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Ginsberg's *Howl's* Influence on the Emergence of Hip-hop music: Adjoining the Parallels of Two Counter-Cultures in the Twentieth Century America

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Abstract

Howl (1955) is regarded as one of the most influential and prophetic poems of Allen Ginsberg and the modern America. It's a lamentation for the creative minds and a portrayal of oppressed American society which suppresses all the radical and rebellious artists. The establishment of this poem's literary merit in the literary circle has always been under great scrutiny as it was charged for obscenity. Consequently, after a precarious journey and suffering criticism by several conservative literary critics and scholars, Ginsberg's *Howl* sustained itself in America, and led to influence many radical writers and artists.

In the similar manner, later in 1970s, emerged a performing art called rap music, which is generally engulfed under the terminology of hip-hop (deejaying, rapping, graffiti painting, break dancing). Hip-hop began as an expression of rebellion against established system in black communities but eventually got celebrated through the entire America.

This paper tries to situate *Howl* and Ginsberg as revolutionary, self-reflexive and an influence which paved the way for the birth of counter-cultures. A parallel between the two movements (Beat movement and Hip-hop) is searched and contemplated by pointing out the similarities in the ethos of both of these movements.

Keywords

Howl, Hip-hop music, Beat generation, counter-culture, Ginsberg.

Introduction

Counter-culture, according to the definition of Cambridge Dictionary is “a way of life and a set of ideas that are completely different from those accepted by most of society, or the group of people who live this way”. The term “counter-culture” emerged in 1950s America and one of the prominent names associated with it was Allen Ginsberg along with his contemporaries (Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Lucien Carr and Neil Cassady) got their literary presence acknowledged as beat generation or *beatniks* (a mocking term used by journalists to stereotype these artists). The Beat Generation was regarded as a literary subculture movement which played a major role in the construction of American politics and culture in the post-war era. The Beats wrote and lived unconventionally; they embodied various values and norms of behaviour substantially different from those of mainstream society. This led to Beats being celebrated as the counter-culture of 1950s. They believed in purification and enlightenment of soul and body through heightened sensory awareness.

In the late 1970s a new cultural movement named “hip-hop” arose in the streets of South Bronx and Harlem. The production of a new kind of music was the most imminent practice under this culture and the music started attaining popularity as black music or rap music. African-American people used this form of music to protest and reflect their revolt against Civil rights movement and the prejudices against them by the authorities. The lyrics and the musicality

of the songs had a very significant role as they tried to inculcate a feeling of brotherhood among blacks and the rebellion against white supremacists.

Art as a rebellion

The Beats got continuously questioned for their lifestyle rather than the literary aesthetic they behold and are regarded as pioneers and trailblazers of several rebellious movements in the second half of twentieth century America. They “sought to counteract a philistine and inhibitive society by exploring the most extreme, potentially ecstatic area of the self” (Osborne,185). *Howl* is believed to epitomize Beat aesthetics and the most representative poetic expression of the Beat movement. It attacks capitalism and cultural conformity in the United States. Ginsberg presented the idea of art and literature as a form of protest and avenue of change rather than being only celebrated as a source of entertainment. Hip-hop culture built its foundation on the corresponding belief that music can be utilized to reflect the sufferings and to protest for the rights of coloured people (African American) suffering under the subjugation by white supremacists. The common assertion carved in the minds of commoners that it is unethical to ask questions to authority in a democracy is shattered by Ginsberg in 1950s and this form of revolt is carried ahead in 1970s by musicians connected to the movement of hip-hop.

Ginsberg performed his poetry at San Francisco in different reading sessions at cafes and bars. (*Howl* at an event called “6 Poets at 6 Gallery”). The reading of *Howl* by Ginsberg caused a sensation as it reflected “an exile within a culture”. The beginning of the poem engaged audience in such a way that it indicated the powerful impact it would leave on generations thereafter, “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed

by madness, starving hysterical naked”, (Ginsberg,1). The performance poetry by Ginsberg was astonishing as some scholars argued that

“Never before had a modern audience reacted so passionately, or identified so completely with a poet’s message” (Simpson, 72).

Experimentation with a new style

Howl was written as an experiment to find out that what could be done with long lines. Ginsberg wrote longer lines with enjambments and provocative comparisons. In the parallel lines when rap music was written, the lyrics included words with specific pauses. The hip-hop music was continuous flow of words on the volume of stressed beats. One of the most common features in Howl and the rap songs is the usage of words and structure. Ginsberg in his poetry used “hip talk” of jazz musicians and parallel to it; hip-hop culture borrowed rhythms, accompaniments and edited jazz music to produce an ideal canvas to paint the lyrics of rap songs. Rap is regarded as the most widely known and practiced performance poetry.

Ginsberg credits Kerouac for the title of his poem, “Howl” and salutes him “as the creator of a “spontaneous bop prosody (writer’s attempt at capturing the purity of spontaneous emotion in a literary medium) and original classic literature.” (Lawlor, 27)Kerouac’s work, “On the Road” could be considered an epitome of spontaneous writing. Kerouac claimed that he wrote an entire novel in the time period of twenty days. Ginsberg practiced “Spontaneous Bop Prosody” and in his work “On Improvised Poetics”, Ginsberg dispensed the idea of spontaneity, through his axiom “First Thought, Best Thought” as capturing immediacy was at the core of his art. Identically spontaneity is practiced at a high volume in a

sub-genre of hip-hop music, freestyle rap (verses are improvised while performing). ““To rap” is slang for “to talk””, (Abrams, 272) and similarly Howl performed by Ginsberg broke the conventional form of poetry, he focused on the spontaneity poetics and wrote whatever came to his mind without revising, rewriting and editing it. The spontaneity in both of these art forms is practiced by presenting a free, unstructured composition in which artists put down their feelings and thoughts without a plan or a revision in order to convey the immediacy of experience.

