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## BEAT LITERATURE: A NEW LITERARY MOVEMENT IN POST-WORLD WAR-II AMERICA

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**Abstract:** *This paper seeks to explore the emergence of Beat Literature during the Post world War-II America and its consequential responses. Literature of America has inspired generation of readers across the world. Its ability to inspect upon the growing resistance among people toward marginalization, black peoples' rights, racism, disparity, rigid economic monopoly, in time gave voice to the voiceless. Literary movements have invariably played pivotal role in creating new genres, advocated change for the betterment of its community and people. Same is true with Beat Generation writers. They advocated for freedom of speech, individual choices, wider acceptance of different individual selves and creating space for dialogue.*

**Keywords:** *Beat Generation, American Literature, New revolutionary poetry, Cultural responses, Change.*

### Introduction

Literature in America found its strong ground during 1940s, forging a new and modern literary culture and ideals post world war-II that also shaped its future. Revolution in America is not the thing of the past alone. It grew through ages and in different spaces of political tensions, social change, individualism and literary voices. Literary production during the time brought a significant change to its cultural fabric. America witnessed booming economy after the second world war, material consumption touched a new high within its changing social climate of the time. On the other hand, a new set of ideals came to pose great threat to the new changing America. These voices stood in stark contrast to what was already taking place simultaneously.

### Beat Generation

Beat literature as popularly known was a literary movement strictly dating back to the 1940s America and paving its way into 1950s and beyond. It was a strong response to the conformity of established cultural and social standards and materialism of the time. The term 'Beat Generation' was first used by Jack Kerouac in 1948 (Zhang, 205, 2013). The term was made public by Jack Kerouac's friend John Clellon Holmes in his article 'This is the Beat Generation' in New York Times magazine (Zhang, 205, 2913). Beat literature was born out of social and creative circle of Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg (Beatdom, 2). The word "beat" refers to beatify or beautiful and was largely a mental thought of its writers Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Borroughs who were founders of this emerging new movement in America at the time (Zhang, 205, 2013). Beat literature records

the experiences of its writers in response to the external forces that more or less dictate an individual's choices and awareness. However, these writers aimed at transforming cultural fixation and societal pressures in order to awaken a new consciousness among American community.

A new style of writing with an explosive literary content marked this new foundation in literature. Perhaps not for all, but for a significant part of those who resonated with the concerns of the beat generation. It began to be associated with the whole young generation of the 1950s. The idea and themes were not restricted to Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg writings alone, but permeated across the coming generation of writers and readers alike. The change was profound.

### **World War-II and American Economy**

World war-II, as per record hardly had any economic downside for America. Interestingly, it only boosted its economy to a new level by generating employment for its people, especially women (Zhang, 206, 2013). It also saw enhancement in salaries, from blue collar workers to white-collar employees. This also forced mass production and mass consumption. A new form of mass consumerism began to set at the threshold of post-war America. The whole of new setting in American society began to revolve around objects. This new found identity among people in America was devoid of reality and connection with oneself. The subject of alienation became an important thematic exploration for writers of the time who were deeply concerned with the growing materialism and consumerism which only deepened its impending cracks.

“Accompanying the Cold War Iron Curtain after World War II, there appeared a provocative political force called McCarthyism in U.S., whose purpose was to eradicate radical ideas of the American society and political dissents. From the late 1940s to the early 1960s, anti-Communist ideology infiltrated into the educational, cultural and political spheres at all levels, and the left-wing forces got a heavy knock and some left-wing trade unions and cultural organizations were excluded from the mainstream society. McCarthyism stifled free discussion in the American circle of thought, creating a modern politics of terror” (Zhang, 206, 2013). The consumer society and political constraints at that time had a depressing impact on people resulting in mass disappointment. The voices turned mute and the individualistic ideals that America took great pride in had a meltdown the country had never seen before. On the other side of the fence were group of people to whom nothing made sense. Their love for material pleasures ironically made them blind to reality amidst changing scenario. In this environment, “youth culture developed rapidly, which, with its own characteristics, habits, customs, language and idol worship, made continual impact on the traditional value system stressing thrift and self-discipline. So, the protestant ethic and puritan spirit, the American traditional values, tended to decline. However, the prevalence of hedonism didn't mean it had replaced the old value system” (Zhang, 207, 2013). The rise of Beat Generation in response to what was being witnessed finally broke its shackles and rose to the occasion.

### **Beat Literary Movement and Rebellion**

“The friendships among the Beat writers are as famous and enthusiastically chronicled as their actual creative output. During the late 1940s, the Beats often lived together in crowded New York apartments, worked together, and hit the road together to reveal in their writing the “real” America and Mexico. Through their associations, they tested their own spiritual, physical, and sexual boundaries, challenging the limits of their experience. There was a complex web of brotherhood, sexual desire, and emotional tumult” (Mambrol, 4, 2020). Beat writers may intimidate many, challenge the bold characters they exhibited and the kind of life they chose to live by. The ideological warfare and rational output one sees in their poetry and novels openly expressed their lived experiences rather than what they were taught and instructed to follow in life by the conventional system that were already in place.

