

Counter-Culture in the Beat Generation Poetry and its Impact on Modern Iraqi Poetry

Razzaq Zghair Shnawa

Thi Qar General Directorate of Education, Ministry of Education, Iraq

ABSTRACT

Although the Beat movement was short-lived, it left its influence on many poets who followed. During 1950s, the 'Beat' is recognized as a movement or a generation of post-World War II. The works of Beat poets are characterized by experimental styles and subjects including their spontaneous poetry, writing without regard for grammar, sexually explicit language, raising discussion of experience, and themes ranging from rejection of American values and fear of nuclear war to sexual escapades and road trips.

This study sheds lights on some poems by representative poets of the movement. The poems include " A Supermarket in California " by Allen Ginsberg (1926 – 1997) and "Bomb" and " Last night I drove a car " by Gregory Corso (1930-2001). As a female voice among the Beat Generation, Diane di Prima (1934-2020) has been studied with her two poems " I Am A Shadow " and " She Is The Wind ". The study refers to the impact this movement leaves on Iraqi poetry through talking some poems by Hussein Mardan (1927– 1972) in his book "Naked Poems" and the poem ' Oedipus' which summarizes the psychological suffering of Baland Al Haidari (1926 – 1996).

Keywords: rejection, fear, freedom from social constrains.

Introduction

The two decades between 1930 and 1950, or the decades that witnessed the Great Depression and the Second World War, seriously affected all the sides in American life especially the social and cultural sides. Socially, wartime proved the truthfulness of the idea that women could do the jobs of men during men's absence. After the coming back of the veterans from fighting, homemakers, mothers and wives became the main jobs of women. In spite of this, the postwar America was totally different from that which had been before the war. This change included gender matters, economic, technological advances and even landscape transformation which contributed to the appearance of new movements such as Beat Generation. (Selcik 14-15)

These movements were established when young people broke away from other people including their families and parents. This breaking gave them an opportunity to introduce their ideology and literary tendency. Music played a role in presenting this movement among the teenagers who understood this 'beat' as 'hit'. Roll and Rock was a new kind of music which – including jazz, pop, blues and rhythm – left a tangible impact on society and young people who had a tendency for rebellion. This new rebellious man has been described as ' The White Negro' who does not see America in war or in depression; a man who questions everything. Being rebellious and having no clear plan for the future, the new movement presented a turning point in the fifties. (Selcik 16)

Some scholars like David Galens in his *Literary Movements for Students* emphasizes that the beginning of Beat Generation root back to 1944, a year of the first meeting between Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs in Columbia University. Six years were enough to mature the ideas of these literary figures. So, in 1950, 'Beat' was recognized as a distinguished literary movement and as a post-war generation with lifestyles and attitudes which are far from typical America. Kerouac uses this term to refer to the negative points he observes in his world and how he reacts positively to them. Galens adds that two ideas go together in describing this movement. First, weariness and disinterest toward political and social activity is a feature of Beat figures. Second, – with having memory of Beatitudes of Jesus, blessedness and happiness said in sermons – they have feeling of bitterness and disillusionment and a tendency to free themselves from social constrains. (Galens 21)

The main characteristics of Beat writing is that its employment of a spontaneous explicit language with experimental subject and unconstrained style and grammar. The main theme is the refusal of American value and tackling the fear of the dangers of nuclear war. Sexual daring adventures and road trips are also themes that take up a space in Beat writings as in Kerouac's novel *On The Road* which was considered a fundamental work of Beat Movement. In this novel, which is considered an anthem by the Beats for the hope and disappointment it portrays , dissatisfaction leads to a

search for values which are bigger than the values they regard typically American. This search leads the characters to the paths of alcohol, drugs, sex and crimes in a life dominated by chaos or a life which is an edge between hope and disappointment. (Galens 26)

Some other features of Beat Generation are calls for liberating sex and using drugs, spiritual exploration of eastern philosophies. Some of these features were linked or influenced the hippie traditions. However, reaction against traditional values is the most important feature, a feature by which the beat figures shift the concentration from the materialistic perception to the spiritual one. (Tomakić 2)

