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Allen Ginsberg's Poetry: A Form of Protest, Revolt, and Rebellion

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Allen Ginsberg's Poetry: A Form of Protest, Revolt, and Rebellion

Md. Saber -E- Montaha

Abstract- Allen Ginsberg, one of the most rebellious poets in the history of American literature, throughout his life as a poet had taken poetry as a form of protest against different issues. These issues range from conventional societal norms, their justification instead of being suppressive and detrimental to the development of one's true self, to the hypocritical and arbitrary role of the contemporary American government. This paper aims to show how Ginsberg's poetry unmasks the true nature of all the oppressive operations of society and authority. Through the historical background and analysis of three of his poems, this paper also aims at showing the ways Ginsberg used poetry as a form of protest and rebellion against those operations that emphasize the arbitrary interest of the capitalistic society over individual selves, even at the cost of destroying them completely.

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I. Introduction

As a conscious artist of his own time, Allen Ginsberg was always inclined to ponder over all the forms of oppression inflicted by the authority or the government. His involvement with communism and Beat Generation had rendered him with a natural inclination to raise a voice against all the forces that in any possible ways tried to curb the development of one 's self or tried to repress anyone. This Beat Generation consisted of a group of writers and cultural activists influencing 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 exploration and explicit portrayals of the human condition (Charters xv),. Ginsberg used his poetic ability to revolt against the abuse of authority in any form. He had always been in favor of the free expression of thoughts in creative arts, and he never restrained him from doing so in his poetry whenever he deemed it necessary (Raskin xi/Preface). For this reason, many of his poems in one way or another are medium 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 instead of the literary value of his works. Jonah Raskin in his book *American Scream* (2004) shows how Ginsberg, instead of CIA's engagement in covert operations for preventing radical writers, continued to write against the American government's anti-communist activities through the 1950s (xiv/Preface). During this time he wrote his famous poem "Howl" (1956) that had faced trial for using obscene languages for attacking the government with the accusation of destroying the best minds of his generation by forcing them to conform to the rules and destructive forces of the capitalistic society hungry for wars (Raskin 216). In his "A Supermarket in California" (1956) also, Ginsberg shows the operation of the capitalistic society of America turning the normal people into consumers merely "shopping for images" (Ginsberg 59). Placing humanity on the top of any interests, Ginsberg was among the few writers who came forward to show the world the pangs and sufferings of the refugees of war-torn Bangladesh in its liberation war in 1971 in his "September on Jessore Road" (1971). The poem, at the same time, satirizes the silence of the American government in this regard as well as the function of so-called humanitarian organizations that are supposed to help the victims in any disaster.

II. Literature Review

Though Allen Ginsberg is one of the most remarkable poets of America, there are not too many research works on him perhaps because of the uncommon subject matters of most of his poems. Among the small number of writings on Ginsberg, the book *American Scream* (2004) by Jonah Raskin Critically analyzes his poem "Howl" along with discussing the circumstances of the development of Ginsberg as a poet through the presentation of the influential events of his entire life. Louis Simpson's book entitled *Studies of Dylan Thomas, Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath & Robert Lowell* (1979) analyzes some of his poems along with those of some other influential American poets. Md. Mohiul Islam is his article "September on Jessore Road: A Museum of Sufferings" presents the sufferings of the Bangladeshi refugees during the Liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971 as portrayed in Ginsberg's poem, "A September on Jessore Road." The article, to some extent, also discusses America's role in the war as exposed in the poem. It seems that there is not any significant work with a holistic approach to the rebellious demeanor of Allen Ginsberg's poetry yet.

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III. "Howl": A Rough Shout Against Capitalistic Oppression on Individual Selves

"Howl" (1956) is Ginsberg's most-read poem which appeared as a biting satire towards the contemporary American government for its destructive attitude at the beginning of the Cold War just after World War II. As the American government was then so concerned about preventing any foreign ideologies from infiltrating into American capitalist society, they started persecuting any practice or literary work that seemed to go against their interest. There was a great division between those who wanted to protect the American values in any way possible and those who were of the notion that truth was being compromised gradually turning America into a totalitarian police state (Skalleberg 2). "Howl" (1956) appeared in such a turbulent situation, and this is why the poem has a connection to the politics of that time. Among all the other literary works produced as a way to attack capitalism and conformity of America, "Howl" (1956) stands out for its fierce roughness. It is indeed a wild, spontaneous shout without considering or fearing any authority.

