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OLD AGE AND DYING IN THE POETRY OF ALLEN GINSBERG

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ABSTRACT

Allen Ginsberg was one of those rare poets who achieved fame early in life. He also lived till seventy in spite of the various health issues that plagued him since childhood. Having lived a long life as a famous poet and being a practising Buddhist, Ginsberg presents to his readers a distinct body of poetic work which is anchored to the mindfulness tradition of Buddhism. A number of his poems, as we shall see in the following sections, are about being present in the moment by noticing not only the surrounding but also the internal bodily sensations. This manner of infusing the process of writing poetry with mindfulness becomes especially noticeable in his later poems where he chronicles the experiences of his body in old age. This paper intends to study the poems written by Ginsberg chiefly in the last decade of his life in order to examine his point of view on old age and dying as a Buddhist poet.

Keywords: Buddhism, Beat Generation, death, suffering, American Poetry

Introduction

Born in Newark, New Jersey in 1926 Allen Ginsberg had the family background of a poet father and a mother who lived with mental illnesses. Both his parents were left-leaning Jewish immigrants from Russia which finds echoes in Ginsberg's writings later in life. Growing up in Paterson, where his father Louis Ginsberg taught in a school, Allen had to face difficulties at home due to his mother's episodes of paranoid schizophrenia. After joining Columbia University Ginsberg met Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, Lucien Carr, William Burroughs etc. and resonated with these young authors about the states of existence in the world. In a decade they, with others like Amiri Baraka, Diane di Prima, Gary Snyder, who joined along the way, were to be parts a constellation of poets and artists who would be known as the Beat generation. Ginsberg's "Howl" and "Kaddish" along with Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* became phenomenally popular, setting the tone for youth culture in the succeeding decades. Politically Ginsberg was sympathetic to the left in his younger days but moved towards a more spiritual view of existence later in life. In his career as a poet, he has equally criticized the excesses of both American corporate capitalism and the Stalinist USSR. Spiritually Ginsberg was a self-declared practising Buddhist with an interest in Hinduism. Since 1956, when *Howl and Other Poems* was published till his death in 1997 Allen Ginsberg was a cultural icon. His body of work ranges from political poems to spiritual and visionary writings. He is a chronicler of the human condition in the post-Second World War world whose sympathy lies with the downtrodden genius, the suffering angel and the institutionally marginalised. Ironically, Ginsberg, who was a figure of dissent and counterculture, ended up as celebrity-poet since the sixties and was also honoured with

the National Book Award, Medal of Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres and inducted into American Academy of Arts and Letters. The poet himself was acutely aware of these worldly accolades and in his later works writes amply on the ideas of attachment, Self, physical suffering, old age and death.

### Treatment of Death

*Death and Fame*, published posthumously in 1999, is a collection of Ginsberg's poems written between 1993 and 1997, in the last decade of the poet's life. A major part of this period was spent in managing old-age related illnesses like hypertension, kidney problems and hyperglycaemia. The poems of this period give us a glimpse of the poet's awareness of his suffering body and detachment from the same, knowing that "Suffering was what was born" (poemhunter.com). Ginsberg opens the titular poem "Death and Fame", as it appears in *Collected Poems*, with

"When I die  
I don't care what happens to my body  
throw ashes in the air, scatter 'em in East River". (1130)

The acceptance of death rings true in these lines almost to the extent of suggesting a sense of relief from being liberated from the body. Immediately after this Ginsberg asks for a grand funeral. This is not to flatter his ego, but quite the opposite, in order to deny his lifetime of distinct subjectivity in the true Buddhist sense. In the last two lines of the poem, he states the purpose of the grand funeral,

"Everyone knew they were part of "History" except the deceased  
who never knew exactly what was happening even when I was alive" (*Collected Poems*, 1132)

In 1972 Ginsberg had taken the Bodhisattva vow with the belief that rebirths will take place and he would return to spread the wisdom of Dhamma in successive births. So there is no resignation for Ginsberg nor he thinks that being born in the human form would be free from suffering. In "The Gospel Noble Truths" (written in 1975, published in *Ego Confessions* and later in *Collected Poems*) he writes:

Born in this world  
You got to suffer  
Everything changes  
You got no soul...(649)

The awareness of suffering as the First Noble Truth in Buddhism informs Ginsberg's literary corpus. Having taken the Bodhisattva Vow, Ginsberg remained a champion of the causes of pacifism, conservation of the ecology and freedom from political tyranny of any colour. Thus, Ginsberg grafts his literary output and political activism seamlessly with his spiritual practice setting a distinct example of a holistic integrity with one's Dhamma. This dedication is at the same time aware of one's demise as he further writes in the poem:

Die when you die  
Die when you die  
Lie down you lie down  
Die when you die. (649)

Ginsberg's understanding and acceptance of death can be studied in the poems of the nineties published posthumously in *Wait Till I'm Dead* (2016). In the poem "Dream of Carl Solomon", Ginsberg writes, "The first rule is: Remember you're dead. / The second rule is: Act like you're dead." (206) The heightened awareness of the arriving death and Ginsberg's intellectualising the issue in his poetry reveals his life-long dedication as a poet to record the phases of consciousness in the flux of existence.

