

# ***The Analysis of the Social Origin for the death of subject in Allen Ginsberg's Howl through the Cultural turn of Fredric Jameson***

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**Abstract:** The post-modernist creations after World War Two were always argumentative. The beats generation such like Allen Ginsberg who sparked ideas but lost in the chaotic social order at the same time during this post-war period, which trigger the exploration of the subjectivity in their works. Based on the claim in Jameson's theory the cultural turn, Allen Ginsberg and his generation was in a situation of death of subject which only call for the common social utopia but ignore the individualistic sense. Under this framework, this essay discusses the origins of the death of subject in Allen Ginsberg's Howl by examining the impact of technology and industrial revolution as well as the chaotic social order of consumer society after WWII. It is clear that death of subject existed in the Howl due to multiple factors of pressures of society, but his work is still remarkable literary creation with strong personal style especially in terms of emotional expression.

**Key words:** Allen Ginsberg, Howl, World War two, post-modernist.

## **1. Introduction**

Allen Ginsberg is one of the representative poets in the wave of Beats generation. Under the context of traumatized society after WWII, as one member of the Beats generation, he was inspired to create the long poem Howl as the symbol to express the emotion of regret and hopelessness by describing the most realistic US social phenomenon after WWII. In Jameson's theory the cultural turn, the claim for death of subject described the general trend of losing individualistic creations among post-modernists. Allen's work, directly correspond to the idea of Jameson Fredrick in his theory the cultural turn, which suggest that the death of subject was almost impossible to avoid in the wave of post-modernist world and existed in the Howl as well.

Scholars have investigated the phenomenon of death of subject itself in numerous Aspects. There were insights who evaluate as the undeniable development of the literary history that the flourishing of individualism was already reached a peak in the era of modernist and no longer able to be exceed [1]. Claims of the reason of death of subject after the war also targeted on the problem of education among the lower classes and the destruction of the minds of people [1]. Moreover, the inadequate functioning of the new intention of creation under the common pursuit of the socialist utopia was also brought up as the reason to lose the uniqueness in post-modernist creation [2]. However, the psychoanalysis of the Beats generations and the origin of the inability to perform new stylish works were rarely discussed. As a result, this essay will focus on the influence of consumer society after

WWII that posted ideological and psychological effect on the common people, which ultimately lead to a common call of identity in post-modernist world such as Allen Ginsberg's Howl.

To explore how Allen Ginsberg's work Howl was influenced by the society so that actually fit into the framework of Jameson's theory of death of subject, there will be three sections in the essay. The first section will be the discussion of impact on minds of people when they stepped into post-industrial era. By showing the effect of destruction of old social order and impression of the world, this section will focus on how this post ideological impairment on beats generation and how this led to the death of subject. The second section will focus on the war trauma and psychological disorientation of people after WWII. By analyzing the cognitive distortion of the society, this section will display how Howl was a reactionary product to this social chaos which therefore reduce the individualistic subjectivity. In section three, there will be a reevaluation of Allen Ginsberg and his own in terms of artistic expression and characteristics of writing as the reflection to whether it is the loss of subjectivity in every way.

## **2. The Impact of the Post-Industrial Era**

One possible reason that Howl was corresponding to the critique of claim of death of subject in Jameson's the cultural turn is the mechanized and fully commercialized society. The establishment of consumer society was the beginning of explosion of information when it comes to the postindustrial era, this was the action of diminishment of older knowledge system and the reliability of past [3]. The new social order and social structure built up new cities with the swirl lives in the cities with no clear position or demands to act as humanity, which leave the society into a state of death of subjectivity that Jameson claimed in works such as Howl. The disorientation of this new society can be divided into two parts, which are the commercialization of society and the diminishment of the old order and system of cognition. People felt the change of the society and social norms but still unable to adapt to it as a new version of social order. As a result, seeking for the new norm and the most appropriate way of living became the most essential goal for this generation of people, which was the reason that people were aiming for the common utopia at this point.

On the way to seek the appropriate way of living, beats generations were described as a generation that was inspired and paralyzed with the great amount of passion to find the answer about their true future in cold consumer society that is lack of humane perceptions. Their marginalized actions were the symbols to reveal the individual value of society, but also simultaneously grasped a group of post-modernist authors to call for the reflection, while Allen Ginsberg's Howl was one of the works that tend to be reflective in the wave of beats generation but regretful for the devastated and chaotic social reality.