Furthermore, disillusionment , which can be the result of the post-war period, is one of the central themes of the Beat Movement. The members of this movement were disillusioned with the complacency society, a complacency which comes as a result of two kinds of feeling at the end of the war. These two kinds of feelings are both pride and sorrow. Many people were uneasy about how victory was obtained because this way did not regain the spirit of optimism. With this division in the society, people got attracted to disillusionment which was raised by Beat styles because of the distrust that America would regain its pride. (Galens 26)

Allen Ginsberg (1926 – 1997)

What is known about Allen Ginsberg is that he explains his major themes by employing experimental performance. Relying on social performance is one of the essential elements of his poetry because he is of the idea that embodying thoughts through visible performance is so important. He refuses subjecting poetry to the familiar or superficial issues because such a technique will not reflect reality. So, those who study Ginsberg deal with performance as a dynamic issue in expressing his themes. Some scholars deal with Ginsberg's poetry from three perspectives: the first one represents his understanding of social performance; the second perspective is that which tackles his oral poetry while the third perspective is allocated for dealing with his leadership of beat generation. (Mahran 2)

Ginsberg – who mixes action and fancy, imagination with observation – is ranked among poets of social poetry which is presented through simple words as in his “A supermarket in California”. His performance is used as a social instrument to determine flaws in society. His poetry shows his view of darkness, sadness and hardness toward society. His awareness gives an eye to his audience to observe hidden meanings as in his “Supermarket in California,” a poem by which Ginsberg wants to increase the awareness of people in their flaws. (Mahran 3-21)

Dr. Prabhanjan Mane thinks that the primary theme of the "A Supermarket in California "

is the moral choice with which America is faced. Will it, as Ginsberg suggests in this poem and other poems, continue to be a place of acquisitiveness, empty material values, and alienated individuals? Or will America recognize its inherent spirituality and embrace the possibilities for living in a real human community? (Mane 1)

At the beginning of "A Supermarket in California", the poet shows that he shops groceries, then he indicates the hidden meaning of shopping when he says he is hungry fatigue for images. Then, he presents the idea that he is proud of himself by comparing himself as an American poet who follows Whitman. (Raskin 119)

In this poem, the poet imagines to meet Whitman in the supermarket directing questions to him directly. This poem has no equal lines. The poet starts the poem describing how he walks under the trees enjoying the scene of the moon. He makes it clear for the readers that he is shopping images which he has hungry fatigue for. The person he is asking about his dream is Walt Whitman. Walt Whitman who calls for the American Dream is asked and described by Ginsberg as childless, lonely old grubber who enters his head among the kinds of meat in the refrigerator and watches the grocery boys. (1-8)

What draws the attention is that Ginsberg asks Whitman about the destination the latter is going to as if there is no hope because all the doors are closed, a matter which creates a feeling of absurdity " Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour. Which way does your beard point tonight? / I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the supermarket and feel absurd." (14-16)

In the last part, he finishes the poem describing California with many images such as lonely people in solitary streets. The clear term which summarizes the poem is ' the lost America '. then, he directs his speech to his father and teacher making a comparison between America during their time and America when the poem was composed. Such a description of disappointment enrolls this poem under the list the beat poems which not only refers to beat ideas but also mentioning Whitman's name as if to draw the attention of readers to the Whitman's ideas that were disappearing gradually. The last image in the poem represents a message that everything in America has change; that is why the speaker asks his listener about the old image of America and how it used to be

Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher, what America did you have when Charon quit poling his ferry and you got out on a smoking bank and stood watching the boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe? (24 – 27)

Gregory Corso (1930-2001)

Gregory Corso acquires his spiritual heritage from his catholic upbringing. In spite of this, he starts doubting catholic beliefs and develops a sense of humour and interrogative mentality. He adopts dark suspicion toward the nature of this universe and tackles metaphysical and intellectual matters and sophisticated themes. Despite the idea that his thoughts do not present him as a reformer of American society, his doubts do not prevent him from showing faith in God as a main theme in his poetry. What distinguishes him is that there is no enough biography of him and all what is available are biographical fragments. (Olson 1-3)

