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ALLEN GINSBERG'S POEM *HOWL*: A MAJOR CONTRIBUTION TO THE
PROTEST LITERATURE

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Abstract

The present study explores the voice of protest in Allen Ginsberg's poetry. When the world is beset with injustice, blood-deemed tide is loosed everywhere, the ceremony of innocence is in jeopardy seconded by the prosperity of the worst and the adversity of the best; the poets appear on the scene as angels to save the world with the power of their pens. Allen Ginsberg was one such rebellious poet who had chosen poetry as a form of protest against the social and political ills. This paper aims at showing Ginsberg's indomitable efforts to unravel the oppressive and authoritarian attitudes of the capitalist society at social and political level. This paper also seeks to harp upon how Ginsberg used poetry as a form of protest and rebellion against the capitalist world which made all possible efforts to glorify and gratify its personal design at the cost of common interest. As the father of the Beat Generation and the prophet of the 1960s, Allen Ginsberg ushered in a new literary movement that soon spread to a social and cultural phenomenon. The seed of that turbulence

is actually of native born and it can be traced back to 1955. The invitation had been set out by Allen Ginsberg. His poem *Howl* became his masterpiece which established him as a prophet of the Counter culture movement. This paper tries to present the protest and revolution as the powerful running thread of Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl*.

Keywords: Protest, revolution, oppressive, authoritarian, capitalist, Beat Generation, Buddhism, Krishnaism

1.0 Introduction

Allen Ginsberg had developed a deep concern over the oppression and torture perpetrated upon the common men. His empathetic heart was touched to the quick at the exploitation and suffering of his fellowmen in the hands of the tyrants. His close association with

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communism and Beat Generation developed a natural impetus to raise a voice against the tyrannical forces in the society and government. The Beat Generation comprised a group of writers and cultural activists influencing the American culture and politics after the World War II whose central elements are the rejection of conventional narrative values, rejection of materialism, sexual liberation and explicit portrayal of the human condition (Charters: xv). Ginsberg used his poetic ability as a powerful weapon to revolt against the abuse of authority on the common populace in any form. He had always been in favor of the free expression of thoughts in creative art, and he never restrained himself from doing so in his poetry whenever he deemed it right (Raskin xi: Preface). For this reason, many of his poems in one way or another are replete with ideas of protest, rebellion, and revolt where the supposed targets are the contemporary government, society or any injustice occurring anywhere in the world. The American government and society in general, have mostly been revolted against in his poetry. In doing so, he never felt intimidated although such revolutionary zeal in his poetry cost him getting recognitions in the form of prestigious prizes for literature (Md. Saber -E- Montaha, 2020)

1.1 Literature Review

P B Shelley, one of the greatest Romantic poets, once said in his *Defence of Poetry*: “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” They have been serving as the rabble-rousers and protesters, revolutionaries and lawmakers. Poets have commented on the events of the day, giving voice to the oppressed and downtrodden, immortalized rebels, and campaigned for social change (Holman & Snyder 2019). Prompted by the infamous Peterloo Massacre of 1819 in Manchester of England, he had composed his moving poem *The Masque of Anarchy* which echoes his sense of protest and revolution as follows:

In his *Song to the Men of England*, Shelley appeals to England's less educated society comprising the workers, the drones, the people who worked towards amassing the wealth of the tyrants. In this poem, Shelley tries to wake up the workers to the plight they may not see:

1. *Wherefore feed and clothe and save/
From the cradle to the grave/
Those ungrateful drones
who would/
Drain your sweat --
nay, drink your blood?*
2. *Sow seed -- but let no tyrant reap:
Find wealth -- let no imposter
heap: Weave robes -- let not the
idle wear: Forge arms -- in your
defence to bear.*

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The *Prelude of William Wordsworth* echoes his revolutionary spirit which is evident in the following lines of his poem:

A light, a cruel, and vain world
cut off/ From the natural inlets
of just sentiment,/ From
lowly sympathy and chastening
truth;/ Where good and evil
interchange their names,/ And
thirst for bloody spoils abroad is
paired.

Walt Whitman, in his *To a Foil'd European Revolutionaire*, shows his sense of protest and revolution in the following lines:

*Courage yet, my brother or my
sister!/ Keep on -- Liberty is to
be subserv'd whatever occurs;/
That is nothing that is quell'd by
one or two failures, or any
number of failures,/ Or by the
indifference or ingratitude of the
people, or by any
unfaithfulness,/ Or the show of
the tushes of power, soldiers,
cannon, penal statutes.*

Paul Laurence Dunbar, in his *The Haunted Oak*, depicts his his sense of protest and revolution in the following way:

*I feel the rope against my bark, /
And the weight of him in my
grain, /I feel in the throe of his*

*final woe/ The touch of my own
last pain.*

1.2 The New York Beats

common bond because they discovered in one another a powerful spark of the potential American youth, a potential that existed outside the strict conformist confines of the Post-World War II. Through his association with Elise Cowen, Ginsberg discovered that they shared a mutual friend, Carl Solomon to whom he later dedicated his most famous poem *Howl*. This poem carries Ginsberg's autobiographical overtone up to 1955, which hastened his relationship with the other Beat artists of that time.

