

BEATS AND GINNSBERG

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ABSTRACT

Every literary movement has a potential to influence the future generation. In this context, the Beat Generation, a literary movement was started shortly after the World War II by some 'angry young men' or rebellious personalities who were seeking another world for the adjustment away from the confinements of the established norms and conventions. The post war period was a time when many people from every nook and corner were in pursuit of liberation in works, life style and other alternate forms of livelihood. 'Beat' writers, though they didn't follow the established patterns, were socially and culturally accepted by the then young generation either in the group of 'hippie', or in the hallucinogenic world. Engaging in narcotic intoxication, Immoral and unsocial activities like gay marriage, homosexuality etc., purposeless wanderings, practicing Eastern religious activities etc. sound, in a sense, completely non sense, but what can be perceived from those abovementioned activities is that the young generation had been fed up with the established terms and conditions and was on the way of exploring new world. In short, the 'Beats' have shown a way to the aspired youth for an alternate source of creativity.

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1940s and early 50s the Beat Generation also known as the Beat Movement emerged with the works of some writers such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs, Herbert Huncke, Gregory Corso. It was Jack Kerouac, an acknowledged leader and spokesman of the Beat Generation, who for the first time introduced the phrase "Beat Generation" in 1948 to characterize the underground and anti conformist youth gathering in New York. The adjective word 'beat' was initially used for Herbert Huncke's association with the underground world originally meaning 'retired' or 'beaten down'. Later, Kerouac expanded the meaning of 'beat' along with the paradoxical connotation of 'upbeat', beatific, 'on the beat'(music) (Zalesky 2002). The writers of this generation were expressing the views of postwar American society that would only reach full expression in the 1960s in the form of counterculture. While they were not so intent on defining a political or economic position as they were on escaping from one, the Beats regularly affirmed values of awareness with a "detachment from the existing society"(Mitchell 2002).

The social atmosphere the Beat Movement created was a rebellious tone of dissatisfaction from the society and a devotion to the concept of voluntary poverty. Socially the tone sounds completely negative anarchic individualism, but a primary motivating force shows the sameness of dress, a ritual use of 'hip' language and jazz argot with a tendency to cluster together in espresso bars and party pads (Bym 1998). The Beat writers always tried to seek illumination and

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joy from adjusted society and complete annihilation of the motives of an acquisitive society. The concept of illumination results from the simple surrender to the process of experiences from sexual ecstasy, drunkenness and hallucinogenic drugs i.e. peyote and lysergic acids, from disciplines of Zen Buddhism and from anything that created an illusion of receptivity to life (Google, 21 March). Their main aim was release from the confinement of social to get and moral judgment as well as from the conventions of literature.

Some special features highlighted in the Beat writers' works are spontaneity, open emotion, visceral engagement in gritty worldly experiences, and images from Buddhism, Judaism, and Catholicism etc. One important aspect of this generation is the continual challenge to the limits of free expression producing a body of written works which are controversial both for its advocacy of non-conformity and for its non-conforming style (Google 21 March). Drug use, sexuality, aberrant behavior etc. as the topics of the writings made the readers puzzle whether to accept heartily or reject abruptly "Howl" written by Ginsberg in 1956 brought a worldwide fame as the first Beat work in American English literature, which was based on its "graphic sexual language"(Mitchell 2002) that even brought a controversy as an obscenity-trail. But it was banned from reaching the readers. "*On the Road*" written by Kerouac in 1951 and published in 1957, along with the fame of "Howl" created a picturesque in structure and episodic, hence, Kerouac was often accused of encouraging delinquency. Similarly, "*Naked Lunch*", another notable creation of the Beat Generation, written by William Burroughs in 1962, went to trail for obscenity after its American publication (Byam 1988). Gary Snyder, a promoter of Zen Buddhism and oriental philosophy in the Beat Movement (1998), Phil Whalen, a follower of Snyder and known as 'unspirited' poet, Michael McClure, Gregory Corso etc. are some other important Beat writers.

