

SPIRIT , SEX AND BODY IN THE WORKS OF BEAT WRITERS

Dr Geetanjali Joshi Mishra*

There has been a tendency to portray the Beat movement in a very narrow sense by referring to it as a mere cultural and literary 'impulse' and to see this impulse in a negative shade and regard the movement as a mere *revolt* rather than a *protest* for something. During its initial struggle to establish itself, Beat literature and movement had to face immense opposition. John Wain called William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* "a prolonged scream of hatred and disgust, an effort to keep the reader's nose down in the mud for 250 pages.", while others (Norman Podhoretz) called Kerouac's *On the Road* as "poverty of emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic resources, ineptitude of expression, and an inability to make anything dramatically meaningful." It was supposed that they were at war with everything sacred in Eisenhower's America - "Mom, Dad, Politics, Marriage, the Savings Bank, Organized Religion, Literary Elegance, Law, the Ivy League Suit and Higher Education, to say nothing of the Automatic Dishwasher, the Cellophane-wrapped Soda Cracker, the Split-Level House and the clean or peace-provoking H-bomb." The Nation dismissed the beats as "naysayers"; even Playboy called them "nihilists." Some were sympathetic towards them like Lawrence Lipton who called them 'Holy Barbarians', "holy in their search of Self and barbarians in their total rejection of the so called civilized standards of success, morality and neurosis" while others like William F Brown were callous enough to call them, "a hip collection of cartoons about life and love among Beatniks."

The beats howled back to this critical chorus in one voice. "Beat," Kerouac emphasized that 'beat', stood not for "beat down" but for "beatific." "I want to speak for things," he explained. "For the crucifix I speak out, for the Star of Israel I speak out, for the divinest man who ever lived who was German (Bach) I speak out, for sweet Mohammed I speak out, for Buddha I speak out, for Lao-tse and Chuang-tse I speak out." To those who called Howl "howl against

* Assistant Professor, Amity University, Lucknow Campus

civilization,” Ginsberg replied that his ejaculatory work was a protest in the original sense of “pro-attestation, that is testimony in favour of Value.” He illustrated his protest in religious terms. “‘Howl’ is an ‘Affirmation’ by individual experience of God, sex, drugs, absurdity,” he explained. “The poems are religious and I meant them to be.”

Jack Kerouac however visualized a different significance of the word ‘Beat’. He saw in it spirituality and ‘a vision’, he insisted that the term ‘Beat’ never meant “Juvenile delinquents” but rather it meant “characters of a special spirituality who didn’t gang up but were solitary Bartlebies staring out the dead wall window of our civilization” he took the term ‘bartlebies’ from Herman Melville’s story about a non-conformist American named, “Bartleby the Scrivener” He claimed that the term had much deeper connotations which had spiritual significance and had a sort of mystery attached to it. It is said that Kerouac discovered the spiritual aspect of the term in 1954, when he went to a Catholic church back home in Massachusetts. On hearing the melodious ‘holy silence’ in the church he could make a liaison between the terms ‘beat’ and ‘Beatific’. ‘Beatific’, as term has a very archaic existence, going back to 1639, when it was first used in print in the sense of ‘beatific vision’ or the “direct knowledge of God enjoyed by the blessed in heaven”. The recent connotation of the word can be found in *Webster’s collegiate dictionary*, where it is defined as something “possessing or imparting beatitude; having a blissful or benign appearance: saintly angelic”; “the point of Beat is that you get beat down to a certain nakedness where you are actually able to see the world in a visionary way” wrote Ginsberg, “which is the old classical understanding of what happens in the dark night of the soul”

Though after the publication of *Howl* and the reviews it got from critics the gurus of standard literary criticism, Ginsberg stood for his work and championed its cause. In a letter he wrote to Richard Eberhart, dated May 18th 1956, he wrote, “*Howl* is an ‘affirmation’ of Individual experience of God, sex, drugs, absurdity etc ...to call it work of nihilistic rebellion would be to mistake it completely. Its force comes from positive ‘religious’ belief and experience. It offers no ‘constructive’ program in sociological terms – no poem could. It does offer a constructive human value – basically the experience –of the enlightenment of mystical experience – without which no society can long exist”

