

Beat Generation: An Observation of Collective Social Chaos

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Abstract – Cultural historiographies have extensively documented the contributions of Beat Generation in giving effect to the spread of countercultures that eventuated in 1960s. The Beat phenomena incorporated divergent and often conflicting emotions, simultaneously and with equal ease. Therefore in beat literature it is not uncommon to find spiritual ecstasy and erotic sensations expressed concurrently. They advocated guilelessness, exposedness, incertitude, and eccentricity while defying restrictions, suppressions, material considerations and authority. The Beat Generation of Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassidy exercised a major impact upon other contemporary maverick movements. A trend of experimenting with the conventional art forms was ongoing in the America of 1950s, which ranged from Expressionist painting to San Francisco Renaissance; and from New York Poets to Black Mountain School. The Beat Generation too was the outcome of that impatience which was aiming to disrupt the accepted artistic notions. Writers of this Generation were disgusted by the high and phony artistic discourses such the one expressed by New Critics and New York intellectuals. The writings of this Generation were reacting to various socio-political developments like paranoia of cold war, neo-colonialism and rising trends of capitalism. The object of this paper is to foreground socio-cultural factors that conditioned the writing of Beat Generation.

Keywords — Beat Generation, Black Mountain School, New Critics, Cold War, Neo-colonialism, Capitalism.

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INTRODUCTION

The Banking system remains, as always the most dominant segment of the financial sector. Without a sound and effective Banking system in India it cannot have a healthy economy. The Banking system of India should not only be hassle free but it should be able to meet new challenges posed by the technology or any other external and internal factors.

The sigh of relief which America took in the springs of 1945 was truly short lived as it gave way to "the animosity of post war Soviet-American relation" which "drew on a deep reservoir of mutual distrust" (Chafe, 31). This led to an American dream of not only augmenting the military power but also engaging into a space race. "The idea of communism frightened countries such as Britain and U.S., whose rulers thought the 1917 revolution might lead to similar revolutions in their own countries" (Wayland, 08). This long fostered prejudice became paranoia as in the aftermaths of world war two; Russia saw itself at the zenith of its power. With the red scare in its full sway the Americans were forging new ideas for themselves and breaking away from the former collective beliefs. At this time of transition, a group emerged which

shaped its belief around the contemporary historical movements.

In addition to the cold war a similar war was being waged in America, the war of cultural ideology between the "Beats and the squares" (Bennett, 03). The America of 1950s reflected a perfect dichotomy between the ideologies adopted by the "squares" who stood for "values such as an all-consuming work ethic, sexual repression, cultural xenophobia, militaristic patriotism, and suburban materialism" (Bennett, 03) and the Beats whose "convictions and attitudes were unconventional, provocative, anti-intellectual, anti-hierarchical and anti-middle-class (the 'squares') (Cuddon, 78). The name "Beat" was given by Jack Kerouac as multi-purpose term, encompassing both the positives and negatives of this world. "On one hand "Beat" implied weariness and disinterest in social or political activity, and on the other it was reminiscent of the beatitudes of Jesus- declaration of blessedness uttered during the Sermon on the Mount" (Gale,29). The very nomenclature of this generation demonstrates a non-commitment to single ideology centered definition. The other figures who constituted the body of 'Beat Generation' included names such as Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, and William

Burroughs. Kerouac and his compatriots were opposed to any totalitarian attempt and gross standardization of affairs. To realize and voice once individuality was of utmost importance to them. "Emerson and Thoreau were examples of the sort of individualism increasingly championed by Kerouac as an antidote to the standardization he observed in mid-twentieth century America" (Gair, 04).