They meaningfully took their poetry to the jazz clubs, alleyways and bedrooms. They questioned the age old maxim of “art for art’s sake” and found their true calling in “high” art. In doing so “their themes challenged the false sheen of American patriotism, a holdover from World War II’s war effort. The resulting proliferation of nuclear weapons, the onset of the cold war, and increasing racial tensions further contradicted America’s wholesome image” (Mambrol, 5, 2020). They openly challenged America’s weakening spirituality and growing racial tensions. “The Beats lived their beliefs by existing hand-to-mouth and befriending criminals, prostitutes, and others who lived on the margins of society. Interestingly, through their immersion into the sordid parts of American life, Beat poetry emerged as largely affirmative of human nature. Throughout their work, the creative process is celebrated, as is the integrity of those who push societal boundaries, foster a spiritual vision, or choose to be different” (Mambrol, 5, 2020). As Mambrol very rightly highlights Beat writers larger than life attitude toward the opposite end of American society, they did so without fear and inhibitions.

The poem “Howl” by Allen Ginsberg, published in the year 1956, gave a whole new meaning to their ongoing rebellion. It marked a historic timeline for the Beat literary movement. The poem faced legal trial on its publication for obscenity and bold statements. A long poem “is intended to be read aloud, almost chanted, a sort of return to an oral tradition that had been neglected in literature for a long time. The content of the poem raised eyebrows, and sparked an obscenity trial which challenged the definition of pornography in America” (Zhang, 207, 2013). The poem explores the deafening side of American life that largely remained neglected—drug addicts, prostitutes, swindlers and drifters. As Zhang iterates “there is a visceral rage against the system that requires conformity and selling-out. Foul language and slang are common throughout the work, as well as drug use and criminality (ibid). In saying so “this poem, though regarded as “disgraceful” by orthodox literature of the 1950s, reflects the feelings of anger and excitement of the young people, and is the Bible of the Beat Generation and a manifesto of a new youth culture”(ibid).

Among them Jack Kerouac’s piece ‘On the Road’ turned out to be a significant work which came to be recognised for its nuanced take on spirituality, only to become an influential work for many others. In this book Kerouac takes us on a journey with “a group of people traveling both geographically and spiritually in the country. In a dreary conservatism and mass consumption era, Kerouac described a life which was rid of social pressure and shackles” (ibid). This work critiqued American society where he saw “obedience as a big problem in the post war American society. In this society, everyone was doing what they thought they should do. Kerouac believed that in this society, people earned money and desperately accumulated material wealth, just like insects” (ibid). The characters of On the Road are always in action and convey their dissatisfaction with life and excitement to get rid of the middle class restrictions. As the focal point of the American society, the middle class most typically reflects the spirit of the American nation, beliefs and values. However, in most of the post-war middle-class youth’s eyes, the traditional beliefs were becoming increasingly disintegrated and no trace of new faith was in view. In panicky embarrassment, the countercultural mentality of the middle-class youth was accumulating power (ibid). Unlike this work which is revolutionary in tone and treatment as specified, Kerouac’s other work ‘Dharma Bums’ exhibits a greater understanding of humanity and why things are what they are. Thus, the work in the opinion of the author delves deeper into the philosophy of life. As Zhang explains further in his work on Beat Generation, he writes stating Kerouac's own opinion that “the American society was impacted by materialism and obedience, and even universities were no exception. He believed that universities were only meeting places of the middle-class. In his view, money is not the key to happiness or success. Pleasures of life are simple and the meaning of it can be found in nature, even in the absence of material wealth, one can enjoy the pleasures of life. Whether a person has money or not does not matter, “He doesn't need any money, all he needs is his rucksack with those little plastic bags of dried food and a good pair of shoes and off he goes

and enjoys the privileges of a millionaire in surroundings like this.” He pointed out that a person might have all the money he needed but was still unhappy, because he hadn't got rid of the values of consumerism of the American society”.

In their rebellion and angst against the society's failures as understood by them, Beat Generation suffered from their own short-sightedness. In the opinion of the critics, they remained anti-feminist throughout their life. Although they held progressive ideology, women never in true sense participated in their circle, or were rather not encouraged enough by them. Much to the disappointment of women who were the most marginalised among the two sexes, it is indeed a saddening reminder that they received no moral support from Beat Generation who had the greatest opportunity at hand. Excessive indulgence in drugs and other amoral activities marred their movement with controversies and legal trials. It nonetheless was successful in its attempt at drawing political attention and making an impact socially and literarily on American changing culture.

### **Conclusion**

The emergence of the American Beat Generation echoes through the 1950s era. It inspired many to look at social environment and introspect how it shapes the young generation and its minds. The progress cannot happen when one society is underprivileged and the other benefits. The middle class society is the backbone of any social system; their well-being and rights to a dignified life must not go unnoticed; individual self and their right to choose, decent pay, economic parity, freedom to democratic rights builds the strength of a nation. Beat generation may not appeal to all alike but they were able to open the consciousness of a powerful nation and its people, created space for dialogue for stakeholders to engage in policy making which unites every strata of a society as whole.

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