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## The Trial of Ginsberg's *Howl* and the Politics of State Censorship in the United States

**Amritendu Ghosal**

Research Scholar  
Department of English  
Banaras Hindu University  
Varanasi

A work of art can exist at the fringe of a society, criticizing its mainstream discourse. This makes art important for through it, manifests the expression of worldviews that seem unusual, though authentic. But this creates a problem for the dominant ideology of the society in maintaining the status- quo of power relations as through art and poetry the vindication of the worldviews of the marginalized can be expressed. There is a long tradition of censorship of art and literature in the America, a tradition that has tried to include Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg within itself. This paper attempts to understand in the light of materialism, the relationship between the politics of censorship and the need of the non-progressive state policies to keep a check on alternative sexualities as attempts of the state to silence artworks that challenge the dominant discourse of power-relations in the society.

Apart from the psychological tendency of being suspicious of things that are different from one's own, there is an angle of materialism in the desire of censoring works of art. In the year 1956 when *Howl and Other Poems* was published, the reception of the volume by the establishment of the American state was not entirely unexpected. The copies of the book were swiftly confiscated from the shelves of the City Lights bookstore in San Francisco and a case of obscenity was filed against the publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti. History was repeating itself with yet another poet in the United States, the previous one being Walt Whitman, whose *Leaves of Grass* was similarly rejected by the Boston District Authority. The charges were similar in both the cases: explicit treatment of sexual acts and homosexuality. Though there was a case against Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* by the 'people', the book was eventually declared not obscene by the judge Clayton Horn. Fortunately, both the volumes, *Leaves of Grass* and *Howl and Other Poems* saw the light of the day and established their respective authors as rather influential poets and counter-culture thinkers of the world. At this point though, what calls for analysis is the root of this institutional homophobia that leads to such trials of works of literature, even in a nation like the United States that esteems itself upon the freedom of speech and press it grants to its citizens constitutionally. When one probes deeper into the issue one discovers that this is not just a matter of obscenity. The roots go farther than mere 'morality' or 'acceptable' content in public discourse. The matter starts at the socio-economic structure of the nation.

The systems of feudalism and capitalism need to promote heteronormativity to ensure heir and labour. The logic of producing heir is quite simple: there must be a next generation in the family to inherit and expand the family wealth so it remains concentrated in a few hands. A continuous inflow of cheap labour is of paramount importance to such economies that run for the profit of the private owner. The profit that the owner class makes is directly proportional to the availability of cheap labour force. It is also to be noted that the ideological apparatuses are greatly influenced by this owner class (owner of both land and capital). So through superstructural elements like religion, conventional bourgeois morality, the media, those in

power popularize and enforce an ideology that supports their system of profit. Most of the people who are born in this given ideology take these beliefs at face value and a whole social system is set up which though seems logical and natural, in fact, is not. The entire system is centred on the profit motive of the owning class.

In the light of this thesis if we consider a social system that encourages the motive of profit, the reproduction of the labour power is of paramount importance. This reproduction of labour power occurs through the bare minimum wages that is given to the workers so they can have a family and produce children who are raised in the same ideological envelop so they too join the labour force when they grow up. Louis Althusser while addressing this particular issue claims:

But besides these techniques and knowledges, and in learning them, children at school also learn the 'rules' of good behaviour, i.e. the attitude that should be observed by every agent in the division of labour, according to the job he is 'destined' for: rules of morality, civic and professional conscience, which actually means rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labour and ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination. (Althusser: 138)

In such a context, the family is reduced merely to a breeding ground of future workers. So quite logically, such a system would not welcome homosexual relationships among people because it does not produce progeny which is detrimental to profit maximization. This logic can be challenged by claiming that there are not as many homosexuals around as there are heterosexual people. But this counter-point is insufficient because the dominant ideology takes everything within its sweep, leaving no exceptions behind. The dominant ideology does not function by picking and choosing. It lays down the laws that are naturalized by the Ideological State Apparatuses and the Repressive State Apparatuses, making them the 'obvious' ways in which the society works. As far as the exceptions to this broad set of rules are concerned, they are marginalized, persecuted, incarcerated and banned.

The establishment of the state has at its disposal institutionalized religion in order to carve public opinion. These institutionalized religious forces are far from the spiritual philosophy that they claim to profess. Institutionalized religion works more as a means to control people's free thought and coerce them into supporting the dominant ideology laid down by the powercentre. Hence it goes a long way in maintaining the status quo of power relations in the society and in ensuring that due to the fear of sin, taboo and perdition, there is no uprising of the people against the political and economic power centres. Through this tool of politicized religion, homophobia enters into the collective psyche of the population. Such ideological conditioning creates distinct lines between right and wrong, proper and profane, what can be allowed and what should be banned.

