

The Socio-Political Factors in Jack Kerouac's Novels

Mary Bridget Rohini Fernando, Reg No 11748

Ph.D. Research Scholar, St. Mary's College (Autonomous), Thoothukudi,
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, India.

Dr. A. Sebasty, Associate Professor of English (Retd),
St.Mary's College (Autonomous), Thoothukudi.

Abstract

The American literature of this era brought forth a new generation out of the war, but the traditional, religious, and social aspects were quite different from those of the previous one. Though the social conditions of the post-war period were traditionalist some of the most furiously discussed writers were homosexuals or bisexuals including Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal and James Baldwin whose gloomy themes and experimental methods paved way for Beat writers such as Neal Cassady, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs and Jack Kerouac. Kerouac's novels are concerned with a desperate situation that captures the various problems in the American society.

Keywords: Beat literature, Post war, Freedom, Travels, Existence.

America was marked by political and social unease during the mid-twentieth century period. The beginning of the Cold War increased the growing economic pressure and was accompanied by social revolutions in the form of the Civil Rights Movement. The Beat Movement developed in those circumstances and is a truly literary movement started by a group of authors whose work influenced American culture and politics in post-World War II. Among this group of young writers, Jack Kerouac developed his specific style of writing and as his classic novel *On the Road* was published in 1957, it managed to influence future generations of young

Americans. In his novel *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac refers not only to the American society of the 1950s but also to the current political and social circumstances of America. He describes the general situation of American society and provides an alternative way to approach life. They changed the face of poetry from a conventional writing style to a free verse form, over the second half of the twentieth century. The Beat Generation is considered the precursor to the counterculture of the 1960s. He refuses to be part of the mainstream society and consumer politics that were starting to develop in the 1950s. Throughout his novel, Kerouac expresses his protest against American conformity and consumerism of the 1950s and manages to influence future generations in their view of modern American life.

Jack Kerouac was one of the pioneers of the Beat Movement which developed in the USA throughout the 1950s. After World War II, America faced a series of different changes and revolutions from the Civil Rights Movement to the jazz era. This is the time in which Kerouac wrote his autobiographical novel *On the Road*, describing his adventures while travelling across the United States with his friend Neal Cassady. This paper will discuss the relation between Kerouac's novels and the society of the 1950s. It will take a look into how Kerouac regards American society, economy, politics and general state of the country at the time of his travels, expressing his view of American society, conformity and consumerism of the 1950s. After World War II people in America wanted to live happily, undisturbed by the problems of the outer world. During the 1960s, long-held values and norms of behaviour seemed to break down, particularly among college girls and boys. They separated themselves from their mainstream culture through changes in clothing and lifestyle. It was spearheaded by three men, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William S Burroughs. These three writers challenged the term 'literature' in mid-twentieth century America. Kerouac's *On the Road* sent a thousand teenagers hitchhiking across America in search of 'IT', which explains the

particular moment when you know your identity and everything is certain forever by finding the soul of America. Kerouac's quest to find meaning and truth in life is mainly of a spiritual nature. The novel, *On the Road*, has many journeys undertaken by Sal and Dean who look for 'IT', a moment of epiphany which allows them to accept the core reality of life. Their choice is devoted to a search for 'IT', the happy sense of human existence which was shattered by the Second World War. As Tom Lutz quotes John Clellon Holmes' statement in *Doing Nothing: A History of Loafers, Loungers, Slackers, and Bums in America*, "...the valueless abyss of modern life was unbearable" (226).

The Beat Generation or the Beat Movement was a group of writers and friends who wrote poetry and prose, experimented with drugs, traveled across the country while being involved in alternative forms of sexuality and subsequently had a major impact on the future of American literature. They rejected materialism of the 1950s and instead developed an interest in Eastern religions and experimentation with both literary and physical freedom. Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs are considered to be the three crucial writers of the Beat movement, with Kerouac himself coining the term "beat" which held various meanings, from being "beaten down" with life to "beatific"- being holy in the face of the world. The initial members of Beat Generation, Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs met in the late 1940s at the Columbia University in New York and developed a long-lasting friendship which was later continued in San Francisco among other Beats such as Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, Carl Solomon, Gary Snyder and others.

Jack Kerouac tries to understand the entire human existence through his travels across the American continent. The rootlessness of the immigrant society on American soil drives Kerouac to go on the road in search of 'IT', an ideal existential space that might echo his own self. Among his most famous novels are *On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums*, *Tristessa*,

Subterraneans, *The Big Sur*, *Doctor Sax*, etc. Topics that occupy most of Kerouac's prose are jazz, promiscuity, Buddhism, Catholicism, use of drugs and the eternal search for oneself through travel and new experiences. "The content of his work promotes the Beats' underground lifestyle of sex and drugs, their political beliefs in changing an economically restrained America, and religious beliefs such as Buddhism and Catholicism" (Nicoletti 1). Kerouac died on October 21, 1969 at the age of 47 from internal bleeding caused by his long-term abuse of alcohol. However, the popularity of his works and the influence they represented on the younger generations remains unprecedented. Kerouac has managed to move and inspire young people in America. Hence, Jack Kerouac invites his readers to experience his novels with an open mind to find the true meaning of life.