Ginsberg's involvement with the Beat Generation has much to do with the content of "Howl." The poem starts with the declaration, "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked" (Ginsberg 49). From this very first line to the end of Part–I, the poem talks about various psychedelic activities of these best minds. Among the three parts of the poem, Part–I only presents the seemingly unnatural acts of these people. If analyzed carefully, it becomes quite apparent that their activities bear close resemblance with that of the followers of Beat Generation who are characterized by their preference for individual freedom. This Beat Generation assumedly represents that group of people who celebrated freedom of self rather than conforming to the selfish motives of the contemporary capitalistic society. A large portion of Part-I of the poem refers to a single subject "who" which seems to point towards the people who had a different vision of life other than those established by the mainstream society. As the activities of this "who" occupy a big portion of the first part, it is apparent that Ginsberg wants to show this group of people's struggle to adapt to the routines of the society that they find to be suffocative. Ginsberg tries to present their inner world, their vision by often comparing them to spiritual entities and by analyzing the established norms to show that anyone can have their beliefs, their interpretation of life and their way of looking into everything. Calling them "angelheaded hipsters" (Ginsberg 49), he seems to opine that any belief, though subversive to the established ones, have their equal right to be respected.

Such instances are plenty in the first part, and through them, Ginsberg certainly tries to prove that alternative values apart from those approved by the society are justified as well. Ginsberg shows how individual interests are suppressed by the society that is concerned only with the reproduction of capital by forcing everyone to conform to the same beliefs and thereby turning them into blind worshippers of authority easy to control and manipulate along with celebrating freedom of self. The oppression of the capitalistic society on individual selves has been suggested through the instances of the "who" being "expelled from the academics for crazy and publishing obscene odes on the windows of the skull" (Ginsberg 49) and their being forced to be in "policecars for committing no crime but their own wild cooking pederasty and intoxication…" (Ginsberg 51). The use of such negative words as 'obscene odes,' 'pederasty' and 'intoxication' is suggestive of how society regards the subversive potentials to be a threat to its oppressive authority. All the other crazy activities of these people have a similar indication. The protest against the capitalist interest of the society becomes quite evident when Ginsberg presents these people to burn "cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism" (Ginsberg 50).

The oppressive operation of capitalism and its selfish tendency for exploitation becomes more evident in the second part of the poem. In Ginsberg's words:

> What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up
>
> their brains and imagination?
>
> Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness Ashcans and unobtainable dollars!
>
> Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in the armies!
>
> Old men weeping in the parks!
>
> Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental
>
> Moloch! Moloch the heavy judger of men! (Ginsberg 54)

Moloch, the biblical name of a Canaanite god associated with child sacrifice (Hughes 115) is a metaphor for a capitalistic society that sacrifices the interest of individual selves for its profit. This 'Moloch' dominates the middle part of the poem. Using this metaphor, Ginsberg shows the extent to which society can go in achieving its capitalistic interests. It puts more importance on conventional societal norms other than individual hopes and aspirations. 'Solitude', 'Filth', 'Ugliness', 'Ashcans', 'unobtainable dollars', 'Boys sobbing in armies', 'Children screaming under the stairways', 'Old man weeping in the parks', all these words and phrases reinforce the indifference of the society to the suffering of its members as the only thing

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it is capable of doing it to exploit them and judge them its prescribed parameters. At the end of Part- II, Ginsberg reaffirms how the American society has destroyed all the potential and dreams of his "Mad generation," the name he has given to those people who want to value their individuality over the accepted societal norms.

