



## Sexual Liberation in the Beat Generation: An Analysis from the Selected Novels of Jack Kerouac

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**Abstract--** This paper is a presentation of the sexual dynamics of the Beat Generation in light of the two novels *On the Road* (1957) and *The Dharma Bums* (1958). Both the novels were written by Jack Kerouac, the most prominent writer of the Beat Generation. The Beat Generation is very much highlighted because of their hippie culture and explicit manner of expressing sexual desires. Also, the Beat Generation explores homosexuality, polygamy, extramarital affair, etc. in the most lucrative way. The liberation that is mentioned dented the explicitness of the writers about the notions and their practices. The novel *On the Road* explores homosexuality, polygamy, one night stands, pedophilia, etc. and *The Dharma Bums* express group sex and correlation of Buddhism and sexuality. Thus, both the novels are upfront notions of sexual liberations of the Beat Generation which are elaborately discussed in the paper through close textual analysis of the novels and qualitative research procedure.

**Keywords --** Beat Generation, sexual, liberation, homosexuality

### I. INTRODUCTION

The Beat Generation emerged as a literary movement by a group of writers and poets whose works projected and created impact on the American culture and politics in the post WW2 times. The authors of the Beat Generation published their works in bulk in the 1950s where standard narrative values were rejected, spiritual quest were prevalent, American and Eastern religions were explored, economic materialism was neglected, human condition was portrayed explicitly, experimentation was done with psychedelic drugs, and sexual liberation was explicitly analyzed. Their approach were very contradictory to state government rules as they were very upfront and interested towards alcohol, drug, homosexuality, music and so on. Homosexuality was not only in the literary works of the Beat Generation but also a part of their activities. Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs were openly gay or bisexual and participated in the sexual rights movements. Jack Kerouac being a prominent personality of the Beat Generation was very much aware of homosexuality and that got reflected in his novels. Kerouac himself had three wives and was good with heterosexual relationship with female partners. No one labeled him as homosexual neither did he claimed to be so, but certain incidents refer to the fact that he had homosexual encounters sometimes. Even in his letters exchanged with Allen Ginsberg, Kerouac was found to question his sexual identity. However, apart from homosexuality, the Beat Generation talked explicitly about human relations and every possible terms of sexual liberation. Sexual relationships with no strings attached, extra marital affairs, bisexual relations, interracial love

affairs etc. were also very prominent in the Beat Generation and the authors have explicitly projected those in their novels.

Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*[1] and *The Dharma Bums*[2] are two novels which explore sexual liberation of the characters and their adventure towards sexual relationships and both the novels were based on real life events of Jack Kerouac's life. Homosexuality, pedophilic desires, polygamy, extramarital affairs etc. had profoundly came up in these novels. In *On the Road*, the plot was based on adventure and friendship of Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise where encounters of Dean were to some extent bisexual. He was into polygamy having three wives and also was into extramarital affairs. His lustfulness towards younger women projected his pedophilic identity. Sal Paradise was not very comfortable in love and was more of no strings attached person. The friendship of Sal and Dean was very close but that was not homosexual rather very much homosocial [1]. On the other hand, *The Dharma Bums* is a novel that tells the story of Ray Smith and his adventures as a hitchhiker, mountaineer, and aspiring Buddha. Japhy Ryder is another important character in the novel who is a friend of Ray and a believer in Buddhism. He was also the person who inspired Ray for climbing. Ray and Japhy's sexual encounters project the sexual examples of Beat Generation. Japhy was very vocal about his sexual desires and he would practice extreme sexuality along with Buddhism. To him girls are playmate and though jokingly, he mentions about performing incest as well [2]. On the other hand, Ray remains in the dilemma of performing sexual liberation or Buddhism. Thus it is seen that Jack

Kerouac, in his novels profoundly discussed about different sexual relationships and affairs which is a key motive of Beat Generation. This paper would explore the sexual propaganda's of Beat Generation from the above mentioned two of Kerouac's novels.