The body of first half of twentieth century literature could be broadly categorized into two schools: Modern and Post-Modern; spanning from the First World War years of 1914-1920 and the post Second World War years (1939-1945), lasting unto 1950s respectively. This entire generation of writers had witnessed the dire consequences of war and the rings of it are particularly audible in their writings. They were the "Lost Generation". The first real generation in the history of American letters, damned and forsaken, lost from all others and themselves" (Aldridge, 24). The "Beats" too were a post war generation; hence the prefix "Lost" is readily attachable to their generation. But they were lost in an utterly distinct manner; lost in a self-carved utopia, looking nonchalantly at the wider world, never stepping into the mire of morality. They had grown in the wrecks of society, so the rife complications of their time was never trying enough for them; they knew what was to be changed, was attitude toward those problems. "Life if it were to matter, would be lived existentially at the edge; confrontation, shock tactic obscenity when needed, a non-ideological politics of drop out or commune, sex or marijuana virtually on demand, endless readings, love inns, happenings, change of fashion and talk, these would all be the means of assault and change" (Lee, 02).

Albeit the mood of their writing was set by the time and the social factors but they neither inherit any specifics of their predecessors nor attempted to exercise the other popular measures which were being exercised in the other parts of the world. "The beat generation is altogether too vigorous, too intent, too indefatigable, and too curious to suit its elders. Nothing seems to satisfy it but extremes, which if they have included the criminality of narcotics, have also, included the sanctity of monasteries. Everywhere the beat generation seems occupied with the feverish production of answers – some of them frightening some of them foolish- to a single question: How are we to live?" (Holmes, 12) This unique attitude made them the face of the marijuana smoking; hitchhiking, defiant, down and out American youth who were "mad to live, mad to talk and mad to be saved" (Holmes, 12).

Howl, Naked Lunch and On the Road are the paradigmatic works of 'Beat Generation'. Howl is a combination of autobiography, apocalyptic vision and prophecy (Klemens, 02). The sexually explicit language, mostly homo-sexual in nature, shocked readers and critics alike and the poem faced trial for obscenity. Though after being testified in support by the respected poets of the time, Ginsberg's poem was

declared non-guilty of obscenity and the notoriety of the trial had immediately made the poem successful.

Burroughs's Naked Lunch managed to be published in United States only after 1962 when it was acquitted of the charge of obscenity after three years long trial. There is no regular plot, no smooth narrative, no linear point of view and no easily ascertainable theme in Naked Lunch. Precisely, it is the saga of junkie William Lee and a mishmash of freakish characters who assemble in an austere perverted zone of drug addiction, lewdness, and lunacy. It is not the theme which makes this book one of the magnum opus of the Beat literary movement. Rather, it is the style, or the genesis of its style, which struck the reader's attention and invited a flood of critical annotations—negative as much as positive—to Burroughs's arte fact. Naked Lunch is composed of a sequence of unsystematic sketches and incoherent notes. While living in Tangiers, Burroughs carved hundreds of literary scraps and, later with the assistance of his friends Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac and many others, he randomly accumulated the snippets and presented them to a publisher, leaving it up to the publisher how he prefers to arrange the stacked pages and publish it. Consequently, one can actually study Naked Lunch from middle, from front to back, from back to front, or from any direction. The lack of genuine literary effort as well as required capability was so ostensible that it caused great annoyance and invited the wrath of many critics. Some declared that it took no intelligence to create the so-called novel and even less to read it. However, Naked Lunch, in spite of the cruel, even offensive censure, enjoyed the status of being a national bestseller and proved to be a milestone in its author's literary reputation. The chaotic storyline and jagged structure of Naked Lunch is not due to the incompetence of the novelist but reveals an inclination of defying and deconstructing the borders and the boundaries. "Naked Lunch is so excessive that it baffles structure or tries to control it or inflicts interpretations upon it. Naked Lunch's structure is impossible to grasp because it is a moving mosaic reconstituted in variant form by every reader through an endless piecing together, a continual reassembling of a text without limit" (Edward and Graulund, 76).