Allen Ginsberg, a leading figure of this generation has briefed some important terms as the main features of the Beat Generation. Firstly, spiritual liberation, sexual "revolution" or "liberation" (Google 21 March), such as gay liberation, somewhat catalyzing women's liberation, black liberation, Gray Panther activism are some things commonly found in Beat writings. The main demands such as liberation of the words from censorship, demystification and/or decriminalization of some laws against marijuana and other drug are still noticeable. Likewise, the evolution of rhythm and blues into rock and roll as a high art form, as evidenced by the Beatles, Bob Dylan, and other popular musicians influenced more in the later fifties and sixties. (Mitchell 2002)

BEAT GENERATION

The Beat Generation, a term used to describe a group of American writers who were also known as 'beatniks' (Zalesky 2002) making a culture that includes a rejection of main stream values, experimentation with drugs, alternate forms of sexuality and an interest in oriental spirituality became very popular in the mid 20th century. The members of this generation developed a reputation as new bohemian hedonists who celebrated non-conformity and spontaneous creativity (Gargan 2004). Initially, Ginsberg, Kerouac, Burroughs, Snyder and sometimes Corso were known as 'Beats', but later, the Beat category would

include some other sub groups who also shared many of the same themes, ideas and intentions such as initiation to spontaneity, open form of composition, and subjectivity. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Harold Norse, Kirbi Doyle, Kenneth Rexroth, Micheal McClure, Philip Whalem, Lew Welch, Gary Snyder etc. were the writers whom the 'core' (Google 21 March) Beats encountered with in San Francisco and they were associated with the San Francisco Renaissance. Some poets like Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, Robert Duncan etc. associated with the Beats and they were originally from Black Mountain College, hence, they were later known as the poets of Black Mountain College. The poets of New York School i.e. Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch and the surrealists poets like Ted Joan, Philip Lamantia etc. were labeled as the 'second wave' of the Beat Generation. (21 March)

UNIQUE COMBINATION

Among the core Beat writers Ginsberg, Corso, Kerouac and Burroughs, Corso was only from New York but they were often called the New York Beats. They included one more member in their group. He was Herbert Huncke, a drug addict and petty thief often stationed in Time Square area. Burroughs met him first and introduced him with other Beat writers to his junky life style and junky lingo. Later came Hal Chase in this group, who was an anthropologist from Denver. Then came 'the often neglected women' in the original circle, Joan Vollmer and Edie Parker whose apartment often functioned as a salon and Vollmer was particularly a serious participant in the marathon discussion-session (Google 25 March).

Burroughs was associated with underground criminals of New York as an interest in experimenting with criminal behaviors i.e. dealing with stolen goods and narcotics as well as developing addiction to opiates along with his Beat friends. His contact with Huncke, also shows the criminality of the Beats. Ginsberg's attachment with Huncke brought him on a 'quest for supreme reality' (Google 25 March). Once he was in trouble when he gave shelter to Huncke and stored his 'goods' in his apartment. Moreover, he rode with Huncke to transport his 'goods' in his apartment. That brought him into the legal prosecution when the police chased them. His emotional attachment with Huncke can be seen in the lines of his poem, 'Howl', "Who walked all night with their shoes full of blood on the snow bank docks waiting for a door in the East River to open to a room full of steamheat and opium." (Baym 1998)

However, the whole poem was dedicated to Carl Solomon with whom he was befriended at Bellevue Hospital where he was sent to cure his so called insanity. Sometimes the core 'Beats were known as 'libertine circle' (Ginsberg's phrase) for their infatuation with a number of drugs i.e. Marijuana, Benzedrine and in some cases opiates such as morphine as well as psychedelic drugs i.e. peyote, yage, ayohuasca, LSD. Though there were some intellectual aspects in their interest as well as a simple pursuit of hedonistic intoxication, the drug use was termed as 'experimental' (Google 25 March). Along with the experimental drug use, many of them claimed that the intoxication with drugs would enhance their insight, creativity or productivity. With the popularity of the Beat phenomenon the drug use became widespread among the hippies.