### Background of the Study

Sexual liberation is very much prominent in Beat Generation and amongst its authors. Beat Generation evolved in the post WW2 era when America was going through a cold war with Vietnam. At that period a group of young writers initiated the Beat Generation characterized as a reaction against the monotonous standardized, mass society created by the post war government. The Beats went against the values that were set by the state government and introduce a hippie culture full of drugs, alcohols, explicit sexual encounters, homosexuality, jazz music, romanticism and so on. The core group of Beat Generation authors Herbert Huncke, Ginsberg, Burroughs, Lucien Carr, and Kerouac met in 1944 in and around the Columbia University campus in New York City. Later, in the mid-1950s, the central figures, with the exception of Burroughs and Carr, ended up together in San Francisco, where they met and became friends of figures associated with the San Francisco Renaissance. In the 1960s, elements of the expanding Beat movement were incorporated into the hippie and larger counterculture movements. Neal Cassady, as the driver for Ken Kesey's bus Furthur, was the primary bridge between these two generations. Ginsberg's work also became an integral element of early 1960s hippie culture. Majority of the Beat Generation writers were inclined to homosexuality and bisexuality and the practices had come up evidently in their writings. The most prominent homosexual of the era was Allen Ginsberg who was a self-proclaimed homosexual and came out as such in 1943. Others like William S. Burroughs, Neal Cassady, Lucien Carr were also prone to bisexual relationships. Jack Kerouac himself was never labeled as homosexual but the notion came up in some of his novels which were based on his adventures with his friends of Beat Generation. Though Kerouac was never referred to be homosexual, he was confused about his sexual identity and that came up in his letters exchanged with Allen Ginsberg. Also among the Beats different sexual terms were prevalent. Polygamy, polyandry, extramarital affairs, pedophilic encounters, one night stands or no strings attached type hook ups, group sex; interracial love affairs etc. were very much prominent amongst the Beat Generation.

In Jack Kerouac's novels, like *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*, most of the sexual liberations of the Beat Generations are revealed. Both the novels are based on true life events of Jack Kerouac and thus it showcases the relation among the Beats and their approaches towards the opposite sexes or same sex encounters. In *On the Road* the main two characters Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty actually represent Jack Kerouac himself and his friend Neal Cassady respectively. The characters like Carlo Marx and Old Bull Lee are the replicas of Allen Ginsberg and

William S. Burroughs respectively. The novel holds a great deal of historical significance, showing an underbelly of American culture full of sex, drugs, and lost youth, a culture that received little public attention during the 1940s and '50s. The novel documents a time in America when a post-World War II sensibility began to take over the general consciousness. The polygamy of Dean, his pedophilia, and interest towards Sal showcase explicit sexual liberation in the novel. He was also in sexual intimacy with Carlo Marx and Old Bull Lee. On the other hand, Sal Paradise was more into having sexual relation for pleasure with no responsibilities. He was seemingly attached to Dean's first wife and thus different dynamic of sexual approaches came out from the novel that represents the sexual liberation of Beat Generation. In the novel *The Dharma Bums* Ray Smith is an alias for Kerouac himself; Ray's friends are caricatures of his real-life acquaintances, and his cross-country jaunts, described in explicit detail, occur in certifiably locatable towns and cities spread across the United States. Japhy Ryder is the representation of Gary Snyder, Kerouac's friend, this character in the novel inspired Ray to go for climbing. Ray and Japhy's sexual explicitness and sexual behavior in light to Buddhism is analyzed in accordance to the notions of Beat Generation in the novel. Hence both the novel *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac are upholders of sexual liberation exploring several sexual dynamics of the period.

### Problem Statement

This paper states to explore the sexual liberation of the Beat Generation through the novels *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac. The novels are explicit examples of postmodernity and sexuality and thus this paper will reveal the sexual dynamics of Beat generation through them.