Corso played a role of taking the Beat movement into laughter and hilarious in an exaggerated way of romanticism. Absurdity and variety are features that can be considered Corso's additions to the Beat movement, a technique by which he tries to draw attention to the concepts he mixes such as using the phrase "The Happy Birthday of Death" as a title to a volume of poetry carrying a picture of an atomic explosion. (Olson 64)

According to David Galens, " Bomb" is Corso's satirical attempt in which he ironically tries to lessen the destruction of atomic attacks by describing the bomb-drop as a second coming of the Christ. To Corso, the atomic explosion represents the end of history portrayed by humans and the beginning of heavenly eternity. In this poem, Corso employs a sense of humour with some scattered images in a Beat style to offend " members of the campaign for Nuclear Disarmament ." (Galens 24)

"O Bomb I love you
 I want to kiss your clank eat your boom
 You are a paean an acme of scream
 a lyric hat of Mister Thunder
 O resound thy tanky knees
 BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM
 BOOM ye skies and BOOM ye suns
 BOOM BOOM ye moons ye stars BOOM
 nights ye BOOM ye days ye BOOM
 BOOM BOOM ye winds ye clouds ye rains
 go BANG ye lakes ye oceans BING
 Barracuda BOOM and cougar BOOM
 Ubangi BOOM orangutang
 BING BANG BONG BOOM bee bear baboon" (1-14)

In his poem “Last Night I Drove a Car”, Corso is seen as a trickster who indicates that everything can be accepted. In this poem, he shows that this romantic element can still be employed in contemporary poetry. The romantic claim of the German poet Friedrich von Schlegel, who thinks that the abnormal eccentric and monstrous behavior also has a value in literature, is adopted by Corso in this poem. (Olson 64)

Last night I drove a car
not knowing how to drive
not owning a car

I drove and knocked down

people I loved
...went 120 through one town.

I stopped at Hedgeville
and slept in the back seat

...excited about my new life.

This poem calls for developing egoistic individuality, the romantic concepts and personal issues. Corso shows the atrocity of egoistic individuality in an image of a driver who neither knows how to drive nor does have a car but this does not prevent him from driving fast, threatening the lives of others and then sleeping excited in the car (**Olson 65**). So, such a deviation from the familiar in the driver's image is employed by Corso as a Beat technique, a technique to develop a form of daring even if this daring has no rules or experience. The aim of employing this daring by the poet is to encourage people to experience life paths.

Diane di Prima (1934-2020)

According to David Stephen Calonne, Diane di Prima has been studied as a main female literary figure whose name is associated with a male-dominated Beat generation movement. She said that she would confront what prevent her way of life, her way of dress, her behavior as Italian/American and her accent. She defends the slang street language she uses in her poem. She is of the idea that if she chooses a high level language, her literary products can be visible by a narrow part of the literary world. (Calonne 1)

Another critic, McKenzie Livingston, shows Di Prima as a poet who tries to exceed any constraints in expressing her gender, a matter which is not simple during the period when she starts writing. Environmental, political and social are the issues that tackle her early writings. But in the latter part of her life she concentrates on familial issues in order to catch up with what she did in her early career; therefore she tried to allocate a stable time for her children. (Livingston 1)

Both critical opinions by Calonne, who tackles Prima as a distinguished female figure, and Livingston, who presents her as a poet who exceeds constraints in showing her gender, can be found in her two poems " I Am A Shadow" and "She Is the Wind". The poem " I Am A Shadow" comes as a reflection to her insistence and challenge against all the difficulties she faces. She keeps repeating the phrase ' I am' such as " I am a shadow crossing ice / I am rusting knife in the water / I am pear tree bitten by frost" (1-3). In spite of these hardships – in addition to the glass that cut her feet –, she can walk in dark windy forest and can uphold the mountain with her hand. (4-6) She finishes the poem with an image that locking her jaw with a silver wire does not prevent her eyes from looking at eagles (10-11)