Kerouac's On the Road is generally conceived as the "hip-pocket bible of Beat Generation" (Tamony, 274). This book is loosely based on the experiences gained by the author and the relationships lived by him. The characters are life-like. The major characters are Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty. On the Road encompasses the multifarious road trips taken by Paradise and Moriarty, which fairly symbolizes their quest for values that is typical and stereotypes of American life and gives birth to the prototype of Beat Generation's feelings of alienation and dissatisfaction. But the quest for value brings about a tryst with drugs, marijuana, booze and women- all approximating them to the disjointedness, and further uniting them to chaos. This novel could be certainly be daubed as an

anthem of 'Beat Generation', for it sticks closely to appearing and vanishing chain of hope and dismay. Despite the scattered opinion of the critics, the majority of readers have found this work to be thoroughly engaging. While being praised for voicing the delusion and angst of an entire American Generation, it also faced the flake of selected few, who belittled it as an unschooled and delirious attempt of smugness and self-sympathy. But fighting against all odds. On the Road remained to be recognized an incomparable work, both for its form and content.

These writers were the mouth piece of a generation that wanted to react against fear; against repression; against biasness; against conformity, as the text states:

Beat and angry generation is a protest. Not everybody in this generation is angry and beat. Generations get their markings from a few who express their generation clearest. They are being forced by the total subconscious of their generation to utter, to shout, to cry, to beat out their truths, suspicions, hopes, loneliness, warnings, and prophecies. They are the true voice of their generation. Those are sensitive voices. They are pervert-they are not normal. Normality is conformity, money minded, dead, Eisenhowered, and maimed, and futurized, harperized, deodorized. To be beat today is to be abnormal, to go against normality, conformity, to be immoral, to be perverse. (Harris and Macfadyen, 01)

Disillusionment may be considered the core element of the Beat Movement, for it encompasses the basic reason for the split from mainstream society that the original Beats desired. The 'Beat' way of life mesmerized American people as they feared that the Post War accomplishment and new-found capitalism might instigate the government towards adopting a stricter means of social control. The 'Beats' who had chosen to be discontented, deserted and disillusioned at these times of suspicion became models for the American youth who were hitherto ensconced in a nook with family members, awaiting slow distress.

Social non-conformity is another core element and direct derivative of disillusionment. The obvious enterprise of all 'Beat Generation' writers was to rebuff material concerns, repudiate stock values and disdain for any socio-political logrolling. At the same time voicing one's opinion was a praise-worthy act and individuality fetched deep respect. This sense of individuality was often expressed in the terms of a cross-town or across-country adventures. Mobility in this way was a key concept in 'Beat' dictionary. Through constant journeys and adventures they attained two purposes in one act. (i) Detachment with any specific location or setting; and (ii) a straight face

reply to society you have done this to us; and now we don't give a damn to you.

While spontaneity is more an action than an idea, it has been called the primary virtue and a one-word summary of the Beat Movement. This theme, more than any other, speaks to the frenzied, intense emotional state that many Beats found both exhilarating and necessary. Moreover, it embodies the tendency not to think twice about hopping into a car and taking off for unknown destinations just for the thrill of adventure and the prospect of discovering something new about oneself and life in general. To be impulsive was not to be cautious. For the Beats, caution was a symptom of social conformity, and living off the cuff was an openly defiant response to such careful, regimented existence.

With 'Beat Generation' what had started as a small cluster of rebellious outcasts in New York City soon grew into a larger group based in San Francisco and eventually spread its influences across the country. The Beats now appeared everywhere in the 1950s, paving the way for the hippies of the following decade. The word 'Beat' originally meant poor, down and out, dead beat, on the bum, sad, sleeping in subways. Now that the word is belonging officially it is being made to stretch to include people who do not sleep in subways but have a new gesture, or attitude which I can only describe as a new more. "Beat Generation has simply become the slogan or label for a revolution in manners in America" (Kerouac, 02). The element that separated the Beats from the other associated artists was a profound, almost mysterious type of indifference which eclipsed their individual identity as an artist and so stretched it that it verged almost to stupidity. Such an eccentricity brought them oftentimes closer to the world of criminals and outcasts; this perhaps was a part of their agenda to exhibit the world of outcasts as a major constituent of contemporary social scenario.

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