1.3 The Blake Vision

While reading the poetry of William Blake in 1948, Ginsberg at first claimed to have heard the voice of God but later interpreted the voice as that of Blake himself. Ginsberg described it as the 'voice of the ancient of days.' The experience lingered in his mind for several days. Ginsberg felt that he had experienced a kind of interconnectedness between himself and the universe. He looked at the latticework on the fire and realized that some hand had crafted that. Then he looked at the sky and felt that some hand had crafted that too. But the sky was the hand that crafted itself. He believed that this hallucination was not

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caused by any drug use. Ginsberg stated that it was not the hand that had placed the sky but the sky was the living blue hand itself. He felt, 'God was in front of my eyes -- existence itself was God and it was a sudden awakening into a totally deeper real universe than I'd been existing in.'

1.4 The San Francisco Renaissance

Ginsberg moved to San Francisco during the 1950s. Before his poetry collection *Howl and Other Poems* was published in 1956, he took to working as a market researcher. In San Francisco, Ginsberg met James Broughton, Robert Duncan, Madeline Gleason and Kenneth Rexroth and other poets who were the members of the San Francisco Renaissance wherein he was introduced into the San Francisco poetic tradition. He also met three budding poets like Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen and Lew Welch. In 1959, he met John Kelly, Bob Kaufman who were his friends at Reed College. Ginsberg was one of the founders of the *Beatitude* poetry magazine. His first public presentation of *Howl* brought him worldwide fame.

1.5 Impact Of Buddhism On Ginsberg

Ginsberg felt inclined towards the vision of Indian culture and religion. With his spontaneous visions, he started his spiritual journey to India with Gary Snyder. Ginsberg set out to meet the

Dalai Lama as well as the Karmapa at Rumtek Monastery, Dudjom Rinpoche in Kalimpong who taught him: 'If you see something horrible, don't cling to it, and if you see something beautiful, don't cling to it.' After his return to the United States, he happened to meet Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Kagyü and Nyingma Tibetan Buddhist master who became his friend and lifelong teacher.

1.6 Impact Of Krishnaism On Ginsberg

Krishnaism also cast a tremendous impact on Ginsberg. Initiated with the Hare Krishna mantra into his religious practice, he developed a close proximity with A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder of the Hare Krishna movement in the Western world. He befriended him, visiting him often and suggesting publishers for his books leading to a fruitful relationship. This relationship is documented by Satsvarupa Dasa Goswami in his biographical account *Srila Prabhupada Lilamrta*. Ginsberg donated money, materials and his reputation to help the Swami establish the first temple and toured with him to promote his cause. In spite of Ginsberg's attraction to Eastern religions, the journalist Jane Kramer argues that he, like Whitman, adhered to an 'American brand of mysticism' that was 'rooted in humanism and in a romantic and visionary ideal of harmony among men.'

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1.7 Voice Of Protest In *Howl*

As the father of the Beat Generation and the prophet of the 1960s, Allen Ginsberg ushered in a new literature movement. His masterpiece *Howl* marks that something new in American literature has already begun. Ginsberg's *Howl* describes the horror, hopelessness and frustration in the life of Beat Generation artists. The poem is an expression of dissent against the oppression and exploitation of the individual in authoritative society and it raised a long distressed cry for emancipation. The poem represents such typical feelings and is welcomed as a revolutionary poem. When the poem was first published in 1956, it got enthusiastic reactions. Some passionately welcomed it as a 'poetic bomb' with its obscene vocabulary and counter-culture voice, while many academicians took it as a statement against their work and ideas. Allen wrote the poem in free style and in the form of catalogue where he describes the various scenes of life-style as lived by the artists of this subculture. The writer used images and local slang, obscene vocabulary, vernacular language to describe the counter-culture of drugs, free and unconventional sex, hallucinations and hopelessness. The high emotions presented through various, juxtaposed phrases correspond to the psyche of the characters taken from the Beat Generation. As a protest poet, he initiated

a new style of American literature. Yet this is far from just a literature movement. It is a social and political movement intimately connected with the protest activities in the 60s.

Ginsberg once claimed that all his works were an extended endeavour Biographical overtones. His *Howl* is not only a biographical sketch of his experiences before 1955, but also a history of the Beat Generation. Ginsberg also claimed that *Howl* was a testimony of his unresolved emotions about his schizophrenic mother. He begins the poem with "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness" which sets the stage for Ginsberg to describe Cassidy and Solomon immortalizing them into American literature. This madness was the 'angry fix' that society needed to function and madness was its disease. Though references in most of his poetry reveal much about his biography, his relationship to other members of the Beat Generation and his own political views, *Howl* is still perhaps the best place to start with.

1.8 Conclusion

Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* is a land mark in the field of protest literature. This poem raises a firm voice against the exploitation inflicted upon the poor, lowly and downtrodden in the contemporary American society. His poems in general

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and *Howl* in particular augmented fuel to the fire of protest and revolt against the capitalist society and Governmental authoritarianism. Ginsberg's *Howl* also presents a true picture of the horror, hopelessness and frustration in the life of Beat Generation artists. The poem is an expression of dissent against the oppression and exploitation of the individual in authoritative society and it raised a long distressed cry for emancipation. This poem has undergone the litmus test to survive in the face of any odds of time.

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