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Oriental Essentialism and Alienation in Allen Ginsberg's Writings on India

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Abstract

This paper examines Allen Ginsberg's writings on India in the context of orientalism and cultural essentialism. While Ginsberg is widely regarded as a major voice of dissent against American capitalism, his engagement with Indian spirituality presents certain contradictions. By analysing *Indian Journals* and related writings, the paper argues that Ginsberg's representation of India is marked by cultural essentialism and a lack of engagement with historical and political realities. His adoption of Eastern mysticism, though part of a countercultural stance, becomes assimilated into the global cultural market. The study further explores how this process leads to a form of ideological alienation in Ginsberg's work.

Keywords: Allen Ginsberg; Beat generation; India; orientalism; counterculture; cultural hegemony; alienation

Introduction

While Allen Ginsberg is widely recognised for his critique of the American capitalist establishment throughout his career, he—being a product of that very system—is equally its victim, much like his fellow citizens.After his travels to India and Japan, he adopts certain elements of the spiritual and poetic practices of Eastern mysticism. His interest in and enthusiastic propagation of Eastern spiritual discourses set him apart from his contemporaries. Other authors in the Beat group who practised Buddhism were Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder, sporadically in Kerouac's case and with a monk's rigour in the case of Snyder; GinsbergintroducedEastern spiritual discourses to the American masses.

Yet, in a strange dialectical twist, the very elements of Eastern mysticism that Ginsberg had infused into his poetry to bolster his countercultural stance become a unique selling

point for the poet in the global culture market of poetry. The culture industry tends to assimilate its own critique with the passage of time. As long as there is a way to convert ideas into products that can be sold for profit, the market monetises even its own criticism. The same is the case with Allen Ginsberg and his practice of Eastern discourses in poetry and public image. The spiritual elements of cultural dissent, such as meditation practices, chanting of mantras, Indian apparel, beads etc., became the foundation of a New Age spiritual market in the West.

More complexity is added to the matter when the line of demarcation between culture and counterculture becomes fuzzy. In *Countering the Counterculture: Rereading Postwar American Dissent from Jack Kerouac to Tomas Rivera*, Manuel Martinez claims that the binary of culture/counterculture is not without flaws and, in fact, the very concept of the Beat writers, including Allen Ginsberg, as authors of dissent is open to questions. Contrary to the popular opinion regarding the Beats as radical artists, Martinez states that they were merely a subculture within the mainstream culture of atomised consumption within capitalism. According to Martinez, the Beat poets were built on the same conservative outlook of the 1940s America from which they claimed to dissent. He goes on to state that the Beat form of counterculture was never truly a counterculture at all because there was no counter- political foundation in their ideology. As a matter of fact, the Beats were propagating the same old American individualism in a different mould that was suitable to the market culture of capitalism.

These observations regarding the hegemonic culture, the counterculture and the grey space in between form the background against which the study of the works of Allen Ginsberg about India is conducted. Ginsberg was one of the early celebrity figures who travelled to India and took back with him the mantras of Indian mysticism, and a deeper analysis of his *Indian Journals* and other poems on India reveals an orientalist-white man's gaze upon the culture of the subcontinent. It might have been inevitable that Ginsberg from the West was enthralled by the sights and sounds of India, yet it does not nullify the need for a critical reading of his texts to discover contradictions between his love of India and hiscultural blind spots. One finds a curious lack of insight in Ginsberg's writings on India regarding any sort of political or historical understanding of India. On the other hand, Ginsberg engages in cultural essentialism of India, which points to the conservative elements in him that, over time, eased his assimilation into the mainstream culture of the West. Ananalysis of such contradictions in his writings and activism as a leading figure of the American counterculture results in an understanding of his alienation not only as a poet working in the capitalist paradigm, but also his alienation from his own works as a poet of

'dissent'.

