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Naked Truths as a Credo of Protest in Allen Ginsberg's "Howl"

ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the United States was abounded with darkened repercussions represented by waging wars such as the cold war, the Vietnam War, and the appearance of various ideologies as materialism, consumerism, sexual freedom, racial struggles and many other examples and consequently, new trends and movements appeared to rebel against the conventional norms that prevailed during that time. The rebellion took an upward trajectory crystalizing itself in diverse forms namely: the religious, political, social and literary ones. Unruly politics and queer activism defied the commonplace hetero-normative ways of peaceful demonstrations.

The beat movement burst out against what was believed as repressive, dehumanized, corrupt, and unjust in the United States of America. Allen Ginsberg's monumental poem "Howl" seems to be the manifesto of the movement. Most striking quality is the use of naked truth as an expression of the poet's own eccentricity. This quality makes the poem a landmark of eccentricity. "Howl" reflects and connotes a deeply celestial interpretation. A celestial reading of the poem will mend its presupposed deformed image, prove the opposite, and support the basic theme of protest which is at the center of the beat movement.



Introduction:

In 1944 The Beat Movement appeared at Columbia University in New York at the hands of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs, who later became the canonical poets of the movement, in their first meeting. In 1950s, that small group of friends was then recognized as a literary movement and as a generation of post-World War II youths whose attitudes and lifestyles were far removed from typical Americana (Milne, *Movements for Students*, 29). Poets of this movement were recognized by their wild and raging rebellious spirit towards the traditional norms and conventions be it religious, ethical, moral or social that govern society and their adaptation of the unconventional and the queer behavior and acts. Their echoes were prominent through 1950s and 1960s initially in San Francisco community and New York City. They took shelter from the horrors of the conventional society by adopting amorality, hedonism, surrealism, jazz, casual obscenities in their writings (Dougherty, p, 130). Breaking away from the seemingly unalterable conventions and solid mainstream thoughts happened because these poets saw the truth of the howl slogans of their society. They discovered that all the beliefs that they grew up with and were taught and institutionalized to believe in were fraud. Therefore, they exhibited the truth of their society in naked shapes among those poets is Allen Ginsberg whose poem 'Howl' is viewed as a naked confessional poem.

The term “Beat” got a wave of complex connotations. Kerouac was the first to coin the term “beat”, by which he referred to both the negative aspects of the time and the positives ones represented by his responses to it. In a religious sense, the term “Beat” is associated with spiritual “beatitude” especially the one that is "reminiscent of the Beatitudes of Jesus-declarations of blessedness and happiness uttered during the Sermon on the Mount (Milne, *Movements for Students*, 29). Despite the sense of blissfulness which is mostly drug-induced, the followers of the movement felt, the 'feelings of disillusionment, bitterness, and an overwhelming desire to be free of social constraints' were often dominant." (Ibid).

In a musical sense, the term “Beat” tunes to the jazz beat and reveals that the jazz music was a vital influence upon the Beat generation. In a sociological sense, the term beat intensifies that “the condition of the outsider, the man who is down and out, who looks at esquire society from the peripheries and reject its disciplines, goals, and values” (Bartlett. 3). Psychologically, they feel beaten outsiders and defeated from within. Thus, their only way of fight back strategy was to reveal the ugliness and the fraud of the society and its controlling political system in the most outrageous and flagrant way.

Their apparent irresponsibility and eccentric lifestyles proved a serious preoccupation with what is wrong in their society and system. Their obscenity and eccentric practices prove that they are marginalized and brought to the end of their politics. Furthermore, their society and the political atmosphere they live in left them no choice but to do queer political practices which violate formal politics. Their inclination towards different kinds of politics-one that is unruly politics that extends beyond and messes

up the confines of the commonplace resistance- formed the cornerstone of their ideology. Khanna et al explains unruly politics as “a reconfiguration of political spaces- political action taken by citizens do not fall within the traditional ‘formal’ channels of the political” (423). Judith Butler calls the reflection of such queer modes of implied or embodied protest in literature “theatricalization of political rage” (232).