NEW CONTEXTS

The post war period was the time wherein dominant culture was getting weak but a strong intellectuality had undertaken with sense of spontaneity. The Beats were a manifestation of their undercurrent pursuing self expression by negating control and order (25 March). Charlie Parker's bop form of jazz had influenced the Beats. Abstract expressionism flourished in New York had a great influence in the Beats especially in the Black Mountain College. Burroughs had adopted John Cage's 'cut-up' technique in his poems. 'Minutes to Go', a poem written collectively by Corso, Brion Gysin and Burroughs was constructed by clipping phrases from newspapers, mixing them in a bowl, picking them about at random and pasting them in a poem's form (Gargan, 2004). The 1920s Dadaist/Surrealist poet, Tristan Tzara who used to compose poems putting cut-up words which he would take randomly from his bag, had an influence on the Beats (Google, 25 March). Robert Lowell's attachment to the Beats for founding confessional poetry was a noticeable transition from the traditional forms forwarded by the New Critics to the non traditional poetry of the Beats. Ginsberg's '*Kaddish*' is a surrealist poem. Some Beats like Ted Joan were the members of Surrealist group. Likewise Romanticism was a land mark influence in the writings of the Beats. Ginsberg mentioned P.B. Shelley's '*Adonais*' at the beginning of his '*Kaddish*' and Shelley's poems were a great influence in his other poems too. William Blake, another Romantic influence in his poetic career, was the subject of his self defining auditory hallucination/revelation. Besides, the works of American Romantic poets i.e. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Whitman, Edgar Allan Poe and even Emily Dickinson were the influences in the writings of the Beats.

GROWING POPULARITY

With widespread popularity of the Beats, Herb Caen of the San Francisco's Chronicle in 1958 coined a new term 'Beatnik' to the Beat Generation resembling the Russian Satellite Sputnik suggesting 'far out of the mainstream of society' and 'possibly procommunist' (Google, 21 March). The new term's popularity could be observed in a new stereotype of men with goatees and baretts playing bongos and women being free spirited wearing black leotards and dancing (Baym, 1998). Later the image of 'Beatnik' was seen in many cartoons, movies and T.V. shows. Besides, 'Beat' literature and 'Beatnik' stereotype had greatly influenced high school students and college students in the late 1950s and early 60s. Later, in the sixties the Beat culture that was earlier accompanied by Beatnik, was also accompanied by a public terminology 'Hippie'. The change in the public level from Beatnik to 'hippie' was noticed in 1967. In San Francisco's Golden Gate Park where Ginsberg, Snyder, McClure and many others participated leading the crowd chanting 'Om'. They were also observed participating in important events in 'hippie' culture along with Abbie Hoffman and other members of the 'Chicago Seven' at the protest of 1968 Democratic convention (Baym 1998). The Beat members were frequently seen with somber colors, dark shades, goatees colorful psychedelic clothing and long hair. They were also known for 'playing it cool' and sometimes 'being cool' (Google 21 March). The Beats also influenced many post modern novelists. Ken Kesey's '*One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*', Terry Sothern's '*Dr Strangelove*', Thomas Pynchon's '*Gravity's Rainbow*' were a few post modern novelist to name.

Burroughs had inspired many later post-modernists novelists in the cyberpunk genre. 1970s' top pop singer/composer Bob Dylan was very close to the Beats with whom he toured many places for the public functions. In 1975 he was befriended by Ginsberg on the 'Rolling Thunder Revue'. Hence, the Beats had a great influence on the rock and roll figures not only Bob Dylan, the Beatles, but also Jim Morrison and many others (Google 24 April).

Thus, the Beat Generation has had a great influence on the modern society. In a sense, it can be taken as the first subculture -cultural subdivision on life style, political grounds etc. Though they produced a great interest in life style experimentation in regards to sex and drugs, they had intellectual impact encouraging the queries of authority, and popularizing interest in Oriental spirituality.

