies more than confronting truths, and shapes the narrative timeline of the novel. Vonnegut juxtaposes religion and science through Bokononism, showing that both of them are social constructs that, instead of advancing and improving humanity, lead to its destruction and dehumanization. (2)

Through Bokononism, Vonnegut shows the human potential of creating fictional religious beliefs and following them in order to achieve mental peace and meaning in a meaningless world. Vonnegut mocks humans' futile expectations to find answers to universal questions through religion. Vonnegut's portrayal of religion in this sarcastic way serves as a critique of how science and religion can be both exploited for destructive purposes. Looking into it from the carnival lens, Vonnegut warns his readers that "Anyone unable to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either." (4) emphasizing the novel's main theme that humans prefer comforting lies over harsh truths.

In the novel, Bokononism is portrayed as a manipulated religion founded on a set of untruths or "foma" to make the lives of the San Lorenzan community peaceful and united by preserving their mental peace and distracting any kind of existential fear. According to Snigdha Nagar (2016), both the religion of Bokononism and the political system in San Lorenzo work as illusive and fake systems claiming to maintain the stability of life in San Lorenzo. Nagar draws upon the Nietzschean idea of truths as illusions created and believed in by human beings (531).

In her bachelor's thesis, Ingrid Landsverk (2022) focuses on how Kurt Vonnegut's has used the religion of Bokononism in order to criticize grand narratives. Bokononism, being a fictional religion, challenges the grand narratives' idea that religion must be founded on truths in order to be valid and useful. Vonnegut takes it as a challenge to create a fictional religion which is completely based on lies, yet it comforts people's worries and makes their lives meaningful (9). This postmodern approach reflects Vonnegut's stance towards the modernist grand narratives of absolute and universal truths in science and religion.

Valibayli (2021) investigates the religion of Bokononism as a means to comment on the futilities and meaninglessness of life and human nature. This fictional religion, even though it is built on lies, is meant to comfort people's lives in a world full of chaos and indifference (72). The author states that Vonnegut utilises "Bokononism" as a tool to criticise the religion in the American society. Valibayli demonstrates that the teachings of Bokonon underscores the idea that the happiness of human beings is reliant on imagination and self-deception (74).

Moreover, Reema and Jasmine (2020) approaches the theme of religion in her article from the same lens. The authors state that Bokononism, as a fictional religion, serves as a pivotal element in reflecting the futility and meaninglessness of the human religious beliefs in *Cat's Cradle*. The Bokononism religion is used by Vonnegut as a tool to criticize both religion and science as social constructs (164). This technique by Vonnegut represents his skepticism towards grand narratives and absolute truths. On the other hand, Vonnegut portrays lies as a crucial element that one needs for maintaining the individual and social happiness. The authors also touch upon one of the central ideas of the novel that while science can be helpful in providing knowledge for the sake of human service, it lacks ethics and morality, making it a destructive tool of humanity (166).

3. RESEARCH GAP:

Even though much research has been conducted on analysing the satirical and philosophical aspects of Bokononism, there remains a gap in the reviewed literature regarding Bokononism's role as a primary mover of action in *Cat's Cradle*. While all the previous conducted articles have underscored the significance of the Bokononism religion in framing the novel's themes, none or hardly any of them have highlighted the role of Bokononism in influencing the character's way of making decisions or carrying the novel's plot forward. This paper aims to fill the above-mentioned gap by investigating not only the thematic function of Bokononism, but also its role as a prime mover of action in the novel through a detailed analysis.

4. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS:

Bokononism in *Cat's Cradle* does not only serve as a satirical commentary on the human nature, but it also functions as the prime move of actions that unfold throughout the progress of the novel. Kurt Vonnegut introduces the religion of Bokononism through the character of the protagonist, John (or Jonah), who undertakes a journey in order to gather information and write a book titled *The Day the World Ended* documenting the life story of Dr. Felix Hoenikker, the scientist who invented ice-nine, a material that causes any water body to freeze upon contact. Through the journey of John's exploration of ice-nine and its origins, he comes across an island called San Lorenzo on which he gets encountered with the people of the island and discovers to what extent the outlawed religion, Bokononism, has shaped their lives. One of the main evidences that highlight Bokononism's role as a prime driving force of actions is when the



protagonist John encounters the religion's central principle: "Live by the *foma** that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy." (*Cat's Cradle*, epigraph). This quotation embraces lies as a means to make the characters' lives easier and more meaningful, and serves as a main force of driving the actions of the novel. Even though John feels initially skeptical about Bokononism, he becomes increasingly influenced by it. His embrace of the Bokononist teachings becomes clearer as the novel progresses, and he descends into a world where absurdity prevails and reason is neglected.

Moreover, the influence of Bokononism is particularly seen in the lives of San Lorenzan people where it is publicly banned, but highly practised in secret. Despite the open compliance with the anti-religious stand of the island's government, the juxtaposition between public law and private belief generates a space where the actions of the characters are instructed by the teachings of Bokononism. The people on the island follow a religion that they know to be false, but they find it crucial for their peace and survival. This is what Kurt Vonnegut calls as 'tragicomedy of human condition'. Bokonon writes in *The Books of Bokonon* "I wanted all things to seem to make some sense, so we all could be happy, yes, instead of tense. And I made up lies so that they all fit nice, And I made this sad world A par-a-dise." (*Cat's Cradle*, 91). This utopian world becomes a space where characters feel free to navigate their futile lives in the situation of fear from political oppression and apocalyptic environmental catastrophe.