### Research Objectives

The general objective of this paper is to analyze the sexuality of the Beat Generation from the light of the two novels of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*. The specific objectives of the paper are,

1. To explore the sexual dynamics from every sphere of the Beat Generation and Jack Kerouac from the novels mentioned above.
2. To explore notions of homosexuality, polygamy, extramarital affairs, pedophilia, etc. from the novel *On the Road*
3. To evaluate Buddhism and sexuality from the novel *The Dharma Bums*

### Research Questions

The main questions centered to this research are:

1. What are the dynamics of sexual liberation in the Beat generation?
2. How homosexuality, polygamy, extramarital affair, pedophilia etc. are expressed as sexual liberations in *On the Road*?
3. How Buddhism and sexuality clash or co-relate in the Beat Generation sexual practice in light of *The Dharma Bums*?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

*On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums* are two post-modern novels of Beat Generation written by one of the prominent members of the Beats, named Jack Kerouac [1,2]. Sexual liberation has always been a key element of the Beat Generation and that successfully was reflected in the works of the Beat Generation writers. And being called “The King of Beats”, Jack Kerouac has implied the notion very explicitly in his novels. This paper concerns about the sexual liberation of Beat Generation explored through the novels *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums* by Kerouac. Different critics and writers have given their viewpoints regarding the subject matter which are presented here for the clarity of the research and analysis.

Homosexuality was a dominant sexual attribute of the Beat Generation. In the “Beats and Gays” it is found that, “After Second World War, San Francisco slowly became home to both a gay bar subculture and a homophile activist movement, which mostly operated isolation from each other in the 50’s and early 60’s, however, these two groups began to converge” [3]. Also, it is said that “The San Francisco Beats and the gays had a symbiotic relationship. Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg broke through the underground and achieved mythic status with their work respectively, *On the Road* and *Howl*[3]. About Jack Kerouac no justified notion of him being a gay or homosexual is found though there is a rumor of him being involved with Gore Vidal. According to an article from *The Last Bohemians*, “The story of Kerouac and the writer Gore Vidal hooking up in the Village in 1953 is a legend that is off the literary radar. Vidal has been boasting about the event for the last three or four decades, but the poet Allen Ginsberg denied that his friend and Vidal ever had intercourse”[4].

Several explicit sexual liberties were expressed in Kerouac’s *On the Road* and critics have commented about the certain features. According to Madison McAllastor, Many subsequent drafts and rewrites attempted to cover up, or edit out, the homosexuality present in the original. Because of pressure from editors and lawyers, this editing could be viewed as blatant censorship of homosexuality, but in actuality it was far more complicated and complex than that [5].

The relationship or friendship of Sal and Dean has always been questioned by the critics. Kerouac usually erased male homosexuality out of his books and in *On the Road* that is most apparent in the relationships between Sal and Dean, and Dean and Carlo (Stimpson, p. 385) [6]. The relationship between Sal and Dean is at the center of the book. “Much of Beat writing *On the Road*, for example, is about brotherhood” (Stimpson, p. 375) [6]. On the other hand, Aram Saroyan argues, “The beats had to love each other first, before and more importantly than women” (Saroyan, p. 19) [7]. Stimpson again said, “Unable to present homosexuality clearly, Kerouac idealized and de-eroticized a picture of Whitmanesque brotherhood for Dean” (Stimpson, p. 386) [6].

According to Cunnell, the relationship between Dean and Carlo, although secondary in plot, is more predominantly and purely homosexual in the original draft (Cunnell, p. 30) [8]. In the original draft Kerouac wrote in 1947, a passage reads, “Allen Ginsberg was queer in those days, experimenting with himself to the hilt,” (Cunnell, p. 29) [8]. The passage goes on to describe how attracted Cassidy was to Ginsberg at first, and how they disappeared together for two weeks. “This passage was rewritten and in the final version the explicit references to homosexuality were cut, although its sexual ambivalence and indeed homoeroticism remains” (McDowell, p. 415) [9].