ALLEN GINSBERG

He was born into a Jewish family in Newark, New Jersey. His father, Louis Ginsberg was a poet/school teacher, and his mother, Naomi Ginsberg was a never diagnosed psychological ailed lady and a member of the communist party. She often told him bed time stories about those good kings who rode forth from the castles, saw the suffering workers and healed them (Google 24 April). Allen Ginsberg's long autobiographical poem, '*Kaddish for Naomi Ginsberg*' disclosed many of the facts happened in his childhood. At Columbia University his meeting with Lucian Carr brought him into recognition with other writers like Kerouac, Burroughs, Holmes etc and saw in each other the American youth's potentiality that existed outside the strict conformist confines of the post World War II. That helped them view a 'New Vision' for American literature. The word 'beat' referred loosely to the sense of their spiritual exhaustion and diffuse the feelings of rebellion against what they experienced as the general conformity' (Mitchell 2002)

ALTERNATE POWER OF CREATIVITY

It was the experiment with drugs like Marijuana and nitrous oxide that always helped him induce further vision what Ginsberg himself described "an exalted state of mind" (Google 21 March). For him it was the poet's duty to bring a visionary consciousness of reality to readers. Besides, in his Harlem apartment on the day of summer he had an 'auditory vision' of the English Romantic poet, William Blake reciting him his poems: first 'Ah ! Sunflower', and a few minutes later the same oracular voice intoning 'The Sick Rose'. It was "like hearing the doom of the whole universe, and at the same time the inevitable beauty of that doom," (Baym 1998). The incident happened in his life as a poet when he was staring out the window:

... I began noticing in every corner where I looked evidences of living hand, even in the bricks, in the arrangement of every brick, some hand place them there that some hand had placed the whole universe in front me... . Or that God was in front my eyes existence itself was God... . Or that God was in front my eyes existence itself was God... what I was seeing was visionary thing, it was a lightless in my body... my body suddenly felt light and a sense of cosmic consciousness, vibrations, understanding, awe, and wonder and surprise. And it

was a sudden awakening into a totally deeper real universe that I'd been existing in (Zalesky 2002).

His residence 'Beat Hotel' in Paris, a shabby lodging house above a bar at rue Git-le Coeur along with Peter Orlovsky, Corso and Burroughs, bore '*Kaddish*' to Ginsberg, 'Bomb' and Marriage' to Corso, '*Naked Lunch*' to Burroughs within a productive and creative time though they were in the hallucinogenic world (2002).

HISTORICAL CONTRIBUTION

"Hold back the edges of your gowns, ladies, we are going through hell," William Carlos Williams had said these words while introducing the poem, 'Howl' as the most auspicious public welcome from one poet to another (Baym 1160).

'Howl' (1956), a widely read poem that Ginsberg called 'Hebraic Melvillian bardic breath' (Mitchell 436) is a free verse poem whose sources include the poets like P.B. Shelley, Kurt Schwitters, Christopher Smart, Guillaume Apollinaire, Antonin Artaud, William Carlos Williams etc. As far the longer line of the poem, Ginsberg has clearly explained it as an experiment in what could be done with the longer unit of breath that seemed very natural, in his own words:

My feeling is for a big long clanky statement not the way you'd say it, a thought, but the way you would think it i.e. we think rapidly in the visual images as well as words, and if each successive thought was transcribed in its confusion ... you get a slightly different prosody than it you were talking slowly. (Baym 1998).

Along with its publication it brought a controversy that all the copies were seized by police and publishers were arrested with a charge that they published and tried to sell an obscene and indecent book. The issue went into the court. Only in October 1957 judge Clayton Horn ruled out that '*Howl*' had redeeming social value (Google 21 March). The poem isn't only a biography of Ginsberg's experiences before 1955 but also a history of the Beat Generation as well as his unresolved emotions about his 'schizophrenic' (21 March) mother. It is a prophetic poem and a form of Jeremiad written in a long line derived from the Bible, Whitman, Blake etc. It shows a world in which all values and order have become "dehumanized and a diatribe against a military and commercial society" (25 March). The fate of the "best minds" (Mitchell 2002) is shown to have disordered self destructive, criminal and even insane. It is presented in a blend of jazz argot, surrealist imagery and violent action.

Carl Solomon, a Dada, surrealism enthusiast and a sufferer of bouts of depression to whom the whole poem was dedicated and about whom the poem was written was an inspirational personality to him. To date "Howl" has been translated into more than 25 languages including Czech, Chinese, and Polish to name a few (Zalesky 2002).