### Physical Sickness and Mindfulness

Allen Ginsberg wrote his lines by the measurement of breath; he called them “breath lines”. The syllables of every line were delivered aloud with the rising and falling of the breath in a mantric fashion. Ginsberg’s poetic form itself is infused with such elements of mindfulness and especially when he writes about suffering. Physical illness had stayed with Ginsberg throughout his life. *Indian Journals* carry references and instances of few episodes of physical illness; Ginsberg writes:

Ever since return from Gangtok I been sick: first slow cold & yellow phlegm Bronchitis with slight fever,...  
Then my arm hard for several days & slightly swollen, sign of an allergy to the injection: Then lassitude of  
Calcutta heats... a slight kidney attack... then urine test saying excess phosphorus & calcium (oxide?) in  
urine, followed by a sudden dysentery & bone-weak- tired heat fatigue- (41)

Sickness and physical suffering has been a life-long companion to Ginsberg which gave him an objective analytical perspective on suffering. In other words, he had enough first- hand experience of suffering from sickness to enable him to fully appreciate the efficacy of mindfulness to understand it. Physical suffering appears obviously as the major theme in “The Sickness Blues” (1975) where Ginsberg writes:

Lord Lord I got the sickness blues, I must’ve done something wrong

There ain’t no Lord to call on, now my youth is gone...

All I think is Death, father’s getting old

He can’t walk half a block, his feet feel cold...

I must a been doing something wrong meat & cigarettes

Bow down before my lord, 100 thousand regrets

All my poems down in hell, that’s what pride begets (*Collected Poems*, 647)

In his old age the nagging health went up and the state of physical awareness heightened in his writing during this period. In many a poem in *Death and Fame* (1999) he brings up the issue of illness. In “Hepatitis Body Itch...” he abandons the descriptive aspect of poetry and simply enlists his ailments:

Hepatitis

Body itch

Nausea

Hemorrhage

tender Haemorrhoids

High Blood

Sugar, low

leaden limbs

lassitude

bed rest

shit factory

this corpse

cancer (*Collected Poems*, 1139)

This poem seems to come straight out of a session of mindfulness meditation, or rather the poem itself is a form of meditation, to be aware of the state of the body without added adjectives, images or metaphors.

The mature understanding of the event of death in Ginsberg has its background. Apart from the understanding that he received from Buddhism, Ginsberg had closely observed suffering and death throughout his life. His mother, Naomi Ginsberg, lived with mental illness for years in mental institutions. Naomi's breakdowns became more frequent when Ginsberg was a teenager and with his older brother Eugene off to college, he had to witness horrible sufferings first hand. These experiences are given a poetic elevation in his celebrated poem "Kaddish" which ends with Naomi's death and at the same time with a visionary, intimate and optimistic conclusion:

Strange Prophecies anew! She wrote- 'The key is in the window, the  
key is in the sunlight at the window- I have the key- Get married Allen  
don't take drugs- the key is in the bars, in the sunlight in the window,  
Love, Your mother' which is Naomi- (*Collected Poems*, 232)

His mother's death was a deeply moving experience for Ginsberg who by all accounts loved her irrespective of her illness and probably more for her vulnerability as a fellow sufferer in *samsara*. In addition to his mother's suffering and death Ginsberg had seen sudden deaths in his circle, of Bill Cannastra, David Kammerer, Joan Vollmer and Jack Kerouac. On his father's death he wrote "Father Death Blues" in yet another attempt to conceptualise death from a distance, even when the death is of his own poet-father. He writes:

Hey Father Death, I'm flying home  
Hey poor man, you're all alone  
Hey old daddy, I know where I'm going  
Father Death, Don't cry any more  
Mama's there, underneath the floor  
Brother Death, please mind the store  
Suffering is what was born  
Ignorance made me forlorn  
Tearful truths I cannot scorn (genius.com)

While in India, Ginsberg tried to understand death beyond the Judeo- Christian paradigm. He spent many nights at the Hindu crematoriums in Kolkata and Varanasi. By witnessing the human body burning away on a pyre along with its self, worries and suffering, the very immediacy of watching the melting tissue opened up his mind to the concepts of *maya* and *samsara*. He presents the details of a burning body with meditative detachment in *Indian Journals*:

Night at the burning ghat- A body burning in the ash pit- pile of wood & the head slowly bubbling up around the mouth and nose- cheeks blackened with sheets of flame clasping the volume of the face-splitting, and pink underskin sizzling open- Sat on the bench & watched five minutes, staring at the head-feet painted red sticking out the other end of the wood structure bed- (77)

The tradition of burning bodies in Hinduism is opposite to the Abrahamic practice of preserving the remains in the grave. The philosophy behind the dissolution of the body into the elements was a liberating thought to Ginsberg. Bill Morgan writes in this connection the following commentary:

The holy men watched as the bodies burned and the smoke from the fires rolled over their heads as they meditated and occasionally danced to a blind man's drumbeat....To Allen it seemed like a natural conclusion to life, and he loved the fact that sorrow could be easily erased by the process. (357)

**Conclusion**

Throughout his life, death had been present in Ginsberg's vicinity. His journeys across the planet, Hinduism and Buddhism have variously expanded his understanding of the event of death, if not death itself. The zen like perception of death in poems of his last decade alludes to his spiritual accomplishments in his life. Interestingly, Ginsberg stayed critical of his Buddhist discipline, chastising himself in many a poem. This self-criticism comes across most prominently in "After Lalon" where he warns the reader not to follow his path because he thought he got into the fix of "workaholic show/biz meditation market" (*Collected Poems*, 1020) and that he had sold his soul for pretty words. Yet, Ginsberg remains a major American poet who studied suffering and death and made sure to document his observations as poetry. This is true to his Bodhisattva nature which encouraged him to spread wisdom to help fellow beings emerge from the circle of life-desire-suffering-death-life and attain *nirvana*.

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