The final part of the poem is visibly autobiographical as it mentions Carl Solomon whom Ginsberg met at the New York State Psychiatric Institute in 1949 where both of them had been residing as patients because they were thought to be suffering from a mental disorder (Raskin 96). "Rockland" in this part represents the psychiatric institute as Ginsberg believes it to be barren and futile. The best minds like Carl Solomon end up in such 'Rocklands' as a result of society's exploitation. Ginsberg expresses his solidarity with Carl by the use of "I am with you in Rockland" (Ginsberg 55) after every one line in Part - III. He identifies himself with Carl as they both are "great writers on the same dreadful typewriter" (Ginsberg 55). Ginsberg asserts that it is impossible to cure Carl of the madness the capitalist society has caused. Carl's soul that has been long dead by the oppression of capitalism will never return to his body no matter how many shocks are given by the doctors. It is ironic for Ginsberg that the doctors accuse Carl of being insane where he finds the society to be the same. The ending of the poem nevertheless is optimistic. Ginsberg presents a surrealist situation where their own souls' airplanes will drop angelic bombs illuminating the hospital and collapsing all the walls to free Carl. This situation is suggestive of Ginsberg's hope that the wall society has built between established societal norms, and individual choices will one day collapse.

The form of the poem also appropriately fits the content. The long-running sentences without any regular rhyme scheme enable the poem to achieve its aim. Ginsberg borrowed the style of the poem from his inspiration Walt Whitman, who has also used long lines in his poems, as Raskin points out:

> Like Whitman, he wrote long poems with long, prose-like lines and long
>
> catalogues of things and people and events. Like Whitman, he wrote for
>
> America and about America, and like Whitman he sang about himself in the
>
> first person. Neither Whitman nor Ginsberg extinguished his personality in
>
> his poetry. (Raskin 20)

This prose-like quality of "Howl" gives the poem an unconventional structure. Though Ginsberg followed the style of Walt Whitman for the form of "Howl," the poem as a whole is a unique one. The frankness of language and it's unconventionally long prose-like lines without any rhyming render it a shout like an appearance, very apt to the rebellious content of the poem.

IV. "September on Jessore Road": A Biting Satire on the Hypocrisy of America

Ginsberg's contempt for the hypocrisy of the American government and society, in general, is often found in his poetry. In "September on Jessore Road" (1971), using the background of the Liberation War of Bangladesh, Ginsberg presents the hypocritical nature of the American government, the so-called humanitarian organizations and the American society. The poem has a layer of functions. On one level, it exposes the sufferings of the people of Bangladesh living in the refugee camps during the Liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971 to the rest of the world that only a few people did. The poem, at the same time, exposes the hypocritical nature of the American government by showing their inactive role in helping the war victims. It also exposes the indifference of the American humanitarian organizations and American society towards the sufferings of the people in the war. In general, the poem is a sharp satire on the duality and conformity of entire America.

The poem opens with the description of the sufferings of the Bangladeshi refugees in a refugee camp. He brings out their sufferings in the following lines:

> Millions of fathers in rain
>
> Millions of mothers in pain
>
> Millions of brothers in woe
>
> Millions of sisters nowhere to go
>
> One Million aunts are dying for bread
>
> One Million uncles lamenting the dead
>
> Grandfather millions homeless and sad
>
> Grandmother millions silently mad (Ginsberg 211)

Here Ginsberg wants to show that no one was free from the pangs and sufferings of the war. Later in the poem, he vividly brings out the helplessness of the people of war-torn Bangladesh. His description of thousands of boys waiting for their daily bread in the refugee camp and getting whacked for stealing food out of hunger is bound to move anyone. The condition of the newborn babies with rheumatic eyes, the inhuman living standard of the camp altogether make anyone sympathetic to the utterly helpless situation of the refugees. Such an adverse condition of the refugees even failed to move the American government, and that's why Ginsberg lashes his anger towards them.