Furthermore, Bokononism's function as a prime force of action is illustrated when the protagonist, John, learns that Mona Aamons Monzano, Papa Monzano's charming adopted daughter, was a devotee of Bokononism and a follower of its teachings. Her devotion of Bokononism highly influences John's acceptance of the religion. At one point, she tells John: "Bokonon tells us it is very wrong not to love everyone exactly the same. What does your religion say?" to which he replies: "I -- I don't have one." (*Cat's Cradle*, 149). Mona's attitude reinforces the idea that Bokononism offers solace and stability in a chaotic world, even though it is based on lies. This reinforces the idea that characters in the novel are not motivated by logic or truth, but by the need to find meaning, even in untruths.

Moreover, one of the most prominent evidences where Bokononism serves as a mover of the main action of the novel appears at the end of the novel, when the apocalyptic consequences of ice-nine result in the destruction of Earth. John reflects on the world's end by considering Bokonon's teachings, particularly the 'boku-maru' ritual (a form of connection through touching feet), which serves as a symbol of humanity and connection of human amidst inevitable destruction. Bokonon's last message to humanity states:

"If I were a younger man, I would write a history of human stupidity; and I would climb to the top of Mount McCabe and lie down on my back with my history for a pillow; and I would take from the ground some of the blue-white poison that makes statues of men; and I would make a statue of myself, lying on my back, grinning horribly, and thumbing my nose at You Know Who."

(*Cat's Cradle*, 206)

This way of closing the novel indicates that, despite being based on lies, Bokononism provides a sense of closure and acceptance while facing the ultimate destruction of humanity.

5. CONCLUSION:

As has been exhaustively analysed above, Vonnegut has utilised Bokononism as a narrative and thematic technique in order to direct his characters' actions and frame the novel's postmodern absurdist view of religion and science. Vonnegut underscores the paradoxical nature of Bokononism that asserts the potential of lies to provide people with the most meaningful truths. This focus on paradoxical Bokononism influences major incidents of the characters' journey and the novel's progress to their definite fatal conclusion. Even when they see the world falling apart around them, the characters take Bokononism as a lens through which they view the world, make their decisions and motivate their actions. To sum up, Bokononism does not only serve as a means of critiquing religion and human nature, but also as the central force that drives the novel's actions and plot, and shapes its characters' personalities. Kurt Vonnegut creates this fictional religion as a narrative device in order to explore the contradictories of humans' belief and nature, and their tendency to embrace comforting lies rather than excruciating truths. Through these lies, the characters find meaning to their lives and motivation to move forward. By placing Bokononism as the major force that directs the novels' actions, Vonnegut challenges his readers to suspect the role of religion in their lives, and shows them to what extent there are controlled by fiction. This study has highlighted the literary significance of the fictional religion of "Bokononism", in *Cat's Cradle*, providing a new interpretation of its role as a thematic and narrative technique in the novel.

REFERENCES:

1. Babaei, Abdolrazagh & Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya. "Exposing Social Constructions in Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* through Metareligion". *Pertanika: J. Soc. Sci. & Hum.* Vol. 21. Issue. (S), 2013, pp, 227-238. Print.



2. Hanuman, A. R. N. "Hope and Despair: A Carnavalesque Study of Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*". The Criterion: An International Journal in English. Vol. 11, Issue. I. 2011, pp. 15-21. Print.
3. Nagar, Singdha. "No Cat and no Cradle: Religion and Lies as Cultural Necessity". Journal of Higher Education and Research Society: A Refereed International. Vol. 4, Issue. 2. 2016, pp. 531-538. Print.
4. Landsverk, Ingrid. "Postmodern realities and challenging grand narratives in Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*". Unpublished Bachelor's Thesis in language Studies with Teacher Education submitted to Norwegian University of Science and Technology. 2022.
5. Valibayli, Gunay. "Postmodernism and Religion in *Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut". Elger Scientific Centre: Griqol Robakidze University. ISBN: 978-605-74702-1-8. 2021, PP. 70-76. Print.
6. Reema, & Star Jasmine. "Representation of Religion in Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*". Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research". Vol. 7, Issue. 5, pp. 164-169. 2020. Print.
7. Vonnegut, Kurt. *Cat's Cradle*. London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2008.

AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHY:



Mr. Emad Kamel Salami

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Jain (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, India.

Email: emadsalami500@gmail.com

First Author: Mr. Emad Kamel Salami is a Ph.D. research scholar in the Department of English at Jain (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru. He has received his degree in BA (English) from Tartous University, Syria, MA in English from Jain (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, and he is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in English at Jain (Deemedto-be University), Bengaluru, under the guidance of Dr, Mekhala Venkatesh. He has two years of research experience, and one publication

in UGC Care Journal and one research in a National Conference.



Dr. Mekhala Venkatesh

Associate Professor and Research Guide, Department of English, Jain (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru, India.

Email: v.mekhala@jainuniversity.ac.in

Second Author: Dr. Mekhala Venkatesh is Associate Professor & Research Guide, Department of English, Jain (Deemed-to-be University), Bengaluru. She has 26 years of teaching experience, has received her degrees in MA (English), PG Diploma in Public Relations, MPhil, PhD (Dravidian University) and PhD (Jain Deemed to be University). She has more than 25 research publications in ISBN, ISSN, UGC Care Journals and 25 Paper presentations in International/National Conferences/Seminars. Her work, 'Bride Comes Home' - Translation of Kannada poet K.S. Narasimhaswamy's fifty love poems received Kuvempu Bhasha Bharathi Puraskaara-state award for best translation in 2015. Her second book 'Song of Life' - Translation of K. S. Narasimhaswamy's collection 'Kaimarada Nelalalli' and other poems on death was released during the poet's centenary celebrations in 2015. As a member of Kannada and Cultural Ministry's K.S. Narasimhaswamy Pratishtaana (Regd) – State Govt. funded trust since August 2016 she has organized many international and national literary events. She is presently guiding Seven PhD research scholars at Jain (Deemed-to-be University).