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ON

**LANGUAGE, LITERATURE,
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**AN ARTICLE ON ART OR AVANT - GARDE - A READING OF JACK
KEROUAC'S ON THE ROAD**

N. KALAISELVI

Assistant Professor of English, Islamiah women's Arts & Science College,
Vaniyambadi - 635752

The main aim of this paper is to analyze the novel *On the Road* as a piece of literature. Detailed analysis has been done to understand the inherent value of the text. The novel is merely considered as a travelogue by the critics but the aim of this analysis is to look at the text from a different perspective to appreciate the innate value of the text during the post-war period. The struggle between marginal and mainstream literature found importance. With it began a unique period in literary and cultural history that challenged the humanistic grounds on which American Literature is based. Many young writers who belonged to the post-war period started to write about the destruction of the war. Especially in America, writers of the postwar period started to celebrate the freedom of marginality particularly in the light of growing materialism and technological progress. In their novels, outcasts of society such as criminals, suicides, drunkards found sympathetic treatment. Attention was focused on their problems and society was seen as responsible for their worse conditions. In their novels, they wrote about drug use, obsessive wandering and violence that opposed mainstream culture and narrative. These writings are called *Underground Writings*.

The *Underground Writings* inspired many because it worked towards self-liberation and opposed all moral codes and conditions through which they wanted to lead a new liberated life, a life without any rules and restrictions. The powerlessness of the individual in this vast and complex society is a major theme in these writings. These *Underground Writings* resisted the technological, military, industrial and political forces and asserted the human potential in desperate acts of freedom.

The *Underground Writers* wrote about the hidden world provided an insight into the secret world of forbidden drugs. These writers wanted to establish an alternative community that many felt had been destroyed by the Second World War. These narratives reflected their attempts to recover a loss of potential or to channelize their energies into alternative social and to abandon its constraints in order to embrace new experiences.

One of the important of these underground writings is the *Beat Movement*. The important aspect of the *Beat Movement* is that it championed all forms of social, sexual and spiritual liberation. It celebrated risk and individuality and opposed materialistic society and its established orders.

The *Beat Generation* not only rejected the established order, but also insisted people to turn to the distant past and seek values that were radical and primitive. According to *Beats*, the traditional forms were not adequate to express post-war America. For them the immediate experience is superior to derivative experience. They believed that America had become a spiritual wasteland, a land of suppression and repression so certain measures were needed to overcome the restrictions placed on the individual. They believed that the individuality was not to be found in corporate society or middle class suburban but must be found in the outcast, marginal people, thieves and dropouts.

Kerouac, Jack "On the road", Times Mirror; New American Library, 1957.

Their main project was to project the world of outcasts in the most intimate detail. Such intimate identification with the outcast of society was not something that other artists could do. Among the artistic group with which they connected the *Beats* were unique establishing the importance of a radical lifestyle as one element in the tradition of the

individual spirit. The Beat Writers suggested that in a world characterized by control systems, individuals could still matter. For the Beats the individuals were very important and they gave importance to individuality in most of their writings.

Beat Literature is best represented by the works of novelists like Jack Kerouac who is considered as "King of Beats". Jack Kerouac is the chief literary figure of the Beat Movement because he is the spokesperson of the movement. He coined the word "beat" to describe the then beaten down condition of the people. What became apparent in all Beat writings was the belief that the alternative community of like-minded souls who felt alienated from mainstream society should come together to fight against the existing norms. All Beat Writings deal with the search of liberation and affirmation of life. These writes sought a revolution of the soul a cultural revival, not a political revival.

Most of the Beat novels were autobiographical in character, innovative in prose style and the author's personal experiences are transferred into hero's experiences of the novel. They were not interested in literary forms and had an extraordinary attraction for the nature of language in literary art and quality of expression to be expressed like Coleridge and Wordsworth, the Beats promoted the use of language of ordinary men.