"*Kaddish*" is another long prophetic poem, more personal on the life, insanity and death of his mother with a tone of deep sadness less hortatory and satiric than '*Howl*'. It is a prayer and lament for his mother, Naomi Ginsberg and her factual account i.e. her tragic journey through life from a frightened Russian child to a young woman in America and onward towards education, marriage,

nervous breakdown, operation, teaching at school and the position of madness (Baym 2634). Mostly his works display many of the interests of the Beats: drugs, hallucinogenic and addiction, sexual disorder, voluntary poverty, rejection of society, quest for illumination, jazz rhythm and hip language, rootless wandering etc. (Google 21 March).

SUBMISSIVENESS TO ORIENTALISM

Ginsberg's spiritual and emotional attachment with Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan Buddhist meditation master of the Kagyu and Nyingma sects and his friend/life long teacher invoked him to initiate a spiritual journey with his spontaneous vision to India. It helped him experiment with various psychedelic stimulants to create visionary poetry. It was the most important trip of his life. He spent nearly two years there, bought a harmonium in Beneras to sing religious hymns and met many holy sages in an effort to find someone who could teach him a method of meditation that would help him deal with his egotism and serve as a vehicle for heightened spiritual awareness. He even realized that meditation not drugs could help him attain his enlightenment (Google 25 March). While staging demonstration against U.S. participation in the war in Vietnam, he confronted with the police in Chicago's Grant Park and staying on an impromptu stage he chanted "Om" in an attempt to calm the crowds being brutally attacked by tear gas and billy clubs (Baym 1998). He was also involved in Krishnaism with A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder of the Hare Krishna movement in the Western world. He also donated money, materials and his reputation to help the Swami establish a temple and toured with him to promote his cause. Ginsberg, on 3 September, 1968 on William F. Buckley, Jr's TV show '*Firing Line*', sang a song in praise of Lord Krishna playing in his own harmonium accompanied by a guitarist (Google 25 March).

FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

Until his death in 1997, he was in a long fight for freedom whether it was for free speech or freedom for gay people. He traveled to several communist countries i.e. Cuba, China etc to promote free speech. He always expressed his desire for the freedom of gay people openly and graphically in his poetry. He himself wanted to register his marriage with Peter Orivosky, his life-long companion as his spouse in '*Who's Who*' entry (Zalesky 2002). In 1943 he discovered within himself 'mountains of homosexuality' (Theado 2004). His submissiveness to nudity was also a matter of controversy among people. His defense for the freedom of the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) can be read in his essay "Thought on NAMBLA" (published in 1994) in which he has stated, "I joined NAMBLA in defense of free speech" (Mitchell 2004). His attempt to demystify the use of drugs was noticed in his advocating for the legalization of Marijuana. His courage, humanitarian political views and support of homosexuality, his engagement in Eastern meditation practices and his charismatic personality made him a favorite spokesman by the then younger generation of radicalized Americans known as 'hippie'.

He was the 'archetypal' (Google 21 March) Beat Generation writer to countless poetry audiences and to general public. As long as he lived, he

remained a radical poet, an embodiment of the ideals of personal freedom, non conformity and the search for enlightenment. His membership to the American Institute of Art and Letters helped him use his prestige to champion the works of his friends. His accompanying with Bob Dylan at the public functions of rock and roll helped him revive his creativity among the younger people. *'Holy Soul Jelly Roll: Poems and songs'* (1949-1993). *'The Lion for Real'* (1989), *'The Ballad of the Skeletons'* (1996), *'Howl U.S.A.'* (1996), are a few books he contributed to the young readers. His appearance in the film *'Pull my Daisy'* was also 'experimental'. He has still been named a Guggenheim fellow and a Distinguished professor at Brooklyn college until his death (21 March).

CONCLUSION

In short, the Beat Generation started in the mid of the 20th century along with some rebellious celebrities notorious activities and display profound known for dissatisfaction with the American society of 1950s. At coffee houses, public places and also 'unheeded' (21 March) places they were seen doing some extraordinary activities along with creating some excellent works and exemplifying the people that they were also good citizens of their own society. They would deserve all those potentialities that every good citizen would have. On the whole, the Beat Movement always called for renunciation of material goods and acquisitiveness in favor of a rediscovery of the erotic and spiritual self through the use of drugs, casual sex, music and oriental mysticism.

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