At one level, the Beat writers may be seen as early leaders in the post-World War II turn to the East, whose attitudes and use of Asian religious thought provide important insight into the impact of the East on modern American religious beliefs. In the post-World War II period, Beat writers did more than any other literary group to shift America's cultural focus toward the East. The ways in which the Beats utilized and distorted Asian conceptions reveal both the rewards and dangers of turning to non-European sources. The nearly simultaneous publication in 1958 of a special Zen number of the Chicago Review and of Jack Kerouac's novel, 'The Dharma Bums', first alerted the public to Beat interest in Asian thought. In addition to pieces from such respected Zen Buddhists as D. T. Suzuki and Nyogen Senzaki, the special issue featured Kerouac's 'Meditation in the Woods,' a selection from The Dharma Bums; Philip Whalen's Zen poem "Excerpt: Sourdough Mountain Lookout"; and Gary Snyder's description of meditation in a Japanese monastery, "Spring Sesshin at Shokoku-ji." 1960's can be seen as the backpackers era, hundreds of young men and women found in Eastern thought and religion an escape from the materialistic life of Capitalist America, a country in distress and anguish due to the Vietnam war was finding peace in the teachings of Buddhism and Hinduism. "By 1961, I was more interested in going beyond the traditional expatriate role or voyage, of wandering out in the East, particularly India, the most rich and exquisite and aesthetically attractive culture." Says Allen Ginsberg, the poet laureate of America in his interview with Suranjana Ganguly during one of his visits to India. After Ginsberg's and Kerouac's venture into the Buddhist realm of poetry and Snyder's study of Zen, there was a huge wave of paper back publications which came out and were sold as cheap books in drug stores and outside coffee shops. Buddhist influenced poetry of Ginsberg and Snyder, the Zen-inspired novels of Kerouac and Salinger, the popular Eastern-religious essays of Watts, and the transcendental meditative records of the Beatles were the talk of the day. the American language became pregnant with Sanskrit words like nirvana, dharma, karma, and 'satori', (the sound of one hand clapping) apart from language and literature Winston L King traces down certain common events that populated the 1960's "And there is a steady trickle of Eastern inspired events like the following: an American going to Asia to become a Buddhist monk, or at least to practice meditation; hippie music and communities adopting Eastern themes and styles of living; American Quakers and Zen Buddhists holding a seminar in Japan; and establishment of Hindu and Buddhist meditation centers in the United States".

The Beat writers were spiritually attached to the teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism. Buddhism changed the life of all the beat writers who began to understand it, and all the works Kerouac wrote after the mid-fifties, particularly 'The Dharma Bums' and 'Big Sur,' can be interpreted as Buddhist parables. Ginsberg's works are no less influenced by Buddhist thought, and the poet has devoted an enormous amount of his time and energy to Buddhist causes in the last three decades. Kerouac responded instantaneously to Buddhism and the two basic fundamentals of Buddha, that all life is sorrowful and the cause of suffering is ignorant desire. Kerouac was 'on the road' most of his life and this he found in the Mahayana strain of Buddhism two model thoughts, in which he had firm faith and belief. He identified with the 'Tathagata', who is always en route, moving through life without worldly attachment and bodhisattva, who declines personal salvation on behalf of salvation for all sentient beings. He found those aspects of charity and forgiveness in Buddhism which he failed to find in catholic Christianity. Jack Kerouac came to Buddhism through a library (curiously enough, via the works of Thoreau) and started to develop his own private Buddhism, which consisted of brewing tea, locking himself in his bedroom so his mother would not interrupt him, and sitting on a pillow to meditate for as long as the pain of his old football injuries would allow. The Beats, in short, had a mostly literary Buddhism that effortlessly accommodated "having dinner together or just sort of hanging around together there in the yard and writing and talking and drinking wine and having a good time."