As far as her " She is the Wind " is concerned, the phrase ' She is ' is repeated, a matter which reflects a feminist spirit, by which she portrays the importance of a woman. She employs several images for this reason comparing the woman to 'the wind', ' the summer weed' ' the harpy of fire' and ' the marble' . The poet goes on describing the ' She' in the poem as if she is everything for the addressee and the hiss that fills his brain when he is away (14-15)

Hussein Mardan (1927– 1972)

The Beat generation's impact on Arabic prose and poetry starts with some Arab literary figures. The most prominent among these figures is Hussein Mardan (1927– 1972), an Iraqi poet who is known for his literary daring and audacity. He is also known as a narcissist who does not submit to what others say about him and expresses his vanity when he declares that he is the dictator of literary movement, a dictator who has the power to destroy the mountain upon the head of any poet. His beautiful literary performance forces people and critics to forgive his social and moral deviation. (العزاوي 5)

Significantly, Mardan is aware that his new tendency would not have an appeal to people because of his audacity, an audacity which is obvious from the title of his book ' Naked Poems'. Such a tendency evokes some critics to accuse him of being an individual who devotes all his poetry to propagate sex and degrade the human values. Others justify Mardan's tendency to express his inner potential as an escape from the post war circumstances and such a tendency is not his real feature (ناهي 16).

Juxtaposing ideas dominate his poetry about woman, a poetry in which he mixes between his two looks toward her; a look with a respect and a look which is highly inhuman to reflect his disgust against the surrounding circumstances. It is worth mentioning that Mardan is sure that his new or unfamiliar poetry will create a dispute among people; therefore he advises his listeners not to read his poems if they fear their inner animal dark side. In an essay about woman's personality, Mardan is of the idea that the twentieth century poetry has a unique frame for her. According to him, the modern poet should not compose numerous poems for a lady whom he cannot seduce in one poem because modern poet does not have ten years to lose running after

one lady. And worse, he calls for replacing the word love by the word the word lust.
 (العزاوي 101)

He starts his poetic career – with some poems such as ' Growing Death' – by evoking some taboos announcing that

The devil, glass of wine and brothel are my companions
 I vowed my nerves for lust
 with a slim lady whose breasts ripe
 who perceives love with her nail and canine (1-4)

Mardan reasons out his deviation from his social ethics with justifications which are worse than his verbal performance. He writes with a language that reflects the circumstances of his generation and indicates that vice which some modern people suffer from is due to their way of bringing up and the severe circumstances they face. In his ' My Mother's Breast', his shouts can be taken as an indicator of his pains that express the feelings that his age represents a day when love should die because all beautiful love dreams come to be mirage that burns his youth, a mirage that he spends his days running after. This poem summarizes the reasons behind his being away from moral virtues

I grew up in the darkness of vice
 I learned everything but
 I am still ignoring the meaning of virtue
 Let me live alone as a stranger
 among my heart impossible dreams
 Even the glass is shouting empty in my hands
 Everything is ugly in this universe
 Ugly is my love to this universe
 Nights drank my age and slept
 the revolution inside me
 I hated love, I hated you
 I am looking for a new lover today
 The girl of fog, nothing remains but
 a weary body arming death
 blue lips with remains of
 the dream of fire and mad love
 leave me ... no no come , I
 still a slave of my lust
 eat what remains from me (7 – 21)

Pessimism and lack of hope is another ' Beat' feature that frames Mardan's poetry. He starts his ' The Crow's Face ' with desperate gloomy image saying ' that the morning died and the Strange night will come back. He goes on describing his listener as an idiot who still believes that life has hope. He adds that hope in this life is a mere child's dream which looks like a spider's house.

