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Reflection of Literary Movement of Beat Generation: A Select Reading of Allen Ginsberg's Poems

□ Amitabh Ranjan Kanu

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Pramathesh Barua College, Gauripur,
Dist- Dhubri, Assam.

e-mail: kanupbc@rediffmail.com, Mobile: 60038-46659

Abstract: *Beat Generation began to emerge in America in late seventies. Allen Ginsberg decided to teach a course on literary history of Beat Generation at Naropa Institute, Boulder, Colorado of United States. He explained in his first lecture about the course which included major works of the writers of 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. He invited Beat writers to his classes. The invited writers talked about their works. William Burroughs, Gregory Corso, Herbert Huncke, Peter Orlovsky, Michael McClure, Roy Bremser, Carl Solomne, Amiri Baraka etc. are names of writers who were invited to give talks. They spoke on their works. The students were privileged to study about Beat Generation sitting at the feet of masters. The Beat Generation was a literary movement. Ginsberg led the movement from the front. He documented the era and preserved the literature to educate people. Ginsberg always considered Kerouac to be the greatest writer, Burroughs to be the greatest intellect and Corso to be the most naturally gifted poet of Beat Generation. The phrase 'Beat Generation' has several meanings. It means openness. It means to be emptied out, exhausted and at the same time wide open perceptive and receptive to a vision. Sometime it denotes dark night of the soul. It has a celebrated statement 'everything belongs to me because I am poor'. The paper tries to evaluate the literary movement of Beat Generation with special mentioning of Allen Ginsberg's poems.*

Key words: *Beat Generation, literary characteristic, Age and poems of Allen Ginsberg.*

Introduction:

Allen Ginsberg was an American poet. He died on 5th April 1997. Soon after his death, William Hampton wrote a write up on Allen Ginsberg. The write up was published in The New York Times of April 6, 1997. William Hampton wrote that Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl' poems are

the manifesto of sexual revolution. The primary motto of his poems was to pay honour to all kind of freedom. His 'Howl' poems are the literary collection of Beat Generation. A group of writers started Beat Generation. The objective of the movement was to explore and to influence American culture. The writers of Beat Generation were interested in studying politics. They wanted to bring a change to war stricken society. They rejected the standard narratives and economic materialism. They mostly talked about sexual liberation and exploration. The World War II (1939-1945) had left a devastating impact on world economy. Therefore, the American society started emerging after World War II. The Americans looked for a fresh ideology. They dreamt of a fresh cultural upsurge so that they could restart their life. Hence, the emergence of Beat Generation happened to be very close to American Dream.

Objective and Scope of the Study:

It is mentioned that Beat Generation opened up new literary dimensions. Allen Ginsberg is one of the pioneers of Beat Literary movement. Even his poems are attuned with the characteristics which the generation speaks for. The objective of the paper is to understand Beat Generation in regard of select readings of Allen Ginsberg's poems. The select topic has the scope to understand his poems as his poems are the outbreak of his generation i.e. Beat Generation.

Methodology:

It is an analytical paper. It is based on the select readings of secondary sources.

Analysis:

The phrase 'Beat Generation' rose out of a specific conversation between Jack Kerouac and John Clellon Holmes in 1950. They were thinking about the nature of their generation. And Kerouac named the generation Beat Generation and explained that Beat means 'a man of a generation completely eaten - a man without money and without a place to stay'.¹ The generation which they spoke about was the generation who saw World War II and witnessed the catastrophe. The people of this generation had witnessed great economic depression and unemployment after World War II. But women started to get new opportunities. They came out to earn their bread keeping aside household works. They received insignificant payment for their works. The blue-collar workers and white-collar employees were entitled to paid leave. The women workers started contributing to state economy. They became self reliance. They started to be self dependent. They started to deny patriarchal hegemony in their life. The Beat Generation celebrated their act of liberating themselves from social and patriarchal norms. Beat Generation also spoke for emotional freedom and self-selection. It valued instinct of a person - instinct of both men and women. The Beat Generation didn't only speak for women liberation, but also did speak for gay liberation. The writers and poets of Beat Generation were looking for a fresh planet where they can have the right to deal with their instinct. In a letter to Mr. Eberhart, Allen Ginsberg wrote that Howl was not a negative protest. Howl had emotional reality. It gave a