Kerouac did not find true happiness in the material comforts of life that the 1960s offered. He wanted to get over the feeling of loneliness and confront these modern forces by reinterpreting conventional ideas about the relationship between man and his society. Many Americans continued to live in poverty during the 1950s, particularly the French Canadians and African Americans. Their average earnings were far less than that of their white counterparts. After the war, the retired soldiers needed work. Labour strikes and racial discrimination were prevalent in America. A new era of industry and innovation in technology was in demand. People were ready even for low wages toiling in factories or seeking new clerical jobs. The gates of opportunity for jobs were shut for the minorities in America. In 1960, the minorities were barred entry to top professions by overt discrimination, inequality of schooling and social conventions. People began to look to their future with a new set of expectations and this paved way for the American Dream.

The American society in 1950 restricted the freedom of individuals who wanted liberation and authenticity. People were under a lot of pressure in following the rules set forth.

Kerouac's works echo the history of the United States providing descriptions of the social and cultural forces circulating in the post-war era. In his novel, *The Town and the City*, the protagonist moves toward the city and faces many struggles in his life. The novel focuses on two locations, New York in the early 1940s and the rural small town of Galloway which represents the town of Lowell, Massachusetts, where Kerouac was raised. Kerouac felt lonely and beaten down by the emptiness and loss of the land he once cherished as a boy and therefore adopted the role of "a great remember redeeming life from darkness" (McNally 144). The Martin family in *The Town and the City* navigate the seismic cultural shifts following World War II. The protagonist, Peter Martin, has a great attachment to his childhood town of Galloway and remembers the day he returns home after his studies at the university as follows: "After the first months of his freshman year with its dark campus at night when soft golden light shone in library and lecture-room windows, after his wanderings in New York and Philadelphia, he was now returning to something wild and crude, to deep snow and raw gray..." (120)

The novel, *The Town and the City*, is divided into five parts, the first half is set in the town of Galloway, Massachusetts and the other half after World War II is set in New York City which is mainly Manhattan. The happy home of the Martins and the lives of all family members are thrown into confusion when George's business goes under loss. At the same time, most of the Martin children are entering adulthood and leaving home, and the country itself is undergoing much chaos and change following the bombing of Pearl Harbour. The impact of this mighty disturbance of the era is severe in the lives of the Martin children. The family is forced to sell their house in the town since the family business goes bankrupt and the middle son, Peter, a budding intellectual, joins the Merchant Navy. Through his characters Kerouac expresses the struggles and economic conditions during the postwar period and dramatises his own thoughts between his nostalgia for the family life in Lowell and the irresistible attractions

of New York City. The experiences of the two Martin brothers, Peter and Francis are projections of different aspects of Kerouac which reflect the clash of values within himself.

In the novel, *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac shows the influence of Buddhism in the characters. Buddhism has a long history in the United States, starting with the arrival of immigrants from Asia in the early 1800s. *The Dharma Bums* is set in 1955 and Ray Smith, the novel's protagonist, rides a train from Los Angeles to Santa Barbara, although his final destination is San Francisco. Ray Smith recounts it as follows: "I really believed in the reality of charity and kindness and humility and zeal and neutral tranquillity and wisdom and ecstasy, and I believed that I was an old-time bhikku in modern clothes wandering the world..." (8). He wrote the novel, *On the Road*, to herald a change of consciousness in the country. The protagonist Sal is immersed in jazz and his companion, Dean enumerates the claustrophobic reminders of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. The two main characters are Salvatore "Sal" Paradise, who serves as a narrator, and his friend Dean Moriarty, who represents the novel's final hero, a man of an extreme sense for adventure, a con-man with genuine American charm in eternal search for "the kicks" which the North American continent can provide in the shape of wild jazz nights out, experimentation with drugs, fleeting relationships with women and philosophical talks about the purpose of life and their time in general, all of this while hitchhiking or driving across America. Dean Moriarty is an alter-ego to Neal Cassady, Kerouac's friend at the time, who himself had aspirations towards writing and with his incredible character and life was an inspiration behind many works of the Beats.

The people during his time began to lose their optimistic view of the future. America's image as a worthy living place was eventually crushed by people's realisation due to the disintegration of the political and social systems. The frustrations and concerns caused by the post-war period led people to a search for meaning or at least for some means of distraction.

The beat literature was useful to the people who were frustrated after World War II and to find a meaningful existence in their country. Kerouac's novels thus inspired and reaffirmed new ways of thinking among the Americans. This radical change in the American culture brought many individuals towards the Beat Generation which asserted the authority of the individual. The beat writers wanted a rejection of the mass culture and to live independently so as to have the needs and desires of their individual selves fulfilled.

In the novel, *On the Road*, Kerouac states at different times his discontent with the current fashion of consumerism in America and on more than one occasion he emphasizes the importance of simple life, the search for one's soul instead of wealth. Throughout the novel, there is no evidence of Sal being materialistic in any way. "Everyday I earned approximately a dollar and a half. It was just enough to buy groceries in the evening on the bicycle. The days rolled by. I forgot all about the East all about Dean and Carlo and the bloody road...I was a man of the earth, precisely as I had dreamed I would be, in Paterson" (90). Society is portrayed as having a tight hold on one's individual freedom and creativity, but the Beats had great aspirations and inspired reverence for the self as portrayed in their novels. Kerouac's writings are his heart's desire to express and convey the feelings of one's inner consciousness. He presents an attempt to bring out his position in America and search for a deeper meaning in life.

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