Ginsberg satirizes the hypocritical role of the American government in the first place. Being a political power, America could have interfered in helping the helpless people of Bangladesh, which they did not. This

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role of the American government reveals their character as Ginsberg finds it. Ginsberg points out that the war-hungry government of America is too busy in conquering and plundering other powerless countries that they have all their forces occupied:

> Where is America's Air Force of Light?
> Bombing North Laos all day and long
>
> Where are the President's Armies of Gold?
> Billionaire Navies merciful Bold?
> Bringing medicine food and relief?
> Napalming North Vietnam and causing more grief? (Ginsberg 214)

International humanitarian organizations and the society of America are also not spared from the satire of Ginsberg. Such organizations are supposed to help the victims in any disastrous situation anywhere in the world. U.S. Aid is such an international organization that is committed to coming forward in aiding the war victims, but instead of doing so, it remained indifferent to the sufferings of the war victims of Bangladesh. Ginsberg's mockery towards U.S. Aid is explicit as he says, "Where are the helicopters of U.s. Aid?/Smuggling dope in Bangkok's green shade" (Ginsberg 214). The poem also satirizes the indifference of general American people. The indifference and blind conformity of American people faces Ginsberg's rage. He mockingly questions, "How many millions sit down in New York/ & sup this night's table on bone & roast pork?" (Ginsberg 215). He suggests the callousness of the American people when he tells that the people even do not care that their taxes are being used to build armed forces that are responsible for killing people, including children.

V. "A Supermarket in California": A Deep Sigh over the Lost Past

"A Supermarket in California" (1955) expresses Ginsberg's lamentation about the triumph of consumer culture over naturalness. In this poem, Ginsberg recalls the past glory of America when people used to celebrate nature. American poets like Walt Whitman envisioned an America where the society, including the people living in it, will be passionate about naturalness. Ginsberg, disturbed by a completely industrialized America and the emergence of consumerism as a result of capitalistic interest, has a vision about Walt Whitman. In that he finds him walking down the side streets under the trees and entering into a supermarket. Entering the supermarket with Whitman is suggestive as Whitman always voiced against the encroachment of a completely industrialized society and supermarket is a visible result of industrialization. The description of Whitman in a supermarket, therefore, is a juxtaposition of facts between expectation and reality.

Ginsberg's discomfort with the consumer culture is very apparent from the events that follow after entering the supermarket and from the description of the supermarket he provides. The families shopping inside the supermarket are like controlled machines. Ginsberg finds the aisles of the supermarket full of husbands. He sees the reflection of wives and babies in fruits and vegetables. All these instances suggest the numbness of the families who have become capitalized consumers who are all alike without any individuality. Ginsberg, to his despair, realizes the threat of seemingly illuminating results of industrialization. Industrial growth, just like "penumbras," illuminates but only partially. Beneath the illuminating side, there is the cost that is nature and domesticity. Similar to the frozen delicacies in the supermarket, the consumers who shop only for images have lost the warmth and passion. Whitman tastes the artichokes, taking all the foods, but not paying the cashier is symbolic. It symbolizes Whitman's disregard for capital in contrast to the money mindedness of the capitalistic society.

At the end of the poem, Ginsberg yearns for the glory of America's past. His fear of walking through the solitary streets suggests the alienation of the people of commodified America from one another compared to the camaraderie of the past. Ginsberg's lamentation for the lost past becomes evident when he says, "Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?" (Ginsberg 59). The America Ginsberg envisioned is lost now. Alienation replaces the love of the past symbolized by "automobiles in the driveways" (Ginsberg 59). The mention of Lethe, a river in Greek mythology that represents forgetfulness, evidently echoes Ginsberg's belief that the people of America, being controlled by capitalist interests, have forgotten the warm and golden past of America.

VI. Conclusion

Allen Ginsberg was always concerned with all kinds of inconsistencies in society, and he protested those inconsistencies in his poetry. He was conscious of the authoritative role of the American government in destroying individual potentials. His sense of general goodness of America is well known. He was concerned not about American society only, but any kind of injustice happening anywhere in the world also prompted him to protest. All these issues are present in most of his poems in different dimensions. His ability to turn the words of poetry into a form of revolt is evident in many of his poems. Ginsberg's "Howl" (1956), "September on Jessore Road" (1971) and "A Supermarket in California" (1955) are some of his poems that are his means to protest, revolt and rebel against discrepancy and injustice in different forms.

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