

Countercultural Quest in Jack Kerouac's The Dharma Bums: A Frisson Material in Search of Dickey Abstract

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Abstract – In the 1950's America, the literary movement that came to be known as The Beat Generation discarded customary narrative ethics and materialism, explored spiritual quest in their own way and experimented with promiscuous relations and psychedelic drugs. The Beats were of the generation who grew up in the destructive shadow of the Second World War and spent most of their youth in a post-war disenchanting environment. The term 'beat generation' was first used by Jack Kerouac in conversation with writer John Clellon Holmes in 1948. The group of writers that was indulged in Beat Generation was very cynical and iconoclasts by nature and believed in spontaneity in prose and poetry writing. This paper is an attempt to look out at the spiritual quest and the psychological conflict of reaching out at the ultimate truth by acquiring a way that was much foreign to the materialist West in the novel *The Dharma Bums*. What is the ultimate truth? What is the way out of life's sufferings? What is the purpose we dwell here for? And finally what is the purpose of all this existence that is going on and on from eternity to time without end? These are some of the questions that happen to come in the mind of every thinking being but our focus is post-Second World War youth of America who had gone profligate and revolutionary as the result of huge destruction brought up by the war.

Keywords: Beat writing, Dharma Bums, Jack Kerouac, Countercultural Quest, Eastern Mysticism.

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INTRODUCTION

Western youth in those times was looking at the East for some spiritual solution for the problem of dislocation and then started the study of Eastern religious philosophy of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. In *The Dharma Bums* also the protagonist, Ray Smith, goes into various experiments to vanish this pain of dislocation under the guidance of Japhy Ryder, a Buddhist scholar, the character modeled on another beat writer and Kerouac's friend Gary Snyder, who in real life also set off his quest in Zen. The novel is looked upon by many scholars to have activated the 'Zen boom' in America and stimulated the people's curiosity in Buddhism. Not it is that there was no before the beat writers who wrote in the tradition of Eastern mysticism; Whitman and Thoreau are some of the best examples who wrote not only about nature but also explored the individual's search for peaceful space and tranquil state of mind. Heraclitus in 5th century BC and Socrates in 4th century BC were the ancient masters of spiritual philosophy. "In a way, the Beat Generation is a gathering together of all the available models and myths of freedom in America that had existed before, namely: Whitman, John Muir, Thoreau, and the American bum. We put them together and opened

them out again, and it becomes like a literary motif, and then we added some Buddhism to it" (Gary Snyder, quoted in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 172).

There has always been an underlying current of mystical religiosity in the West too but it never became the mainstream of Occidental approach towards ultimate truth. It has been outwardly motivated and materialistic search as opposed to the Eastern emphasis on the transformation of the inner self. But when one tries to adapt to the other, the situation becomes so complex that a scattered being might be the result. That is the case to be highlighted here and there can clearly be seen the same kind of struggle in the life of the different characters of *The Dharma Bums*. The argument is not that one should not go the other side but there are very few who may understand the undercurrent and very consciousness behind the culture that has been developed in very different conditions and is very different from one's own. That is why the frustration and distrust of the protagonist, Ray Smith, toward the notion of nothingness (Sunya) is apparent, at certain points, through the course of the story.

Most of the characters of the novel are based on the real acquaintances of Kerouac. Some of them get affronted by their mean portrayal in the storyline, which, they say, not accorded with the side of their real thoughts. There was an increasing interest in Eastern philosophy in young writers of America in the post-war era. Conflict is not only psychological but it is social as well as familial. Where Ray is now very much indulged in the activities that are prescribed in Zen Buddhism, his relatives grow irritated with his idleness and refusal to work or participate in family affairs. They do not catch up with his developing understanding of the world as "neutrally meaningless, and thus wonderful." The characters of Ray and Japhy uphold the notion of free-spiritedness and compassion for all fellow creatures. Zen teachings are their inspiration to move forward in the spiritual quest. As Victor Turner substantiated the idea of 'communitas,' meaning unstructured community, relating it to the novel's individual character's independent spirit, defying all sense of community, jointly making communitas, where no responsibility is laid on the individuals, no order, and no rule. Interestingly enough, the most famous book in the Buddhist realm of philosophy, *The Diamond Sutra*, also talks about the same kind of freedom. There is no compulsion on any human being to do or not to do anything. One should follow one's own nature in the pursuit of *Nirvana*. Truth is one but the way to achieve is necessarily individual and personal. It says that religion is a matter of very much personal kind, there cannot be a common religion even for two human beings as there is no way to experience the truth collectively but experienced in the innermost self of the spiritual searcher. Inspired with these kinds of meditative notions, Ray is cut off from the mainstream life that surrounds him. He frequently thinks that he is on the journey of becoming a Buddha.