### **2.1. The Social Context in Line with the Loss of Subjectivity**

Jameson was suggesting that this phenomenon as the death of subject in his theory of the cultural turn, offering insight that in response to society, people begin to pursue a common utopia to raise up the awareness of lives and realization of the position as well as identity in the society [4]. His critique was based on how consumer society exaggerate desire for people to seek for the meaning of life, which consequently rose up the wave of Identity doctrine in general and representative way. In another word, in this commercialized and transitioning period of the capitalist world under this context of consumer society, there is no existence of individuality for subjects since no one is privileged than another, and the essential target population of description is the mainstream of society rather than the voice of individual subject. In this way, it was a natural tendency for people to lean on the common pursuit and the purpose of creation in post-modernist world due the pressures from society.

One could argue that identity groups are themselves a development away from individualism toward group-based subjectivities. Interestingly, many of the postmodernist critiques of capitalism that people find in postmodernist fiction and film tend not to turn to a collectivist or socialist utopia that is desirable for the most people in the society, but rather lament the damaging effects on identities or unique subjectivities, and in that sense that might be a Jameson explanation of how some postmodernist art is grappling with the death of the subject.

## **2.2. The Feeling of Insecurity and Disorientation of the Society**

The loss of orientation as human subject resulted by this feeling of insecurity and lacking stability was fully demonstrated by the work of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* [3]. The element of technology always existed in the society that Allen Ginsberg was trying to describe and often appears in a cold, negative and inhumane way. At the beginning of the poetry, there was a picture of people "angel headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night" [5]. Allen portrait a clear contradiction of wonderful and delicate wishes and the painful and cold reality. This sharp contrast serves as the implication to demonstrate that there is a gap between the previous society without much illumination of technological development and the new society that is heavily rely on the usage of technology.

The playful characters of "hipsters" were "angel headed" to attempt to make the connection of nature [5].

There is a strong wish to embrace the old society in a more natural way, which is almost a form of escapism. However, the source of lights was not the nature that people were able to be appreciated, but the "machinery" that would never be able to give a response to meet the psychological needs of people who were in a state of madness [5]. The consequent actions of people proved that the coldness of technology under the capitalistic structure of society didn't leave people any place to stay especially for ones who still stay in the transition period and not ready for the technological functioning society. People were "screaming" on the street, "blocking" the eyes and the month with the sense of unacceptance and refuse to make connections with others [ 5]. This is the point that the human aspect of the society started to lose control and finally lead to the inability to think or react in an individual way.

The assembly of technology in this society was never a sign of delightful future development but more likely to be the source of fear since people started to question the core of humanity and their position in the society. As a result, "starry dynamo" consisted with machines here is not a sign of hope and even ironically destroy the ability to percept of hope [5]. It was clear that humane aspect of people begun to fade away and their own consciousness were lost in the jungle of industry.

## **2.3. The Deprivation of Humanistic Perception and New Creativity**

The similar effect of the city glow on distorted and loosing mental state progressed with the layout of the poetry. At the middle part of the *Howl*, the craziness of life of people were demonstrate with their drunkenness and sexual behaviors without any limitation. People "jumped in limousine" and drive the car to across the city, seeking for "jazz or sex or soup" to meet their raw desires [5]. They didn't control their behaviors with a single rule since the society didn't offer them a humane and moral standard at the time. The need of guidance during this period of time was almost overlooked by the society with the overlooking of importance of education. The flourishment of the society became the only and most important aim for the society, which demonstrate how capitalist system is able to bring a certain level of coldness into a society. It is able to recognize "jazz" as the need for social interactions and understandings, "sex" as the raw sexual desire that was exposed without any covers, and "soup" as the desires for food as the essential need of animal. Three aspects of desires all are

fundamental to human beings but at the same time became unable to be found in the consumer society for young people. Basically, the basic needs as a human being were either not able to achieve or become overloaded in the sense that reach a state of disturbance at the moment [6].