In the novel *The Dharma Bums*, sexuality was figured with Buddhism where the characters explored different sexual liberties. “Beat writers were, and still are, famous for advocating sexual liberation and free love, being open about their homosexuality when that was the case and much of their literary production is filled thoroughly with erotic experiences. All of this inevitably clashed, or merged, with the Buddhist faith that most of the Beats came in contact with, for different time spans and definitely with different results. The relationship between Buddhism and sexuality can be observed in Jack Kerouac’s novel *The Dharma Bums*, published in 1958” [10]. It is also said about the novel that “This loathing of Western civilization is what holds Ryder and Smith together and pushes them towards the physical and spiritual adventure they share but, while the first manages to make the most of it, the latter can never come to terms with him [10].

Based on the reviews and analysis of them, the sexual liberation of the Beat Generation is explored from the novels *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums* in this paper. Both the novels have certain features of sexuality in Beat Generation that the scholars have pointed out. But no work has been created analyzing these two novels together in light of the sexual liberation dynamic. Hence this paper aims to discuss in detail.

## III. METHODOLOGY

The research is a qualitative work based on close textual analysis of the novels *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac. Both the novels are based on the Beat Generation themes and cultures. This paper aims to analyze the sexual liberation of Beat Generation from these novels. The primary data were the main text of the novels and the secondary data were assembled by reviewing and analyzing relevant works and literatures that contained informative notions and facts related to the topic. Essays, journals, literary criticisms, and theoretical concepts relevant to this research were taken as references to set the discussion.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Beat Generation is the revolutionary movement that took place after the WW2 introducing a huge change in the history of American literature. The term “Beat” was coined

by Jack Kerouac in 1948. The group of authors who have been part of this movement had certain ideologies and traits that excluded them from every other. Their practice was more of hippie culture and very much contradictory to the government attributes. The Beats emerged with sexuality, jazz, romanticism, drug use, postmodernity, obscenity, etc. which were not acceptable at first for the post war American society. But the Beat Generation was very firm with whatever they were doing and explored the intimate notions of human life. The writers of Beat Generation were so explicit that they reflected all their activities and sexual desires in literary writings and let the readers be exposed to the inherent human emotions. Sexual Liberation has been the most exclusive notion of the Beat Generation. The Beats explored every phase of sexual desires to comprehend and enlighten themselves to the unknown mysteries of sexuality. Homosexuality, polygamy, extramarital affair, pedophilia, one night stands, bisexual relationships etc. were very common for the Beats. They explored each sexual encounter to experience their desires and formulate to what would be the best for them. Jack Kerouac has been "The King of Beats" and this man is suspected to be a homosexual though no confirm evident of being so is revealed. He was supposed to have sexual relations with Neal Cassady, Allen Ginsberg, Gore Vidal etc. people from some literary hints or so. But no one ever claimed his homosexuality rather termed him to be homosocial for being really close to his male friends. Among James Kerouac's friends, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Neal Cassady are well known for homosexuality and bisexuality. In the novels of Kerouac, homosexuality is evidently present revealing the sexual attributes of the Beat Generation. Kerouac wrote roman e clef novels which were based on the real life adventures and incidents of Kerouac and his friends and thus those featured the true actions of the Beats. The Beat Generation was opting to Buddhism as well and they had different personal notions of excluding or correlating sexuality from or with Buddhism. All these features of Beat Generation are reflected in the novels *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*.

In the novel *On the Road*, homosexuality is revealed by the character of Dean Moriarty who was inclined to his friends Carlo Marx, Old Bull Lee and Sal Paradise in a sexual manner. He was into polygamy as well as he had three wives throughout the whole novel. His actions of lustfulness revealed his pedophilic side and the extramarital negotiation as well. Sal on the other hand was inclined to sexual relationships with no strings attached. The characters in *On the Road* fail to distinguish between love and sex, sex and marriage, lust and love. Dean marries or wants to marry every girl he lusts after, while Sal only wants sex if there is a loving and soulful element to it. *On the Road* portrays a sex-without-strings attitude. There is also holiness, or a spiritual element to sex. As it is revealed from the lines, "Dean had dispatched the occupant of the apartment to the kitchen, probably to make coffee, while he proceeded with his love problems, for to him sex was the one and only holy and important thing in life, although he

had to sweat and curse to make a living and so on"(Kerouac, p.14) [1].