Allen Ginsberg was an inveterate traveller. He had travelled extensively in South America, Africa, Europe and Asia. While travelling in non-European places like South America or India, he was sensitive to the cultural and historical differences between those places and the United States. This allowed him to witness the alternative modes of existence around the world and question the socio-political and culturalnorms of America. Ginsberg's decision to travel to the East, beyond Europe, was a break from the American tradition of seeking Europe as a cultural lighthouse. Though earlier American authors like Mark Twain and Walt Whitman had written about India, travelling to India for cultural and spiritual exploration was still not usual before Ginsberg. After Ginsberg and other Beat Generation writers like Gary Snyder and Joanne Kyger, came and stayed in India, the country became a tourist destination for the young Americans in search of spirituality, peace, history, and the exotic. Ginsbergsays in an interview given to Suranjan Ganguly in October 1993:

> I had already been to Europe and spent several years there, and that was a traditional thing as in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century—the American in Paris. By 1961, I was more interested in going beyond the traditional expatriate role or voyage, of wandering out in the East, particularly India, the most rich and exquisite and aesthetically attractive culture. And also least expensive. . . . But at that time India was pretty well unknown. There weren't that many people who went there. There were rare people, famous rare people who did that, but it wasn't a whole generation that took it on. (Ganguly 21- 22)

After Ginsberg returned from his trip to Peru, he met Pupul Jayakar, who had political connections with the Gandhis and was handling the textile industry of India. He had a conversation with her about coming to India and finding a guru. To this, Jayakar had the following reply for him, which sheds light upon the phenomenon of trying to find the solutions in the 'other': ""But India may have lost its way," Pupul Jayakar countered. "While you look to her to find answers, the young in India look to the West. What do you expect to find?"(Baker 58). Nevertheless, Ginsberg continued looking for answers in the East. He encountered Easternart for the first time in 1953. Carl Jackson writes:

> Writing to Neal Cassady on May 14, 1953, he described a "new kick" which he had just taken up two weeks earlier. Browsing in the fine arts room of the New York Public Library, he had accidentally stumbled across a series of volumes on Chinese painting. Remarking that he had only the "faintest" idea that China possessed so rich a cultural heritage, he confessed that since the discovery, he had spent all his

free time "leafing through immense albums of asiatic imagery." (Jackson 60)

Subsequently, Ginsberg began reading up on Chinese art, which led him to Buddhism, Zen and finally to India. While in America, Ginsberg had read some Indian texts like *The Bhagavad Gita, Ramakrishna's Table Talk*, etc. He mentions his exposure to India further in the interview as follows:

> I had some idea of yoga but not much. Actually, when I was twelve years old I heard an American give a lecture on yoga in Paterson, New Jersey. That always intrigued me and it's still vivid in my mind. . . . I had read some Krishnamurthi, some saint poetry, some Yogananda, a little of the *Mahabharata*, some of the *Vedas*, and translations by Isherwood and Prabhavananda of the *Upanishads*. I had also read LinYutang's *Wisdom of the East*. Then on the ship I read *A Passage to India* and *Kim*, the *JatakaTales* and some *Ramayana*. (Ganguly 23)

In the same interview, he mentions Satyajit Ray's film *Pather Panchali*, which he had watched in New York and had seen Uday Shanker's dance as Shiva, again in New York. Yet, when asked by the interviewer about what he thought of India before arriving there, he says that he associated the country with 'snake charmers' and finding a guru:

> What did you associate India chiefly with?
>
> You know, it was thirty years ago, and I don't remember very clearly except snake charmers and . . . I really didn't know what to ask for, but I had the idea of going there to look for a teacher. That was definitely the purpose. (Ganguly 22)

This 'snake charmers' idea of India, even after being exposed to Indian literature, theology, cinema and performance art, supports the observation regarding the Beat writers, including Ginsberg, by Martinez in *Countering the Counterculture* as white, privileged American poets who were more conservative than they would let on. The writings of Ginsberg on third world countries like Mexico, Peru, India, etc. are replete with cultural essentialism, exoticism of the other culture as a timeless monolith and an ignorance regarding their historical and political context. It is so with Ginsberg's writings about India, where on the one hand he celebrates the rich spiritual diversity of the country, yet on the other hand he exoticises the poverty as some sort of essential, timeless feature. This reveals a conservative core in Allen Ginsberg and challenges his celebrated status as a progressive counterculture poet. Ginsberg, who was inspired to include the songs and music of the minstrel and bhajan traditions of India in his poetry andspirituality by chanting mantras in his public appearances, was actually alienated from his own progressive politicsas his American individualist conservatism betrays through the contradictions. This is because the inclusion of Eastern and Indian discourses in his writings and activism was a part of the