On the Road is not only the most popular novel by Jack Kerouac but also the best known and widely read novel of the Beat Generation. The novel is based on cross-country trips that Kerouac took during the late 1940's with his friend Neal Cassady. This novel was published in 1957. Many critics have analysed *On the Road* as "Road Literature" or "Travelogue". Even though it has some features of a travelogue it cannot be simply considered as a travelogue or Road Literature. In addition to this it is a best example for Kerouac's use of "Spontaneous Prose Method", one can also analyse this novel as an "Episodic Tale". It can be analyzed by using "Part and Whole Technique" and also by using Poe's theory of "The Philosophy of Composition".

The main theme of the novel is the search for identity and the belief on the road. The act of going on the road is a kind of protest, turning against society and its conventional moral codes. This turning against society is a result of the Second World War. The World War psychologically affected the youth and they wanted to identify themselves somewhere, somehow. This is reflected in Kerouac's novels. The search for self and individuality is the major theme in most of his novels.

French, Warron, "Jack Kerouac", Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986.

The Travel Literature is very subjective in nature because it includes personal thoughts with facts about the particular place, recommendations for places, amusing experiences and misadventures of the author. Many critics regarded *On the Road* as a travelogue since it has some of the features of Travel Literature.

Travel Literature must not be confused with travel guides. Travel guides usually give information about a particular country, city or region. Almost after fifty years of publication of *On the Road*, a re-reading of the novel is necessary, since in the recent review of *Time* magazine, *On the Road* makes a place in all time 100 top novels list. In Volume 61 of *Contemporary Literary Criticism* Frederick Feied states that, "In a sense, *On the Road* is a twentieth-century restatement of *The Pilgrims Progress*. Sal and Dean are on the road, and the road is their life. Like Christian and Faithful their goal is celestial city...."

Like *The Pilgrims Progress* which was written by John Bunyan which deals with the journey of Christian, *On the Road* also deals with the journey of Dean and Sal. They undertake this journey in search of self and identity. But *On the Road* is considered as a travelogue since it is written by bohemian author. Kerouac is an underestimated writer since he belongs to a group called the Beat Movement, which is considered as a rebellious movement.

Due to these reasons critics rejected *On the Road* as a travelogue without understanding the value of the author and the novel. Many failed to understand that Kerouac

mirrors American life and he criticizes the middle class values in his novel. They never realised that it is not someone's story but their own story. Since it makes a place among the hundred top novels critics began to analyze the deeper relevance and implication of the text. Now, he is widely recognized as an important contributor to American literature. So a re-reading of the novel is necessary in order to prove that it is not merely a travelogue. So a re-reading of the novel is necessary in order to prove that it is not merely a travelogue. So a re-reading of the novel is necessary in order to prove that it is not merely a travelogue.

Hilfer, Tony, "American Fiction since 1940", London: Longman, 1992.

The novel is divided into five parts. Sal and Dean play a major in the novel. The important aspects of the first part of the novel are the search for identity and the belief in the West. This novel reflects the American's fascination with road travel. This novel reflects their belief in the West, which appears as a 'Promising Land'. In the second part Sal simply responds to Dean's invitation to travel. At the end of each trip Dean does not grow in the way Sal does. In the third part Sal gains the vision about life and it dominates the fourth part.

Many critics view *On the Road* as a travelogue because it has some of the features of a travelogue. The description of landscape, the challenges faced by Dean and Sal, the conditions of toads, the speed, miles they covered and time- everything is carefully described by Kerouac which is a distinct feature of the Beat Movement. Kerouac is at his best in describing, smells, sounds, sights and his eye misses very little and his ears are acute to every sound. They fail to understand the distinct features of *On the Road* and the deeper implications of the text.

Many critics reject this method as pointless, formless. For him spontaneity is a quality of feeling and not of writing. It is a matter of saying whatever comes to one's mind in any order one feels like saying it. The right words are not important but the first word. A word from 'life' rather than 'literature', a word from 'heart' rather than 'brain'.