This kind of writing did not suit to the critics and several other writers of the time and in derision of the book *Time* magazine commented scornfully under the title "The Yabyum Kids: How the Campfire Kids Discovered Buddhism." The book faced a lot of criticism at the hands of writers who were at the time very successful and they said that this is not writing at all. One of the many reasons because of which the book faced scorn is that it denies the physical world and upholds the abstract one, which did not fit the western perspective. Ray disparages Alvah Goldbook, the character modeled on Kerouac's friend and one of leading Beat poets, Allen Ginsberg, for living in what he senses is an illusory corporeal world, while Alvah resorts that the physical world is undoubtedly more real than the rarefied mumbo-jumbo that Ray trusts in. Eventually, Alvah heads off in a bad mood, but Ray calms himself with the reassurance that the scrap was not "real." The scene reminds of the clear cut distinction of western and eastern approaches toward the outer and inner world. In the eastern religious philosophy, the outer world is considered as the "Maya" (illusion) while the

inner world (to be recognized through practicing meditation or devotion) of one's self is regarded as the real one.

In general, the beat poets and novelists were in some senses bums as they usually wander around the places. According to Kerouac's statements, the beats were very wise and independent, so they were very much similar to the ancient Buddhist monks who had passed through in order to expand insight and to look for dharma. The word 'Dharma' is a transliteration from the Sanskrit, means the law or the doctrine. The novel defines dharma as "Truth Meaning": Ray said, "I believed that I was an oldtime bhikku in modern clothes wandering the world... in order to turn the wheel of the Truth Meaning, or Dharma, and gain merit for myself as a future Buddha (Awakener) (p. 6)." A Buddhist monk has to travel from one place to another after training in the temple in search of enlightenment; he cannot stay long at one place or inherit anything. It was this aspect of wandering and seeking the wisdom that enticed Kerouac because he has been doing both since the late 1940s.

The characters in the novel and the people on whom they were modeled were once known as "Zen Lunatics" as the result of their too much indulgence in untamed parties, mania with Oriental devout living out, excess in drugs, alcohol, and free sex seemed mad or even lunatic to others. Japhy wants to start a revolution of Zen lunacy, which he feels is an idea that the conformists of America should-but unfortunately do not-understand. He is a free-spirited and committed scholar of the Buddhist teachings but fails to make others understand his argument except for Ray, who already had taken his teachings into consideration. The paradox that a common reader might encounter while reading the book is that how can a responsible religious person be of this kind where he performs multi sex relations, taking drugs, doing wild parties, and above all how can a compassionate heart be as passive as Ray's? The question arises from Ray's reaction to the situation in which Rosie was caught who eventually commits suicide. After Rosie has committed suicide in the fear of arrest, Ray decides to leave the city, continuing to think that Rosie's problems would have been solved if she only knew the world's true nature. So what is the world's true nature Ray is talking here about? He is again interpreting the situation according to Zen Buddhist teachings about the existence and happenings according to which all problems of all human beings are nothing but psychologically formulated. They do not exist in the real world but in the painful arbitrary thought processes of all humans. In the novel, Ray many times refers to the first Noble Truth, propounded by Tathagata, "All life is suffering." He admits many times that the only single thing that fascinated him most in Buddha's

philosophy is the first, "All Life is Suffering," of the Four Noble Truths.

Ray's comparative belief about the teachings of Christ and Buddha are quite more mature than that of Japhy's. Ray once says that Christ is possibly the Maitreya (Lover of All), of whom Buddha himself prophesied twenty-five centuries ago. Here is an excerpt from a poem of Kerouac in which his vision of different religions of the world is apparent:

"I believe in the sweetness

of Jesus

And Buddha---

I believe,

In St. Francis,

Avaloki

Tesvara,

the Saints

Of First Century

India A D

And Scholars

Santidevan

And Otherwise

Santayanan

Everywhere (Kerouac, quoted in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 15)."

In the light of one argument that is made in the novel, it can be derived that religion is not a personal entity; it is highly impersonal and social and that is what can be seen as the Occidental way of interpretation of religiosity. There are several arguments that support this point of view such as "Durkheimian assumption that religion is somehow at its most genuine when it is organized into church or sect rather than personal or familial in form (a "societal" element that somehow distinguishes "religion" from other categories such as "magic" and "spirituality") (*Buddhist-Christian Studies* 167)." But the Zen outlook is opposite to this in one way or the other that religion is not an entity to be collectively pursued, rather it has to ripen in consciousness of the individual who, by understanding the meaninglessness and the must misery of the routine worldly life, renounces the mechanical activities performed for no purpose and lives on minimal requirements. Ray seems to be frustrated in the loneliness imposed by himself

without the real grasp of the meditative life of Buddhism. This is particularly because of the conflict arisen between his western upbringing and eastern leaning.