dissent from the Evangelical Christian hegemony of America and the consumerist culture of capitalism, but ironically, the same cultural inclusions became his identity marker in the publishing and culture markets. Based on this logic, it can be argued that though Ginsberg took Indian spiritual elements to the West, it remainedonly at a superficial level of performative ideas like mudras, chanting, clothing and so on. The market was quick to catch the emerging trend, and it became a fashion among the youngsters in America to wear beads, bindis, kurtas and so on to put on a hippie look. It was a fashion statement.This can be seen as cultural appropriation by the West of traditional Indian ideas and practices, which, in its process, alienated Ginsberg from the very attachment and love he felt for India. Alienation arises from such ideological blind spots that function often without the conscious awareness of the person it affects. This paper analyses the writings of Ginsberg on Indiathrough the lens of cultural economics and the market forces that operate to appropriate elements of alternative cultures for profit.

Ginsberg in India

Three months before he arrived in India, Allen Ginsberg had a premonitory dream in Israel. He writes:

> Dream, after week of unhappiness and mood arriving by Ship on the Shore and walking along vast boulevard by Sea, Street of Lucknow Chikan in India- first dream of India- huge red and brown night boulevard by water… I wonder what city I'm in, I'm deliriously happy, it's my promised land (I'm writing this in the promised land)… I'm coming to a big church front- at last; it's the Sign Christian all India Church- fantastic Door, just made for me… (Ginsberg, *Indian Journals* 5)

He landed in Bombay with Peter Orlovsky on 15 February, 1962. They spent two days in Bombay and then set out for New Delhi by train. Since they were solely dependent on the erratic arrival of Ginsberg's royalty payment as cheques sent by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, they survived on very little money. The limitation on money, and also their desire to see the common life in India, encouraged them to travel by train in general compartments and stay in cheap hotels or dharmashalas. In Delhi, Ginsberg and Orlovsky met Gary Snyder and Joanne Kyger. Together they toured Delhi, and Ginsberg met the novelist Khushwant Singh over tea. After a short stay in Delhi, the group moved to the Himalayas and met with an array of spiritual gurus. In Rishikesh, they met Swami Shivananda. It would be wrong to say that Ginsberg was naively impressed by all spiritual gurus without a sense of judgment. As Schumacher reports about the meeting:

> Surrounded by a small group of American women who asked him nonstop

> questions about dualism, to which he invariably answered an "Om," and sitting in the midst of boxes containing cardboard cutout images of himself, Shivananda seemed to be a "charlatan of mass-production international nirvana racket" to Ginsberg, but Allen also found that he liked the man, who struck him as being calm and holy. (Schumacher 372)

On asking Shivananda about how to find a guru, he told Ginsberg that his own heart was his guru and not to bother too much about finding a guru outside, because when he finds one, he will know from his heart. From there, Ginsberg moved to Hardwar to see the Kumbh Mela. He was struck by the sadhus and nagas that he saw there. Soon, the group moved to the higher Himalayas and met the Dalai Lama in Dharmsala. Ginsberg talked with the Dalai Lama about psychotropic drugs like LSD and psilocybin regarding their use in expanding consciousness. The Dalai Lama was not interested in the synthetic LSD but was interested in psilocybin as a naturally occurring substance. He posed the following question to Ginsberg about LSD that the poet has recorded in his journal: "H.H. the Dalai Lama who asked "If you take LSD can you see what's in that Briefcase?" (Ginsberg, *Indian Journals* 3) This question opens up a debate regarding what is meant by the expansion of consciousness. Ginsberg's notion of using either drugs or meditation was about having access to forms of knowledge that are not a part of the usual physical world. The Dalai Lama's question makes one think about the purpose of expanding consciousness through drugs or spiritual practices. His essence was to make a point that expanding the consciousness would not be magical or supra-natural, an illusion that many spiritual seekers of Western countries entertain. Ginsberg had a discussion on mind-expanding drugs like LSD with Dudjom Rinpoche, another Buddhist monk. Ginsberg was concerned with having horrible visions of demons etc. while he was high on LSD. Ginsberg mentions it in his journal again, " Dudjom Rinpoche N'yingmapa Lama in Kalimpong who sucked air through his teeth in sympathy, calming my fears of LSD hallucination and advised, 'If you see anything horrible don't cling to it if you see anything beautiful don't cling to it."(Ginsberg, *Indian Journals* 3)