Howl:

In 1956 Allen Ginsberg published his master piece volume and the work with which he is not only identified but immortalized "Howl and other Poems". Ginsberg (1926-1997) was the most rebellious figure among the founders of the beat movement and perhaps the most rebellious American poet of the 20th century. Endowed with extreme Shelleyian spirit and Spartan courage, he expressed his thought fearlessly even if the back lash of it would throw him behind the bars or put him in open confrontation with the authorities. He is very well known for his uncensored exhibition of notions and conceptions even if they are indecent. 'Howl' is personal outcry against the traditional, the conventional, and the orthodox. It bares the anti-orthodox spirit of Ginsberg to its readers and provides clues that justify his full rejection of being a stereotypical white American who abides to laws. In fact Ginsberg thought and works bear the main tenets of post-colonialism. They strive to give voice for the subjugated people and nations and uncover the inhumane reality of the colonizers brought to the colonized. His spirit later was seen in the works of many younger American poets of the age.

When “Howl” first appeared publically, it provoked a sense of shock and resentment because of its explicit sexual imagery and obscene language. It is labelled as a distinctive anguish uproar against all that the poet felt was exploitive, unjust, and imposing marginalization to the individual in American society. It participated in the emergence of counterculture and an expression of sympathy for its pioneers. The style of Walt Whitman was deeply drawn upon Ginsberg. Ginsberg pushed the language to the verge of embarrassment. The poem is pregnant with apparent autobiographical hints and is considered sever and explicit sociopolitical critique of the American alleged way of life, beliefs, and values which are in fact a form ostensible and deceptive front. More than fifty years, after the first publication, it still stands as one of the most influential poems of the modern era (Milne, Poetry for Students, 131).

The notion of naked truths, which Ginsberg highlighted in the poem, bears a thematic multi-dimensional application in Ginsberg's "Howl". Firstly, it connotes to many negative social phenomena in the postmodern American society such as madness, poverty, and sexuality. Jonah Raskin indicates that "along with nakedness and secrecy, madness is at the heart of his work, and especially at the heart of *Howl*"(xxiii). Secondly, it bears positive connotations of innocence, guilelessness and honesty and overt directness as set against the secrecy and hypocrisy of deeply embedded conventional society. Thirdly, it is considered an active manner of protest, for those who were considered as marginal and had no right to choose, against all the negative and deeply

embedded social conventional notions of the American society which were blindly taken as the right beliefs by the majority of the white Americans.

From the very beginning of the poem, Ginsberg poetizes the drama of the modern life where the best minds are bared, naked, and devoid of sanity, certainty, security, connection with the mainstream society, and spiritual sufficiency. He identifies himself "as an inspired jazz musician—a saxophonist—who blows the suffering of America's naked mind" (Raskin, 138). In their protest against the restrictions of traditions, religion, politics, and society, the beats invent their own lifestyle. Their experimental life stresses their resentment of the modern life vices. Thus, they go through hysterical states, barefoot, bareheaded, careless of all the shackles of traditions:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by
 madness, starving hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn
 looking for angry fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for ancient heavenly
 connection to the starry dynamo in the machin-
 ery of night, ... (ll, 1-3).

The notion of nakedness deviates in line 5 to take a new connotation. The bareness of the brain suggests a direct connection with the divine: who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and
 saw Mohammedan angels staggering on tenement
 roofs illuminated, (l, 5)

Religiously speaking, the notion of nakedness associates with sinlessness as in the case of newborn babies who come into the world naked. Thus, nakedness suggests innocence and serenity of the soul and the self. Ginsberg seems to say that the "Beats" enjoy serenity and shameless freedom with this nakedness from the alleged and fabricated traditions. Mystifying the body echoes Whitmanian notions. Thomas S. Merrill sees that 'the doctrine of "nakedness" that Ginsberg continually preaches ... owes much to Whitman ... Clothes ... are garment of illusion with which men shamefully hide their humanity. (Quoted in Bartlett, 97).