Sal had the attribute of thinking of sexual affairs lustfully when he used to see women. "Along about three in the afternoon, after an apple pie and ice cream in a roadside stand, a woman stopped for me in a little coupe. I had a twinge of hard joy as I ran after the car. But she was a middle-aged woman, actually the mother of sons my age, and wanted somebody to help her drive to Iowa"(Kerouac, p. 34) [1].

Sal and Dean both had pedophilia and that were explicit in the novel. "There were the most beautiful bebies of girls everywhere I looked in Des Moines that afternoon - they were coming home from high school - but I had no time now for thoughts like that and promised myself a ball in Denver...So I rushed past the pretty girls, and the prettiest girls in the world live in Des MoinesKerouac, p.45) [1].

Also, Sal sees beauty and sex in virtually every woman he meets. "Incidentally, a very beautiful Colorado gal shook me that cream; she was all smiles too; I was grateful, it made up for last night. I said to myself, Wow! What'll *Denver* be like?" (Kerouac, p. 115) [1]. So it is seen that sexual approaches of Beat Generation is very explicit and out of boundaries.

In the novel *The Dharma Bums*, Buddhism and sexuality are correlated and analyzed. Ray Smith and Japhy Ryder both were into Buddhism but as Japhy was easy with sexuality, Ray was uncomfortable in mixing sexuality with Buddhism in practice. Throughout the book there are several hints of the duality that troubles Smith, and the difficulty he encounters in trying to reconcile his religious side with his sexual impulses. He sees sexuality as a hindrance to faith and a source of unhappiness, and he explains having "gone through an entire year of celibacy based on my feeling that lust was the direct cause of birth which was the direct cause of suffering and death and I had really no lie come to a point where I regarded lust as offensive and even cruel. "Pretty girls make graves," was my saying" (Kerouac, p.31) [2].

Buddhist expert Barbara O' Brien, in her article What Buddhism Teaches About Sexual Morality, proposes more of a modern interpretation, arguing that "The Second noble truth teaches that the cause of suffering is craving or thirst. This doesn't mean cravings should be repressed or denied. Instead, in Buddhist practice we acknowledge our passions and learn to see they are empty, so they no longer control us. This is true for hate, greed and other emotions. Sexual desire is no different" [11]. This seems more compatible with Japhy Ryder's views. He is much more confident than Smith, he is comfortable with expressing his sexuality, and even explicitly linking it to religion. In chapter five of *The Dharma Bums*, a girl named Princess wants to join the group through some sort of sexual initiation – "she wanted to be a big Buddhist like Japhy and being a girl the only way she could express it was this way" (Kerouac, p. 31) [2]

– and “Japhy wasn’t at all nervous and embarrassed and just sat there in perfect form just as he was supposed to do” (Kerouac, p. 30) [2]. He explains that “This is what they do in the temples of Tibet. It’s a holy ceremony, it’s done just like this in front of chanting priests. People pray and recite Om Mani Pahdme Hum, which means Amen the Thunderbolt in the Dark Void. I’m the thunderbolt and Princess is the dark void, you see” (Kerouac, p.30) [2]. This is not just something that Ryder is completely making up to legitimate his actions. Thus a correlation with Buddhism and sexuality is featured in the novel perfectly.

### Analysis

Beat Generation is the preacher of Sexual Liberty and explicitness. Jack Kerouac and his friends are living notions of these attributes. Sexual explicitness has been vibrant in their activities and writings throughout. Jack Kerouac was never confirmed to be a homosexual person but some of the relations with his friends and literary hints term him to be bisexual. Bisexual or not, he projected the notions of sexual implicitness in his novels very profoundly. In the novel *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums* the author showed different dynamics of sexual liberation. He showed the phases of homosexuality of his friends, the pedophilia and lustfulness he and his friend went through, his bromance, and also him hitting the wife of his friend in an extramarital angle. He also showed the closeness of Beat Generation to Buddhism and the correlation of Buddhism with sexuality.