Similar notions of propriety was exercised by the Boston District Authority when Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* was banned. Statesman Anthony Comstock was an infamous crusader against what he considered profane and irreligious around the years 1880. He had influenced many such bans including the work of Whitman. Whitman's publisher had received a letter from the Boston DA that had the following order:

Our attention has been officially directed to a certain book titled "Leaves of Grass: Walt Whitman's published by you. We are of the opinion that this book is such a book as brings it within

the provisions of the Public Statutes regarding obscene literature, and suggest the propriety of withdrawing the same from circulation and suppressing the editions thereof.(Head 1)

Eventually the publisher severed himself from Whitman fearing persecution and jail. But Whitman stood his ground and got the volume published by another publisher. The fact being that the DA did not really have a strong case against him and was only harassing the old poet (even by going against the right of free speech and press), *Leaves of Grass* was left alone by the establishment.

But things were slightly different in the case of Allen Ginsberg a century later, though the context and attempt of censorship were the same. In the nineteen fifties it was the time of the Cold War and what was obsession with puritanism in the time of Whitman was obsession with the paranoia of the communist attack in the time of Ginsberg. After the Second World War, the balance of power in the world shifted to the bipolar kind. The United States and the Soviet Russia engaged in economic and military policies that gave rise to the Cold War. This kind of war and arms race gave rise to a great sense of insecurity in both the countries. This ambience of paranoia is well documented in the works of Ginsberg and other authors of that time. In this situation, the paranoia that was raging in the foreign policies of the American government was seeping into the domestic policies as well. The post- World War II America was a country that persecuted individuals whose thoughts were at odds with what was promoted by the mainstream ideology. Artists and poets were often spied upon, harassed and even forced to leave America. Some such examples are those of Charlie Chaplin, Bertold Brecht and Allen Ginsberg. There were stringent laws and the security organisations had free power to harass anyone who seemed to be different. The policies of the McCarthy Committee deserve a special mention for their intense paranoid and heavy handed attitude to sniff out homosexuals, 'traitors' and 'communists' on the American soil. In the words of McCarthy himself, "If you want to be against McCarthy, boys, you've got to be either a Communist or a cocksucker." (Cuordileone,521) The idea was that either you are with us or against us. Michael Davidson writes in his article on postwar poetry and politics of containment :

In order to monitor the health of the vulnerable domestic body a vast federal bureaucracy was created. A short list of new agencies would include the NIA (National Intelligence Authority) in 1946; the CIA in 1947; the IAC (Intelligence Advisory Committee) in 1950; the NSA (National Security Agency) in 1952; the Hoover Commission Task Force on Intelligence in 1955; and the DIA (Defense Intelligence Agency) in 1961, not to mention special Congressional committees like the McCarthy Committee or the House Committee on Un-American Activities. These agencies policed the threat of subversion by various methods including loyalty oaths, Congressional hearings, blacklists, surveillance technology, executive orders, union-busting legislation, Immigration and Naturalization Service restrictions, and general harassment. (Davidson :271)

At the ideological level, this meant absolute conformism to the norms of the society. Dissidence through action was an unpatriotic act and dissidence through ideology was criminal. It was a syndicate of the government and the market that viciously defended its own interest of profit through militarisation and promotion of the mass culture of consumerism and paranoia.

In this context, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* was kind of like the Beat manifesto where he documents various painful experiences of surviving in the mechanized world torn by wars, fear of nuclear annihilation and inhumane social relations. The poem begins with the memorable lines:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,  
 Starving, hysterical, naked  
 Dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn  
 Looking for an angry fix. (Ginsberg 134)

While maintaining the beautiful cadence of the rhetoric of the streets of urban America, it describes the horrific experiences of individuals who have got marginalized in the homogenizing process of the country. And through this description, there is a searing criticism of the mainstream ideology of the US that revolves around war, greed and torture. The poem also addresses issues regarding sex, both homosexual and heterosexual. The prosecution naturally had a problem with the manner in which sexuality was discussed in the poem. But in the light of the First Amendment in the American constitution that guarantees that all citizens may freely speak, write, and publish his sentiments on all subjects, including sex, the prosecution could not directly charge Ginsberg for using sexual elements. Hence, they did so indirectly by calling the poem obscene and having no redeeming social importance. As Jonah Raskin reports in *American Scream* :