Although there might be a diversity of fresh information flowed into the society with the flourishing of capitalism, the question about what the purpose of living is became hard to answer. As a result, the hierarchy of spiritual perceptions and basic needs in the mind of people became chaotic, which is the reason for the exposure of most essential and basic desires. At this point, those unique features of higher levels ability of thinking as human beings were already no longer existed, which was the death of subjectivity as a common phenomenon in the society. In this way, the subjects themselves in the consumer society shares common features and lacking the ability to find the uniqueness of human being and unable to be evaluated in the individualistic sense.

### **3. The Psychological Impacts of the War on People**

Another part of reason for the loss of individualistic sense as Jameson pointed out as the death of subject in society and directly reflected in the *Howl* was the traumatized social orders after World War two. After the struggling of a disaster for humanity that costed numerous lives, the psychological harms of people were as much as the economic shortage, especially those who were in the lower classes [6]. The arm race leaded to the less concern about humanistic spirits, and at the same time, the expectation for the future among the people were destroyed.

In this way, every individual was facing the challenge to get rid of the war impact in the society, and the influence of the post-war world also exerted key effects on members in the post-modernist that made writers such like Allen Ginsberg unable to portrait their personal idea but express the social issues prior than the individual subjective. Basically, the post-war issues reached a height in the sense that the society cannot fertilize the spontaneous generation of the individualistic way. As a result, it was easy to let the common call of the society to outweigh the individual idea, leading to the death of subject.

#### **3.1. The Inability to Think Beyond the Society in Traumatized Social Orders**

World War two was the historical event that largely influenced North American post-modernist world. With the doubts of identities and social orders under the framework of capitalist influence, the traumatized and consumeristic society was easily becoming illusory to people, which is especially true for younger generations, and that was the formation of well-known beats generation.

Allen Ginsberg frequently brought up war in the *Howl*, and often associate it with violence and the state of loss of control. At the first section of the poem, there was the imagination of being “scholars of war” before the smashing and destruction of the academics, and exaggerated status of “FBI” who call for the peace. All of those were demonstration that although the WWII was over, but the traumas that the war brought to the society always existed in the heart of people. Moreover, based on the context of the history, although there was a peace at an international level, the stability and the sense of harmony was never really consistent in American society. Those were bedding for the hysterical call of people and their reactionary behaviors [5]. The most obvious part existed in section three of the poem, talking about “refugees”, “bombs” and everything that were undermining the humanity during the WWII [5]. Allen Ginsberg portrait a picture that people were still unable to recovery from the war, and more importantly, there was no strong realization to fix the mental state of people. As a result, the shadows of the war were always persisting in the society and finally result a sensory overload for those who cannot release the pain from the war [7].

There was always a tone of irony and imply the relationship of the war and the prevalence of physical indulgence and mental disorder. Although Allen didn’t point out the diminishment of hope

and faith after the war, but there was a clear relationship between the chaos in the society and the war experiences. Like the expression of “coughing” of the United States that made people unable to sleep, the traumas of war and the post-war society became the problem that was bigger than war itself [5]. The society was “sick” in a very serious sense, but the country itself didn’t realize the severity of effect of this post-war sickness to the general public [5]. Consequently, the imbalance of life became the result of most people. This symptom was both common and unable to be separate from one individual to another in the society, and this common difficulty result the inability to step out of the limitation of era, leading to the disappearance of creativity.

### **3.2. Ideological Deviation in the Chaotic Social Composition**

By offering the hint of psychological and ideological destruction of WWII, Allen Ginsberg then started to explain the loss of perception of human soul in human society as another way that could be the reason of death of subject [8]. The variety of “drugs” were described in the poem, and the direct and fearless “sex” occurred on every occasion. Moreover, “jazz” and “hipsters” existed with “drink” in common life of people [5]. The mind of people was constantly in a state of chaos and loss of control. Those chemical and physical stimuli limited people’s ability of thinking since they didn’t even have a clear mind. There are twofold impacts of this. First of all, the problem became to serve that must be addressed in the maximal volume, and it was clear that the strategy of addressing for Beats generation was literary expression. Moreover, the poet himself might also experience this state of madness when he created literary works, so that undermine the expression of individualistic well-being and the desire to voice out subjectively.