In Ginsberg, Kerouac found a more sympathetic partisan; their discussions were dominated by Buddhist thoughts and preaching. Ginsberg compared Kerouac's position with his own visionary experience of 1948: "I am presuming your Buddha experience and my Blake ones are on the same level" under the influence of Kerouac, Ginsberg too started meditating, went to Japan and became an international spokesman for Buddhism, but he always credited Kerouac as his first Buddhist 'Guru'.

However the Beat poets achieved this spirituality through the medium of sex and body, most of their works have been accused of being erotic and obscene, in fact in the 1950s it often seemed that the only openly gay poet was Allen Ginsberg. The enormous publicity that Ginsberg received made him an important figure, whose avowal of homosexuality was part of his larger attempt to undermine American society and its pretensions to respectability. Although many of the Beat writers were homosexual or bisexual (such as Burroughs or Kerouac), it was Ginsberg

who made his sexuality an integral part of his public image and his poetry. "Howl" was the first poem to bring Ginsberg public attention, and its treatment of homosexuality is characteristic of Ginsberg's position during this time. "Howl" is a lament for "the best minds of my generation," the "angel headed hipsters" destroyed by the cruelties of American society. The homosexual functions in the world of "Howl" as a figure of angelic innocence, his love a protest against the insensitivity and madness which surrounds him. Ginsberg's relation to Whitman is clear in "Howl" as far as sexuality is concerned. Ginsberg learned from Whitman the use of the long line, the repetition of the subordinate clause ("who let," "who blew," "who balled," etc.), and the celebration of phallic energy. The line "who balled in the morning in the evenings in rose gardens and the grass of public parks and cemeteries scattering their semen freely to whomever come who may" shows Ginsberg's assumption of Whitman's democratic sexuality--the celebration of anonymous sexuality and the sharing of the poet's seminal energy. At the same time one can see a great deal of the private mythology of Ginsberg--the search for the sexual encounter as perfect religious experience. While this might seem to originate in Whitman's depiction of the sources of mystic vision as sexual, it should be remembered that Whitman's sexuality is portrayed as both active and passive, and that Whitman devotes as much attention to the image of two lovers simply happy to be together as to actual moments of sexual penetration. In Ginsberg the desire for religious vision is transformed into a desire to be laid, whereas in Whitman the experience of sexual pleasure leads to a greater understanding of the world. Although Ginsberg calls on Whitman, he transforms an ultimately peaceful vision of human unity into an affirmation of the homosexual's alienation from the "straight" world and a desire to become an object of love rather than a participant in it. Here, as in the later poems, Ginsberg links his passive sexuality to his poetics, as he rejects the "craftsman's loom" for the orgasmic scream. There's lots of sex in Howl, both gay and straight. No widely distributed American poem had such graphic descriptions of sexuality before 'Howl', which was originally declared obscene by the U.S. government. Lines 36-42, "who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy, who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love" were the primary focus of the famous obscenity trial that followed. Ginsberg wrote Howl after a long struggle to come to grips with his identity as a gay man.

The Beats were avant-garde writers of their age, they broke all notions of the square society to create their own unique counterculture in the 60's. A closer reading of the poems of Ginsberg and Kerouac resonates the elements of spirit, sex and body and requires indept analysis and study of the same.

Works Cited

1. Ginsberg. *Howl and Other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Bookstore,2006. Print.
2. Raskin, Jonah. *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkley : University of California Press,2005. Print.
3. Charters, Ann. *The Portable Beat Reader*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.Print.
4. Raskin, Jonah. *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*. Berkley : University of California Press,2005. Print.
5. Charters, Ann. *The Portable Beat Reader*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.Print.
6. Galbraith, John Kenneth. *American Capitalism: The Concept of Countervailing Power*. Houghton Mifflin,1956.Print.