Even though Kerouac and other Beat's use of Buddhist ideas, one would not consider them Buddhist. One can argue that they might have engaged with one or two doctrines of Buddhist philosophy but that is not enough to call them the committed followers of Buddhism. Another point can be drawn from the non-Buddhist practices to call the Beats irreverent to Buddhism or they did not take it seriously. A scholar of the Beat movement may point out that what the Beats practiced was spirituality mixed with the ideas taken from different Oriental and Occidental religions. The protagonist finds the same way out of his disinterestedness in the socio-political and mechanical obligations which he thinks, in the light of his learning of Zen Buddhist laws, are the reason of all human misery and suffering.

Maybe the opinion in dismissing the Beats is the Western perspective of purity notion that religiosity is supposed to be performed exclusively. If there is someone who practices Buddhism today, Christianity tomorrow, and then Islam, Hinduism and so on, he or she cannot be said to be a truly religious person according to Western perspective, rather he would be considered a confused person. The confusion or dilemma is of the same kind when Ray encounters with different Buddhist notions keeping a scale that is inherently Western. Things and happenings should be looked at in their own nature but not subjectively, particularly when the subject is really subject but socially constructed consciousness. This mixed form of spiritual practices is derisively called syncretism.

In this strange journey of the spiritual quest the Beats were opposed not only by the priest community but also by reputed writers of the time, capitalists, authority, military men, etc. Literally, they were on a very different path from most of the other fellow Americans were at that time. The theme of disillusionment is highlighted in the novel as necessary for starting the journey to the ultimate truth. Until one is not disillusioned at one time or the other and has developed a basic understanding with repetitive experiences of happiness and misery, one is not qualified to have a spiritual understanding at all. Mere observation of the repetitive acts acted by one could trigger the *vairagya* in oneself.

Despite the fact that Ray is made to track the mountain, he is incapable to sense in terms of Zen. Sometimes, he falls into troubles because of newly adapted philosophy but never confesses the futility of his intangible Buddhist thoughts. He frequently meditates on the Zen point of view that nothing exists but only mind itself. This is how he keeps on moving towards the abstract world of Zen and at

the end, he is made to achieve the enlightenment. Apart from this, the structure of the novel is hugely affected by the conflict of concrete material and abstract metaphysics. On the one hand, Ray and Japhy use Zen Lunacy wrongly as an excuse for wine parties and orgies, but on the other, they seem sincere and serious Zen followers when they are on their journey of mountaineering lore.

"The secret of this kind of climbing," said Japhy, "is like Zen. Don't think. Just dance along. It's the easiest thing in the world, actually easier than walking on flat ground which is monotonous. The cute little problems present themselves at each step and yet you picked out for no special reason at all, just like Zen." (p. 52)

Another novel that traces the influence of Buddhism on Kerouac is his *Mexico City Blues* in which also he is seeking to put Buddhist doctrines into the Beat language. His reading of the *Diamond Sutra* recently is rendered as:

Dharma law
Say
All things is made
of the same thing
which is nothing
All nothings are the same
as somethings
the somethings
are no-nothings
equally black. (Kerouac 66)

It is recorded that after 1960 Kerouac's interest decreased in Buddhism. After that, he lived in his Lowell roots, French Canadian ancestry, American patriotism, and Catholic upbringing, and repudiated his former Beat friends, countercultural values and intellectual enthusiasms. The disillusionment of later life of Kerouac can find seed in when Ray says that Zen "didn't concentrate on kindness so much as on confusing the intellect..." Kerouac himself also regarded Zen as too intellectual, though, it rejected mind altogether in the journey to ultimate truth. Kerouac was once asked before his death that about the impact of Zen on his work and life, he said: "What's really influenced my work is the Mahayana Buddhism, the original Buddhism of Gotama Sakyamuni, the Buddha himself..." He admitted his indebtedness to Zen but said that "my serious Buddhism" drew back to India, espousing such philosophy as sympathy, brotherhood, donations,

"don't step on the bug" and the "sweet sorrowful face of the Buddha."

From the ongoing discussion the conclusion can be drawn that Kerouac's account to make Ray go west to meet east is not all in vain. We are all victims of our cultural boundaries in which are brought up. But whether it is cultural or mystical, transcendence is possible and we must strive for it. There have been people not in favor of this sort of slack writing and in support of it because it made some difference to already established norms but what is more central is that Kerouac is successful to convey the way in which he feels the Zen Buddhism, whether his understanding of it is bona fide or not is a matter of endless debate. Ray's rummage for a Buddhist milieu to his knowledge persists all the way through the narrative. Consciousness-probing, mountaineering, headstand, Yab-Yum, and other similar practices signify towards the eastern ascetic tradition. Kerouac's interest in Buddhism is mixed with Catholic roots and the post-war environment and the result of that mixture again mixed with his creative ability is *The Dharma Bums*. The novel implies a fundamental question that everyone should or does encounter sooner or later.

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