The doctrine of nakedness goes back to the state of man before the fall "or the prelapsarian state of man in the biblical Garden of Eden" (Milne, poetry for Students, 139). Adam and Eve were at complete and harmony and perfect accord with God and obeyed his will with unquestioned submission, when they were first created. At this point, they were naked and their nakedness was not shameful. Nevertheless, they lost their innocence through succumbing to Satan's temptation and consequently eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and thus they were banished from heaven and descended to earth and earthly life (Milne, poetry for Students, 139). They, immediately, felt ashamed of being naked and started to cover their nakedness with clothes. Seeing this, god knew that they had disobeyed him; they fell from divine grace. Thus, clothes are a "symbol of loss of innocence, of shame about the body, and of division from the divine.

Ginsberg's naked and bareheaded Beats are shown as being close to God and as holy prophets"(Milne, poetry for Students, 139).

James E. B. Breslin concludes that since "Howl" is a "prolonged animal cry, ... [and] forcefully communicates the sense of a sudden, angry eruption of instincts long thwarted, of release of excluded human and literary energies, [thus, it is] not irony but prophetic vision; not a created persona but "naked" confession..."(From an Essay on "Howl" By James E. A. Breslin). Here, the notion of nakedness is embodied in the declaration and pronunciation of naked statements that are bizarre to the traditional social customs. Therefore the tune of the poem is more than confessional; it is a naked confession of the plight that plagued the modern man. Barry Spurr, commenting on "Howl", says that "of course, Ginsberg was writing at the extreme edge of social protest and was determined to shock"(314).

The ennui and tedium that crouched over the modern man stirred in him the quest for spirituality and wisdom. The beats attribute disorder and unrest of the modern life to the spread darkness that smothered "the best mind of my generation" and derelict them naked and hysterical. They left in an urgent need for light, for spirituality. John clellon Holmes says that "more than mere weariness, it implies the feeling of having been used, of being raw. It involves a sort of nakedness of minds, and, ultimately, of soul; a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness"(10). Their need for spirituality motivated them to search for the original nature of man. Ginsburg believed that such kind of nakedness that violates the terrestrial notion of nakedness is a state of grace. He observes:

"The point of Beat is that you get beat down to a certain nakedness where you actually are able to see the world in a visionary way, ... which is the old classical understanding of what happens in the dark night of the soul ... The new vision assumed the death of the square morality and replaced that measure with belief in creativity. I think we were quite moralistic in a way." (Quoted in Watson, 4).

The beats do intend to test their creativity through self-expression and the liberation of the word. They see the liberation in self-expression and word together with their quest for spirituality make them nakedly honest. There is no way for false affectations in a world afflicted by war, depression and the atomic threat. They esteemed the intellectual spontaneity as an alternating life style. Their rejection was clear against conformity that was inhibited in the natural self.

Conclusion:

To sum up, the notion of naked truths according to the beats is not indecent or unacceptable which is the opposite of the mainstream social tradition of the time, on the contrary, they emphasized that many of the socially prohibited or rejected notions are such as nakedness and queer sexual orientations are not as bad as the outdated and traditional notions that govern the aristocratic white society and legislate the and support the colonial manipulation of other nations. In their expression of nakedness, the beats determine their nearness to humanity and justice. Another reason of using

nakedness as an open expression of truth is that society is full of disgraceful and outrageous events and social phenomena of the modern time, so that is why the best minds of Ginsberg's generation are mad, hysterical, and naked. They are naked in their truth and unfolding of the vices of society. The notion of baring the truth in front of the readers is a protest that does not conform to societal traditions, but tries to disrupt the traditions and offer an alternative which takes extremely the experiences of marginalized people. They are seen naked because their period seems covered with sins, plights, wars, bloodshed and decadence resulting from ugly and inhumane colonial powers represented mainly by America. Thus, they are regarded outsiders, aliens, or bizarre individuals because they held views and notions that completely break away from the mainstream thought of their time.

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