The physical paralysis trapped the soul and offered people a way of escapism in the society, inhibiting their further realization as the individual human subject. And the origin of the limitation of soul was originated from the WWII [2]. It was known that drugs and mass production of entertainment industry were both the effect of war. Retired soldiers brought pain from the battlefield and the way of blocking pains back to the homeland, which directly met the needs of the general publics. In order to describe the state of people, there was no clear flow of subject and the qualities of subject inside of the Howl. The will of society and the state of people in that consumer society were unable to handle the challenge of life, so the description of representation of a group of people that call for the solution of society became the ultimate pursuit. It outweighs the wish of individualistic expressions, leading to the death of mental source of creativity.

## **4. The Rise of Identitarianism As A New Form Of Creativity**

However, the claim of death of subject not only implies the death of the new creativity, but also lack of sensibility as the modernist writer to establish new artistic styles. In Howl, although the choice of subject and the variability of aim as finding and reflecting about the social identity, it’s not necessarily the not a representation of the growth of a new style.

### **4.1. The Prominent and Personal Style of Artistic Creation**

Artistically speaking, Allen Ginsberg opened up a brand-new way of emotional expression. His usage of long sentences with no pauses of syllabus and intervals can often offer the reader great linguistic impact. As Raskin mentioned, his ability of making description of madness of society was never being seem before [2]. Moreover, the repetition with strong but mixed emotions was also a brand-new way to make reflection of the social phenomenon based on the emotional arousals. Unlike most modernist creations, his uniqueness of style was actually portrayed in this exhausted way that almost like screaming towards the society. Allen Ginsberg was the observer who feel regretful about mental state of people in the society as him mentioned he “saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by



madness” in the beginning of the section one of Howl, but at the same time, the participant in this chaotic social storm as one who also produced his work in a state of despair and hopeless [5].

#### 4.2. The Expressive Emotional Arousal of the Poetry

The Double identity of Allen Ginsberg and his generation, in another word, beats generations, offered a new perspective and insight to express their emotions and complete the most realistic picture of consumer society [8]. As a result, at some extent, the generation of Identity doctrine was the new creation that was unique for beats generation and Allen Ginsberg who is one member of them. [9] This flow of emotions was unique and actually a new wave of expression that most modernist writers didn't achieve since most of them only witness the social phenomenon but was not one part of the member of the social phenomenon who was desperately calling for the solution. In this way, this is still a powerful way of individual demonstration even though the central idea of expression might not be unique in the society [10].

#### 5. Conclusion

Generally speaking, the death of subject existed in Allen Ginsberg's Howl, but it was neither a complete follow-up of the old wave of modernism nor the form of literature that is lack of fresh creativity. Allen Ginsberg himself, as the experiencer and observer at the same time, witnessed the fall of a generation by depriving the most crucial part of the humanity inside of humanity. The social structure of the consumer society under the influence of capitalist system brought the emphasizing of technological and economic development rather than the humane perception of the social phenomenon, while the traumatized society after the WWII even enhance the psychological disturbance of this generation of people.

As a result, the death of subject as the common trend in the post-modernist world in forms of the unity of intention of creation was reasonable. Moreover, the coexistence of the artistic creativity and the loss of the willingness to express individualism was also a reactionary interaction with the pressures from the social changes. Admittedly, although Allen Ginsberg targets his work to call for social solutions and focus on the awakening of human soul in the consumer society, his style of writing was still able to be categorized and distinguished among the post-modernist writers after WWII. However, the complexity of newly established consumer society and commercialization of society contribute to the distortion of mental state of people while the destruction of hope and faith after the war also brought the strong feeling of insecurity. Both reasons made up the condition that was almost impossible to generate a breakthrough of literary creation in the post-modernist world, leading to the death of subject as the common situation that also appeared in Allen Ginsberg's Howl.

Although there was a common call that was in line with the society rather than individualistic idealism in the Howl, the value of the call was even more than individualism. Through the unique artistic expression and strong emotional bond, Allen Ginsberg was able to explore the future of position and perception for a generation of people by integrating social, war, and humane elements in the poetry. In extension, by analyzing the relationship between the death of subject in the Howl and the complexity of social reality after the war, it was able to see how a generation of people were shaped by the society. And even more, the impact of war and change of structure of society on the ordinary people through the echoing of the literature creation.

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