In the meantime, while Ginsberg was moving about in India, the media was getting involved in their activities. Bill Morgan writes about a news article on Ginsberg and Orlovsky as follows:

> On May 6 an article about Allen and Peter appeared in the Illustrated Weekly of India. The article called attention to their unconventional attire, pointing out that even for bohemians it was unusual. Then the reporter went on to focus on their goals: "Apparently both Orlovsky and Ginsberg are in search of something which

> they realize they cannot find in the West. What it is they themselves do not know. (Morgan352)

The media attention and popularity that Ginsberg enjoyed was telling in the manner in which the word got out that he was staying at Pupul Jayakar's home in Malabar Hill, Bombay. As Deborah Baker reports in *A Blue Hand*: "It hadn't taken long for the news that the author of 'that sensational poem 'Howl,' by which every beatnik swears," was staying at Pupul Jayakar's house. A parade of writers and journalists arrived to talk to Allen" (Baker 133). It was exactly due to the popularity of Ginsberg in the media that Jayakar had once offered him to be an ambassador for khadi clothes. Wealthy and connected to the Nehrus, as the head of the hand-loom board of the Gandhi-inspired cottage industries movement, Jayakar was working to open the American market to Indian textiles. She looked upon the Beats as trendsetters (Baker 58). In his blog, Malay Roy Choudhury, the Bengali Hungryalist poet and known to Ginsberg, writes about Jayakar's intentions as follows: "Pupul Jayakar who had requested Beat poets and writers to visit India and popularize use of Khadi wear among hippies" (Roy Choudhury). Meher Verma points out Pupul Jayakar's links and position in the industry as follows:

> "Pupul" was Mrs. Jayakar, one of India's most prominent Cultural Ministers who was instrumental in setting up the Festivals of India. As the historian Ramachandra Guha notes—and as was confirmed in Kamal's narrative—Mrs. Jayakar was Mrs. Gandhi's closest friend (2008:493), and this friendship was central to "the gang's" power. Finally, "Rathi" was Mrs. Rathi Vinay Jha, who was not part of this inner group, but a close associate who worked in the Ministry of Textiles and later went on to become head of the Fashion Design Council of India. Together, they made up a "gang" and in Kamal's words, "established and promoted what became known as Indian design and culture" (Verma 56)

The point here is that Allen Ginsberg had been in the eyes of the media and the industrialists in positions of power, who found in him an easy poster figure to sell their products. The 'counterculture' was targeted and marketed as just another alternative culture according to the rules of the market economy. When used on the front of culture, fashion and self-styling, Ginsberg becomes an endorsement personality of consumerism, a notion which he himself was up against. This is where lies the alienation of Ginsberg from his works, among other issues, which we will analyse in the subsequent sections.

Oriental Essentialismand Alienation: Ginsberg as a Poet-Tourist

Situating Allen Ginsberg in the eco-politico-historical framework reveals much more about his writings in India than what meets the eye on a mere literary reading. As a poet of

"Howl" and a well- accepted critic ofAmerican capitalism, Ginsberg is a poster figure of dissent. In his poems, Ginsberg attacks the mainstream consumer culture of the US, and along with other non-conformist authors and activists, participates in the counterculture of alternative lifestyles. Initially, articles were written about Ginsberg, particularly by conservative media houses, that berated him as a radical poet. The Beat writers were called 'know-nothing bohemians',etc. However, gradually Ginsberg, along with other Beat writers, was accepted by the mainstream media and academia, just as the entire counterculture scene was appropriated by the market to brand dissent as a cool cultural product.