Societal and Individualistic reflections

In the second part of poem, the emphasis on the word, “Moloch” is quite prominent because it determines the sad, manipulated and, materialistic society of America. Ginsberg tried to knit down a new consciousness and a different idea of “American Dream” where he criticized and dismissed the hunger for materialistic possessions in the youths of America African

Americans metaphorically presented several “Moloch” in their songs as they narrated the prejudices carried against them because of their skin colour. Moreover, the repeated usage of the word, “Moloch” in the poem hints the usage of “technique of repetition” of a phrase in the poetry of Ginsberg, and the artists of rap music imitates the similar technique of consistent repetition of words and phrases in their songs. The repetition of words on scratched beats and sampled music became a relevant sport in the field of rap music. Allen encouraged his readers and the upcoming generation to wreck through the shell of collective consciousness that was flourishing in America.

The beats focused on honesty, awareness and authenticity over the teachings of institution of high culture and

highlighted the struggles of a marginalized culture which were never related to public. They talked about alienation of a radical mind for going against the norms. In *Howl*, “who were expelled from the academics for crazy and publishing obscene odes on windows of the skull.” (Ginsberg,1) Ginsberg in his *Howl* celebrated drugs, sexuality, jazz, spirituality and even crime to some extent. It was an attempt to transform the conventional form of poetry to a genuine lived experience and it led to portrayal of intrusive thoughts, a frank reference to sex, drugs and criminality. Hip-hop culture similarly reflected the context of Beats in their art and music, several artists talked about the streets, ammunition and the abundance of drugs in their life. This kind of music got renowned as “gangster rap” which flourished in 1980s with a rivalry between West-coast and East-coast American rappers, (e.g., Biggie and Tupac). In *Howl*, Allen Ginsberg portrayed his lifestyle as subject matter of the poem. The poem was a personal narrative and could be analyzed under the light of semi-autobiographical writing. It was dedicated to Carl Solomons who was a very dear friend to the poet. Even after *Howl*'s success, some scholars did not agree to study it under the spectrum of imaginative work, “The trouble with “*Howl*” is that it is so little a work of imagination and so much an expression of Ginsberg's opinions” (Simpson, 74). Ginsberg was interested in individual experience rather than general assertions. Similarly hip-hop artists talked about their lifestyles and the struggles of daily life in their songs.

Drugs, abuse, music and everything in between

Another interesting common feature in these movements was usage of psychedelic drugs by the artists. It is reported that Ginsberg used cannabis, datura and cocaine even during the

writing of *Howl* and under the influence of drugs he mentioned the usage of drugs at several instances like, “with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock and endless balls,” (Ginsberg, 2) A hip-hop music group named N.W.A. similarly glorified the abuse of drugs by artists and openly claimed themselves against the laws. Moreover, the usage of slangs is crucial considering the postulation that rap music inculcated the slangs as lyrics to talk to the listeners directly. “Bob Kaufman, one of the founders of *Beatitude* magazine and Ted Joans, fused beat lingo with African American jazz idioms and the blues and helped to set the stage for rap. (Raskin, 41)

The prominent reason behind hip-hop being sectioned into the umbrella of countercultures is the controversial lyrics of the songs, (analogous to the words used in *Howl*) which were in contrast to the portrayal of American society by Whites. Hip-hop got popular over the course of time and was adopted by several marginalized section as Latins, Natives and Blacks in America. Hip-hop evolved and regressed from its earlier goal which was to celebrate black pride and brotherhood. In contemporary time Hip-hop transformed from the reflection of sufferings and struggles of blacks in American society to the glorification of materialistic possessions in the hoods of black people. Hip-hop music is one of the most popular forms of music in the entire world, where it is even celebrated by every person regardless of their gender, race, color, caste and creed.

The writings of Allen Ginsberg and beat generation can be analyzed as a catalytic reaction which shaped the counter-culture of sixties and other reforming movements in twentieth century America. Hip-hop culture emphasized on the portrayal of the lives of an entire race suppressed by poverty and prejudices against them. The movement in music under the genre of hip-hop is an immaculate example where art is utilized for the purpose of protest for liberation and freedom

of a marginalized community. Both of these movements aimed to challenge the hierarchy and the predomination of Anglo-American people and their traditions, which were regarded as representatives of American culture "It's fair to say that the influence of the Beats extended far beyond literature; one finds their imprint in music, painting and film and photography. (Raskin, 38)

Conclusion

Howl reflects earthy and gritty experience of alienated people and through this poem Ginsberg paved the way for further decades of rebellion in America. Ginsberg along with his writer friends found inspiration in jazz culture of black America and later inspired Hip-hop culture of America. Ginsberg will always be remembered as a great poet and primarily as one of the precursors who initiated revolt and protest through the medium of art for the liberation and free thought of alienated people. Hip-hop on the other end has evolved into a part of every human's life on this planet. This counter-culture emerged for a small population but later impacted an entire generation. Rap music is directly or indirectly influenced by the poetry of Allen Ginsberg and holds a prominent position in the tradition of the Beat Generation.

The poem, *Howl* must always be read, recited, performed, celebrated and worshipped because of it being one of the most substantial works that influenced an entire generation and will keep on influencing more in the upcoming future.

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