space to think as well as to feel free. Ginsberg said that exposing true feeling was madness, not normal in society. He further added that exposing true feeling was not madness rather an expression of natural ecstasy. Further he wrote in the letter that, "Howl is the first discovery as far as communication of feeling and truth that I made. It begins with a catalogue sympathically and humanely describing excesses feeling and idealization."²

The Federal Highway Bill which came in 1956 promoted the development of the outskirts of the city. It constructed forty one thousand miles of inter-state highways. The US states showed interest to invest and therefore they tied with other states. The companies started manufacturing products in low cost. Eventually, an affluent class was born in American society. As a result, since 1950 consumers got attracted to low-priced product. The common men started to buy acres of land outside the cities and made new townships constructing houses. The low-cost houses had been facilitated with shopping centers, playgrounds, swimming pools, community halls and schools. This was the post-World War II 'building boom'.³ The residential kitchen turned into a kitchen industry for producing goods to meet up the needs of customers. The People started to get surrounded by objects and started to toil in order to purchase new products. They found out the meaning of life in objects which brought a change in the meaning of life. They started growing with material things. They searched their happiness not in the small achievement. They engaged in work to earn more exploiting themselves in work without actual meaning. They acted like the tooth on the rim of gear wheel. And thus, the meaning of life was changed.

The novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* was written by Sloan Wilson in 1955. The novel delineated the social reality of American Society of that time.. Wilson talks about how a middle-class family was categorically alienated from society because of material upsurge. Although the family had a beautiful house and all material things, yet the family members were unhappy. The family members always bore a notion with them that they had no happiness. Their relation with others became artificial. The technologies and new machines created doubts because they accompanied by tremendous personal sacrifices. The Beat Generation started to evolve during this decade. It started to recognize the face which remained unrecognized so far. The unrecognized face was the face of the poor, downtrodden and outcast in the society. The generation started to identify the faces that had certain new gesture and attitude. It initiated to recognize them who had "social customs, social style, social ethos and norm."⁴ The purpose of McCarthyism movement in US was to eradicate radical ideas of American Society. An anticommunist ideology was infiltrated into educational, cultural and political spheres during 1940s to the early 1960s. The left-wing trade unions and cultural organizations were excluded from the mainstream society. McCarthyism too created a modern politics of terror. It is true that United States never formally restricted the freedom of expression. Yet McCarthyism turned the democratic institutions of United States into a tyranny.

Eventually, the development of American Consumer Society and the political constraints of McCarthyism made 1950s a depressing era. The Americans went through a mass stressful time. They did not dare to speak for their own rights. The most privileged class and educated children seemed to be under control. They were subject to social depression. Radical liberalism in campuses of colleges and universities was common in those days. Students were put to be scared of. The University was crowded with managerial type students. A few were keen to studies. Both the students were different in types, yet their goal was same. They separated values from goals. They didn't have any social responsibilities. They did not believe in social changes, but were fashioned to fanatical pursuit of material pleasure. A new kind of youth culture was developed which had own characteristics, habits, customs, language and idol worship. It made continual impact on the American traditional values which were tended to decline. The teachers, political leaders, and gospel preachers propagated the protestant ethics. On the other hand the media propagated that pleasure is everything in life. The people of the generation were confused. But the Beat Generation writers tried to enlighten the confused people with their works.