As mentioned earlier, dissenting voices have emergedin Beat studies that question the entire counterculture project of the Beats and the hippies,led especially by the book written by Manuel Martinez entitled *Countering the Counterculture: Rereading Postwar American Dissent from Jack Kerouac to Tomas Rivera*.Here, Martinez subjects Beat literature to a strict critical scrutiny. This critical branch of Beat studies explores the conservative undercurrents in the Beat canon. Robert Bennet writes:

> Martinez's *Countering the Counterculture*, however, radically challenges this traditional interpretation of the Beat Generation as an unproblematic counter-hegemonic movement. Deconstructing "simplistic" views of post World War II American culture which posit a "binary opposition between the establishment culture and a dissenting counterculture," Martinez argues instead that a more complex relationship existed between the "square" mainstream culture and the Beat counterculture (2003, 7). Demonstrating that the "primary Beats" embraced many of the "reactionary, nativist, racist ideologies to which they have conventionally been contrasted…For Martinez, the Beats might have masqueraded as countercultural revolutionaries, but underneath their hip masks they embraced patriarchal, racist, and colonialist values that were essentially square. (Bennet)

On deeper reading, it turns out that the Beat philosophy is based on the tradition of individualism that is taken well in the capitalist-consumerist culture, as opposed to a more public solidarity-driven approach that is necessary for dissent in actual terms. Rachel Adams explains further:

> Despite their expressed opposition to the cultural mainstream, the Beats lose the potential to enact more widespread systemic change by articulating a longstanding American tradition that values personal sovereignty over communal obligation. This explains their attraction to marginal identities, which they freely appropriated as signs of their own transgressiveness while declining to participate in actual

minorities' struggles for political recognition. (Adams 2)

Elements of such reactionary and oriental nature are found in Ginsberg's writings about India as well. This alienates him from the very political stand he generally proposes in his works and activism. When asked about the relation of Allen Ginsberg with the capitalist establishment, Malay Roy Choudhury states the following:

> Yes, he was worried during his lifetime that the American Establishment is not ready to award them (The Beats authors) with governmental and academic recognition. However, presently a lot of academic work is being done on the Beats due to the next generation of poets, who took an interest in them. Even if the Beats were anti-Establishment, they were typical products of the American capitalist world. Ginsberg created his trust with a huge fund to carry on his legacy… They (The Beat authors) regularly interacted with the digital companies and brought out their recitations and films, etc. They appointed secretaries to enable them to get paid invitations for poetry readings from various European and American cities. (Roy Choudhury)

Indian Journals is full of text and pictures where he presents India as a timeless land of poverty, spirituality and thrills as opposed to the historically relevant and the 'standard' West. Allen Ginsberg's India as seen in *Indian Journals* is a chapter in continuation of the nineteenth-century colonial view of India as a land of yogis and snake-charmers. Ginsberg was undoubtedly enthralled to experience the spiritual aspects of India, an excitement that can distract from a deeper understanding ofthe historical realities of Indian society. It is a typical view of a westerner who comes to India for a spiritual quick-fix, and Ginsberg's position is no different. While writing about India, heis oblivious tothe systemic problems like colonialism and thecaste system that have historically wounded India in various ways. Instead, he has a bird's-eye view of Indian society,wherein he could only see a superficial dividebetween therich and poor, as if poverty were a given metaphysical reality. Though he spent a lot of time with the impoverished, he failed to see them as sufferers of systemic discrimination. He could not recognise that suffering and poverty in India were not an essential feature of the country but products of very tangible and mundane politics of colonisation and caste. Ginsberg travelled from sadhu to sadhu, hoping to find a pill-sized dose of quick salvation, but was limited by his inability to reckon with the historical and materialist context of the Indian society. Such a view of India is dangerous because it exoticises the country as a timeless land of spirituality and fails to take into consideration the underlying historical issues. Witnessing the Hardwar Kumbh Mela, he records with a strain of wonder:

> Riding elephants & horses, and all the lady & gentlemen merchants & householders showering their path with flowers- one naked naga under a tree who lives in Hardwar all year under that tree- got up with big belly standing legs apart & blew his conch horn triumphant to see his brothers pass in review to the Ganges along the main street –
>
> Followed by bands of weeping singing homeless women walking along holding on to each other, with no hair & bald like holy humble Gertrude Stein suffering phantoms, actually they made one cry, all dressed in orange robes & singing Sanskrit hymns to Nirvana. (Ginsberg, *Indian Journals* 65)

In opposition to this scene, he finds it difficult to rationalise the presence of a 'Trotskyite' lecturer on the streets of Jaipur,

> A Trotskyite streetcorner lecturer with checkered cap & cape, and bent back, stabbing his fingers into the air to make his point, turns round toward you in the crowd- his face is possessed, dark, piercing, supernaturally intelligent eyes- haranguing with uncanny vehemence & swiftness- no roadside burbler he! – He's a real professional in Hyde Park or 14th St. Union Square- What's he doing here like a unicorn borne up out of opium reverie in Jaipur India RR station bed? (Ginsberg, *Indian Journals* 9)

To Ginsberg, a delirious religious scene fitted perfectly in his imagination of India, but not a 'supernaturally intelligent Trotskyite'. At this point, it becomes important to note that though Allen Ginsberg saw India as a land beyond history, he himself was a subject of his own historical context. Coming from a civilisation that he considered spiritually decayed due to material pursuits, he felt the need to experience the 'ahistorical' spirituality of the East. Disillusioned with Western society, which was founded upon the principles of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, he aspired to discover a different set of mythologies that could work as an alternative epistemological current in his writings.

While in India, Ginsberg had interacted with a wide variety of people. A notable group among them consisted of the Bengali poets of Calcutta associated with the *Krittibas* magazine and Hungryalism. Ginsberg, had a big impact on them with his dedication to spirituality. In addition to that, they were also impressed by his bohemianism and interest in the East. Surprisingly, the poets themselves were hardcore rationalists and did not care much about spirituality. The poets of Calcutta, all of whom were born in pre-independence India, found it interesting to see an American celebrity poet living in India like a fakir and smoking cannabis with holy men in crematoriums. Deborah Baker records in *A Blue Hand*: "Though the British ruled for nearly two hundred years, even educated Bengalis

rarely came face-to-face with a sahib. Never having spoken to a white person, Sunil was impressed by how patiently Allen repeated himself when they couldn't understand his accent" (Baker 161). To them, Ginsberg was the 'other'. The poets Sunil Ganguli and Shakti Chatterjee often accompanied Ginsberg on various expeditions to meet sadhus at the crematoriums or at places like Tarapith, but their roles were largely reported in the journal as translators or smoking partners. There is no mention of their literary works or the exploding literary scene of Calcutta at that time. There is only one rough translation of Shakti Chatterjee's poem entitled "Remove Those Dark SATANIC Mills" but nothing beyond that. It remains open to speculation whether Ginsberg might have shown greater interest in the actual writtenpoetry of the Calcutta poets, had they been merely the sweet poets of the Lord.

In the *Indian Journals*, Ginsberg's thoughts revolved around a specific image of India. His observations do not intellectually cut across the social sections of India. Though he talks about the sadhus, the poets, the landscapes and sufferings, he colours them all in his exotic view of the land.Ginsberg's engagement with the country reveals a complex entanglement of genuine fascination and deep-seated contradiction, as his search for a refuge from Western materialism was consistently undermined by an essentialist gaze. This can be considered as the starting point of the influx of Western tourists into India, considering it to be some kind of spiritual panacea in the second half of the twentieth century.By homogenizing the grit of a post-independence nation into a timeless spiritual spectacle, a gap was created between Ginsberg's Indophilia and his actual representation, marking a site of essentialism and alienation. It is the same essentialism that brought the Beatles to Maharshi Mahesh Yogi and is still contributing to the yoga industry of the West. His *Indian Journals*illustrates how even the most dissenting voices can be absorbed back into the Western orientalist frameworks they attempt to dismantle.In reducing the lived realities of India to a backdrop for his own spiritual quest, he mirrored the same exoticism that would later define the Western influx of the 1960s, proving how difficult it is for a countercultural icon to see past a spectacle of his own making.

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