He completes his perception of 'fallacious' life by describing it as fake even in its situations that are supposed to be delightful such as meeting and smiles among lovers after departures. As an example of this is his ' Does Parting Kill Love ?' . He describes meeting his lady as a meeting with a cold depressed smile though it comes after a year. The speaker in this poem – after the pretended artificial shaking – prevents the lady from completing her statement when she starts with saying 'I still' because he is sure that she will say 'I still love you' indicating that he will not be deceived again by decent utterance (5-7). He uses this meeting as an image of life circumstances which get worse and worse when he describes the meeting that follows not only as fallacious but also as a meeting with frozen lips.

In spite of the audacity he expresses in his poetry, some critics of his age are of the idea that he is a human of purified inner psych. There are some poems that support this critical opinion. An example of his tendency which does not go in line with his 'Beat' ideas is his poem ' A Chant for Al Abbass', a poem in which he praises a high socially-respected symbol. He uses the Imam Al Abbass as a hero that is called for to make a change in this life, a life in which thieves are set free and hope cannot come again unless the Al Abbass kills the snake. (2 – 8)

Finally, the attention that has been given to Mardan is not only due to his role in establishing an Arabic Beat movement but also due to his daring to touch numerous taboos, especially in dealing with sex. Despite the fact that some other poets such as Baland Al Haidari (1926 – 1996) and Sady Yousif (1934 – 2021) also break away from the familiar literary laws, the Arabic Beat esteem is obviously Maradan's.

In addition to the change Baland contributes – with other poets – to the rhymed structure of the Arabic poem by adopting of the blank verse, his contribution has been thematic. Thematically, he adopts a psychoanalytical Freudian tendency especially in the division raised by Freud concerning consciousness which dominates western thoughts during the period Baland lives in. Baland makes use of Freud's theory about Oedipus (عبيد 44). He uses the name Oedipus as a title for one of his poem where he employs Oedipus' complex to deal with modern man's suffering in regard to expatriate, loss and displacement.

Oedipus !
 deserted I am, like night.
 Like silence, I am deserted
 Here
 Near my hand
 All my tomorrow
 A dark life
 A barren desert and a cut call
 And ages fallen down
 And I am the conceited man

go deeply
go deeply
Where is Allah ... ? (1 – 13)

All in all, despite the Arabic attempts to propagate the Beat thought, a reader can notice that these attempts are not widespread. It seems that these thoughts are blocked by Arabic conservative societies at that time.

Conclusion

This study starts with a description of the main features of Beat Generation which emerges as a product of some American internal and external factors, the most important of which is the American participation in World War II and its victory which divides people into proud and disappointed. The principles of the Beat Generation come to represent the end or the breakdown of the Whitman's dream. Therefore, the first poem chosen in it is Allen's Ginsberg's " A Supermarket in California", a poem in which Ginsberg imagines a meeting with Whitman and asking him directly. Such a conversation summarizes the main differences, which represent disappointment of ' lost America', between the age of Whitman and that of Beat Generation.

The study also tackles one of the issues the people divided about which is the atomic bomb. This issue is dealt with in Gregory Corso's "Bomb" which comes as a Beat's breaking from the rules or the familiar. He starts this poem with " O Bomb I love you / I want to kiss your clank eat your boom", a matter which – at first – shows exactly the opposite to what the poet wants to attack. In his " Last Night I Drove a Car ", Corso is about to stress the idea that everything can be accepted even if it is unfamiliar or eccentric such as driving by a person who cannot drive.

Diane di Prima is a female voice whose two chosen poems, " I Am A Shadow " and " She Is The Wind " represent two issues. First, the difficulties she faces does not stop her or prevent from looking forward. Second, the important task done by a female who is everything for male.

The impact of this literary movement on Arabic literature (especially in Iraq) is also supported by the similar disappointment resulting from the numerous wars, big losses and political upheavals the Arab individual acquires from his contemporary issues. Therefore, some poets – led by Hussein Mardan – adopt Beat thoughts daringly. What gathers both English and Arabic Beat movements is that both are short-lived to reflect a counter psychological attack toward severe dilemma the poet cannot solve. That is why, he refuges to some linguistic taboo to express his bitter disgust.

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