On the Road is a best example, which depicts the loss of American values. This book is Kerouac's complaint against the loss of old America, which is celebrated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman and Thomas Wolfe.

Travelling on the road is both escaping from the conventional society and nature. Kerouac felt that traditional forms are not adequate to express the decayed condition of post-war America. Depressed by the Second World War and the resulting established system they wanted to escape from society and wanted to settle down somewhere. They found travelling as an escape from the established order and a way to depress their soul to settle somewhere. Therefore, in this novel, Sal and Dean travel all over America to find a place to settle. This reflects their quest for liberty and individuality. Since the novel represents the true picture of post-war America and their fascination for travel it cannot not be merely treated as a travelogue.

Home in Missoula,

Home in Truckee,

Ain't no Home for me. (*On the Road*, p-98)

Sal never finds his place and identity in this novel. His search continues in the novel. He achieves nothing. In reality, this search of Sal for identity is the search of Kerouac. It is not only the search of Kerouac but it is the search of post-war youth of America. This search for identity and self is there in every novel of Kerouac.

In *On the Road* the road acts as a symbol of search for Sal Paradise. The modes may be different but the search is there in every novel. When the novel was published thousands of the people believed that it was their story and *On the Road* was their book. In this novel Kerouac mirrors the life of the people of post-war America so it cannot be rejected as a travelogue. So the re-reading of the novel is necessary to understand the relevance of the text. The re-reading is also necessary to understand the importance of Kerouac as a writer and the text as an American classic.

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Kerouac works were mainly rejected by the critics as formless, pointless and mere autobiographical ramblings. The prejudice about the Beat movement led critics to reject the works of Jack Kerouac without understanding its deeper aspects. *On the Road* more than any other work of Jack Kerouac represents the most vivid picture of post-war America. This work brought out values and life-style of post-war youth. While it was published, it triggered the imagination of many young people and they realized that it was their story. But at the same time they failed to realize that Kerouac just mirrored the true picture of their society in the novel. Another reason for its rejection may be because he broke all the conventional forms of writing and presented the real picture of American society. So it is hard for the critics to digest this reality since everyone believed that America is a civilized land.

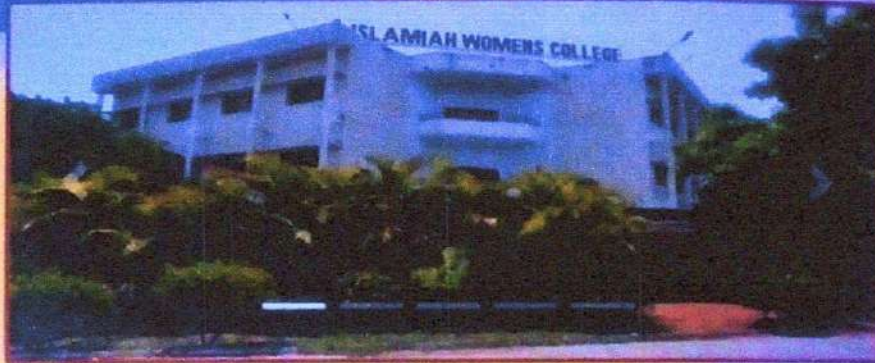
The re-reading of the novel reveals the deeper values in the novel. It is a kind of research which seems to have created a space where writers like Jack Kerouac who was earlier adored of being wild and sensational and chastised for being pointless and formless are now being read with more seriousness. Academic interest and research on a writer of such a magnitude like Jack Kerouac will only sensitize individuals to literature and literary values.

He definitely deserves a scholarly treatment. He is not merely the "King of Beat Generation" he is of all times. Beat Writers not only reflected the picture of post-war America, they reflected the condition of America in their works, they celebrated nature and the life of common man. So in the post-global world there is loss of values, morals and aesthetic pleasure. So in the post-global world, reading the works of Beat Writers with an understanding of their intrinsic worth is needed to fill the space.

Kennedy, Coral, "Jack Kerouac" Modern American Literature 2 (1999): 125- 128

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