The Beat Generation was a group of American poets and writers who started to write after the end of World War II. The Beat culture spoke for all types of liberation. It took initiatives to liberate gay from social dogmas. It spoke for black people and subjugated woman, decriminalized some of the laws against marijuana and other drugs, introduced new form of music and blues and considered rock and roll as high art form. It created awareness about ecology amongst people so that they could show deep respect to their land and its people. It had a celebrated phrase 'everything belongs to me because I am poor'.¹ Allen Ginsberg's collection of 'Howl' poems gave loftiness to Beat Literature. People started reading Howl poems as they spoke about their desires and lust. Therefore, they chanted them with pride. The poems were a sort of return to American oral tradition. The Howl poems changed the definition of obscenity. People started to celebrate their sexuality. With Howl poems, Ginsberg took readers on a tour to a world which is no longer obscene in any way. Ginsberg's poem was a manifesto of a new youth culture that spoke of gay liberation. Allen Ginsberg writes in a poem entitled *Thus on a Long Bus Ride*:

Thus on a long bus ride
My soul woke
Arm in arm with a youth
Hours of communion
Warm thighs
Shoulders touching
Bodies moved together
As we rode on
Dreaming invisibly.⁵

The Beat Generation took repose onto drug abuse and sex to release pain, drove away their inner anger and rebellious emotion. It was said that 'the blues always were a great poetry. The great poetess of blues Billie Holiday was also a famous lover of Lester Young. Both of them were junkies, so they reflected the whole junkie hip consciousness, the world-weary disillusionment and at the same time a kind of homosexual sentimentality, nostalgia of beautiful lesbian yore, or bisexual sentimentality of beautiful lesbian yore. All levels of heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual and lesbian revolution evolved. There is a peculiar quality of mournfulness and nostalgia and desire mixed in that, which affected everybody in the 1940s.'⁶ Therefore, Allen Ginsberg, the product of beat generation unleashed the meaning of holiness. He says:

'The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy! The nose is holy!
The tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy!
Everything is holy! Everybody's holy! Everywhere is holy, every day is
in eternity! Everyman's and angel
The bum's as holy as the seraphim! The madness is holy as you my soul.'⁷

One day Jack Kerouac and John Clellon Holmes were discussing on the nature of their generation. They recollected the glamour of lost generation. Later on, they came out with a thought that their generation is nothing but a beat generation. Kerouac named beat generation not for giving a name to the generation, but to unnamed it. The word 'beat' is a carnival 'subterranean' (subculture) term, a term much used in Times Square in the 1940s. 'Man I'm beat' – the statement did not only mean a man without money and without a place to stay, but also it refers to those 'who walked all night with shoes full of blood on the snow bank docks waiting for a door in the East River to open to a room full of steams heat and opium'⁸

Conclusion:

From the above discussion we may conclude that Beat Generation is all about to evoke rebellious consciousness amongst people. It argues that economic growth and material abundance is not sufficient for overall progress of a society. It argues that spirituality is also necessary for all round development of a person. But it does not speak to follow the pagan tradition of spirituality which was nothing but a spiritual oppression. The emergence of the American Beat Generation came up with an idea that the traditional social system and mode needed to be changed. It suggested that if something is wrong in the social environment in which the youth live in, it is essential to find out the root causes of social problems that disrupted youths' minds. To understand youths mind and their problems, one has to understand the social forces of the society where they live in. Ginsberg wrote for the people of his generation. He believed that the youth who were gone mad had the potentiality to bring change to society. He writes:

'I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix
.....

Who were expelled from the academics for crazy and publishing obscene
Odes on the windows of the skull

Who thought they were only mad when Baltimore gleamed in supernatural ecstasy⁹ ♦♦

End Notes:

1. Morgan, Bill (edt), Allen Ginsberg. The Best Minds of My Generation, p.2
2. Schumacher, Michael. Allen Ginsberg. The Essential Ginsberg, p.338
3. Young, Zhaung. On The Best Generation, p.206
4. Morgan, Bill (edt). Allen Ginsberg wait Till I'm Dead, Poems Uncollected, p.19
5. Ibid, p.19
6. Morgan, Bill (edt). Allen Ginsberg, The Best Mind's of My Generation, A literary History of the Beats, p.39
7. Schumacher, Michael. Allen Ginsberg, The Essential Ginsberg, p.23
8. Ibid, p.199
9. Ibid, pp.14-15

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