In the novel *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac showed homosexuality his friend Neal Cassady through the character of Dean Moriarty. His sexual angles were also revealed by the character of Sal Paradise. They were entangled in between homosexual relations, bisexual habits, extramarital affairs, pedophilia, lust and one night stands. Their nature of sexuality severed all the boundaries. Polygamy was practiced by Dean as he had three wives in total in the novel. Sal was seen to imitate Deans sexual attributed to explore his intentions. Dean on the other hand, is seen to demean the ladies in his life into gender roles. Their friendship also had a homosexual angle to see for the readers and all in all it was a novel full of sexual dynamics. But, *On the Road*’s homoeroticism doesn’t affirm homosexuality or bisexuality as much as it shores up the narrator’s and main character’s prerogatives, as Beat but ultimately straight white males, to go where they want and fuck who they want. But it’s all in the service of their freedom, not ours. Being queer and reading *On the Road* can be like that drunken one-night stand with a straight boy who won’t make eye contact with you after.

In the novel *The Dharma Bums*, Buddhism is correlated with sexuality and the features of Buddhism are elaborated assuring the sexuality as an innocent part of it. There were group sex and lavish encounters of sexual negotiations, but Buddhism was perpetuated in the feature accordingly. Ray Smiths awkwardness and Japhy’s upfront debate evocated the sexual liberty of Beat Generation in the novel. Thus it is seen that both the novels *On the Road* and *The Dharma*

*Bums* are justified examples of sexual liberty of the Beat Generation.

### V. CONCLUSION

The Beat generation is the hippie generation of 1960s in America. Their attributes and notions were pretty much different than other literary groups or movements. They advocated personal release, purification, and illumination through the heightened sensory awareness that might be induced by drugs, jazz, sex, or the disciplines of Zen Buddhism. The Beats and their advocates found the joylessness and purposelessness of modern society sufficient justification for both withdrawal and protest. Sexuality or sexual liberation is the most vibrant aspect of their culture. Beats had the utmost tendencies of being homosexual, polygamous, bisexual, pedophilic, lustful, and sexual manic and so on. Their natures of sexuality are explored through the roman e clefs or other literary works. Jack Kerouac is the most prominent writer of the beats and his works profoundly expressed the versatile sexuality in them. In the novels *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*, the author explicitly pictured the sexual practices he and his friends had.

*On the Road* projected the homosexuality, extramarital affairs, pedophilia, bisexual relations, no strings attached relations, polygamy and so on. The characters like Dean Moriarty, Sal Paradise, Carlo Marx, Old Bull Lee etc. reflected the real life Neal Cassady, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, respectively and their relation with each other. They have been in homosexual terms and were involved with each other’s wives in group sex or similar encounters. Their real life explicitness to love and sex has been expressed in the novel through lust, sexual intercourse or experiments of different sexual affairs. All their dynamics to sexuality revealed the actual picture of sexual liberation of the Beat Generation. On the other hand, the practice of Buddhism was prevalent amongst the Beats. Though some people like Ray Smith from *The Dharma Bums* were incapable to relate Buddhism with sexuality, another character from the novel Japhy Ryder could practice both in explicit manner. In the novel it is showed how Buddhism and Sexuality was collaborated by the Beat Generation to make that a part of their sexual liberation.

Thus, sexual liberation in the Beat Generation is the explicit portrayal of homosexuality, polygamy, extramarital affairs, one-night stands, pedophilia, and correlating Buddhism with sexuality. All these aspects were profoundly presented by Jack Kerouac in the roman e clefs *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*. Through these novels, Kerouac revealed his life adventures and the true aspects of sexual dynamics of the Beat Generation.

### COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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