The prosecution offered a pathetic case. Ralph McIntosh, the deputy district attorney, argued that the average person would not and could not understand *Howl*. He added that he himself did not "understand it very well." Still, he remembered parts of it well enough to quote them, and to note, "I think it is a lot of sensitive bullshit." But there wasn't much bite to his bark. (Raskin :219)

The prosecution came up with the weak argument that what cannot be read by children is not appropriate literature. In defense of the poem was the brilliant ACLU lawyer Jake Ehrlich. Raskin informs further: "The desire to censor," Ehrlich noted, was "not limited to crackpots and bigots but could be found in all walks of life. Language itself was not "a crystal, transparent," but rather the "skin of a living thought,"..." (Raskin: 220) Defending the matters of sexuality, the book reviewer of San Francisco Examiner Luther Nichols clarified as Raskin informs:

When asked to interpret the section of *Howl* in which Ginsberg mythologizes Neal Cassady's sexuality, Nichols explained that it was about "fertility." From his perspective, one might say that the "secret hero" of the poem was meant to be a sex god who would rejuvenate the sexless wasteland of modern society- and that *Howl* itself was an invitation to a more open and healthy sexuality. (Raskin : 221)

Eventually, the poem was declared not obscene and that it did possess redeeming social importance. In his verdict Judge Horn states:

I do not believe that "Howl" is without redeeming social importance. The first part of "Howl" presents a picture of a nightmare world; the second part is an indictment of those elements in modern society destructive of the best qualities of human nature; such elements are predominantly identified as materialism, conformity, and mechanization

leading toward war. The third part presents a picture of an individual who is a specific representation of what the author conceives as a general condition...The answer is that life is not encased in one formula whereby everyone acts the same or to a particular pattern. No two persons think alike; we were all made from the same mold but in different patterns. Would there be any freedom of press or speech if one must reduce his vocabulary to vapid innocuous euphemism? An author should be real in treating his subject and be allowed to express his thoughts and ideas in his own words....Therefore, I conclude the book "Howl and Other Poems" does have some redeeming social importance, and I find the book is not obscene. (Horn 1)

In retrospect, one has to wonder why *Howl* and *Leaves of Grass* are special cases and how they are connected with each other. On the first look the answer to these questions seem to be that both the authors are homosexual and there are homosexual elements in both the works. But are not heterosexual authors and their works about explicit heterosexual elements also banned like *Ulysses* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*? Yes, but not through this logic. It is believed that such erotic heterosexual literature is dangerous to the moral integrity of the population and can lead people into doing things that may dissolve the "sanctity" of the family system. To the present system of economy, the family is of the greatest importance. As mentioned before during the discussion of Althusser, the establishment knows that it is the family which is a fitting nursery to raise interpellated individuals that will happily serve the system of profit making and thus it must be protected from alternative sexual discourses.

In such a profit oriented social matrix, the importance of Whitman and Ginsberg cut deep. Both these poets were visionaries who did not buy into the American Dream and presented an alternative outlook that, among other things, also included acceptance of homosexuality. There are many countries in the world even today where homosexuality is illegal. Even in the United States, gay rights are a major topic of political debate. The right wing and the Republican Party openly stand against homosexuality. It is the same right wing that viciously promotes the non-accountable free market policies. Their policies are controlled by the corporate lobbyists who keep their profit at the top of the agenda like any other business institution. The rights of people, their freedom and their humanity come later. This is the system that views individuals as cogs in its machinery and wants to homogenise them into conforming sheep who will act according to the instruction they receive through the media. Now if the media becomes open to homosexuality then it is an attack on the ideological envelop that keeps the power relations safe. Hence, they want to censor and silence the alternative discourses, including homosexuality. Censorship is a weapon of a system that is homophobic to its core. And the people who promote this homophobia are only mouthing the tacit ideology that finds true expressions of sexuality alarming as it disturbs the comfortable status quo of the society and jeopardises the systemic codification of human emotions as their social roles.

The blanket of ideological conditioning in the fifties' America was being short-circuited by the counter-culture creativity of the Beats and especially by Allen Ginsberg with *Howl*. Ginsberg was a non-conformist in all ways. He was everything that was marginalized in America in his time- a left- leaning Jewish homosexual with a history of psychological imbalances in the family. Yet, *Howl* was a declaration of the futility of the establishment that tried too hard to homogenize people into manageable non-entities with programmed minds. In the tradition of Walt Whitman, *Howl* stands as an attack on the system of repression and censorship. Through its very existence, it vindicates the rights of human beings to celebrate their individuality, sexuality

and freedom of expression in the times when the system of politics and economy aims to stifle honest expression of individual thought.

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