

# Howling Cry of Dystopia

S. A. Kalikar

Hislop College, Nagpur, India

Keywords: Howl, Hysteria, Cry, Dystopia, Anaphora, Subversive, Mental Health, War.

Abstract: Howl, hysteria, cry all these words seem to portray a complete derangement of mind, body and soul. It is very natural of humans to experience such pain if the social conditions are unfavourable. One such poem that had made news is *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg. This paper attempts to examine why anaphora is the most striking feature of this poem? How it makes the rhetoric more appealing at the same time subversive? Does the epic-like structure of this poem and its sheer nakedness create an atmosphere of high drama or of pity or both? Further the paper will try to analyze how the poem brings to fore the most neglected aspect of human existence- the psychological well-being! *Howl* talks about war, counterculture and about mental health. Can we read *Howl* in the context of our present situation? The immortality of the poem in stark contrast of a fastchanging world is miraculous! *Howl* is a phenomenon of dystopia.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

It is this fine, yet wild piece of poetry titled *Howl* that has stood testimony to the power of the man and power of the moment (Arnold, 1865). It is often quoted how literature has always been the voice of the subaltern or the voiceless who are unable to express their agony in public, fearing hegemonic backlash. *Howl*, the cacophony of the oppressed has echoed ever since this piece was penned by Allen Ginsberg in 1954-5. Dystopia, Hysteria, Mental Illness, Sexuality, Drug Culture, Politics, Religion, War, Capitalism, and Injustice are the visible themes that have given this composition the power to subvert and be heard. It has successfully created room for the silenced voices to express their agony and pain freely. Dystopia is the core and mantle of this revolutionary poem of 112 paragraph like lines. Vagueness its crust. A prose poem in free verse had left its readers spellbound and utterly shocked back then. *Howl* also known as *Howl for Carl Solomon* was first published in 1956 in a collection titled *Howl and Other Poems*. This immersive and subversive message of angst was first presented to public on October 7, 1955, at the Six Gallery in San Francisco. It had not only created ripples but also a storm that left everyone in a haze. Horror and disgust was in the air and the audiences were left paralyzed by its sheer obscenity. The non-conformity exhibited with such a tremendous velocity was difficult to ignore as it howled and howled

resonating fiercely in everyone's ears. The poem's deafening howl left people dumbstruck. *Howl* indeed is a breathless poem which had left the authority grasping for breath.

*Howl* resembles an epic form in three cantos and speaks about the best minds of the generation who are distraught with the apocalyptic scene of the post-war world. The world filled with capitalistic hysteria, the post-war world that left people handicapped both in mind and spirit and the world which was spiritually degrading. The entire poem looks haphazard and wild to naked eye, but its soul lies with the disillusioned minds of the lost generation. Its absurdity, its vagueness and its broken spirit is its essence. *Howl* is the looking-glass to be used for retrospection as well as introspection. A mirror of the society, where the image looks distorted as well as scattered. *Howl* seems representative of T.S Eliot's *The Wasteland*, a land where disillusionment and spiritual decay ruled. A land of utter chaos and derangement. It may be stated that *The Wasteland* is a prequel to *Howl*. Three decades apart, yet both are symbolic of dystopia. Both speak volumes of the aftermaths of war. Both *The Wasteland* and *Howl* have stayed news and made news too. This reminds us of Ezra Pound who once said, 'Literature is news that stays news' (Sen, 1975). These two poems are the distorted images of the then contemporary society. *Howl* being the most recent ones among the two poems, this paper attempts to showcase how the epic like structure of *Howl* is

instrumental in portraying the dystopia of the 1950s and why the howling echoes even today.

Let us first examine the word 'who' in the poem *Howl*. The enigma of the word is such that, it compels the reader to dig deeper and deeper into its context. The word 'who' which appears every now and then is like an incantation more or less similar to an invocation in an epic and is indicative of the best minds of the generation. Anaphora is the most striking feature of this poem. The word 'who' is repeatedly used at the beginning of the poetic lines of the first canto. The continuous hammering of this word probably secures a permanent place in the reader's mind. The poet hints at those people who were the best minds of the generation who had gone wild and out of control. The young generation who engaged themselves into drugs, free sex, and homosexuality and were eager to break all the norms of the society exemplified the Beat philosophy. Madness was in the air, and everybody breathed the same. Non-conformity against religion, against authority, against parental pressure was their anthem and they sung in unity. They shared the same 'structure of feeling'. 'Who' appears approximately sixty times in the first part of the poem and changes its form to 'whose' in the second part. This deliberate reinforcement has amplified the idea of decay and debauch of the best minds of the generation. The poem signifies how war, industrialization and capitalism had encroached and derailed the entire system. This over indulgence had caused the cessation of human values, morality was going down the drain. Anarchy was loosed upon the world and the best minds of the generation were left aghast and broke. These destitute banded together leaving parental control behind. They wandered the streets and towns sometimes hungry and most of the times distraught. They breathed the same philosophy and were against war. It is this anti-war ideology that landed them in trouble. Their non-materialistic approach to life, alienation from conventional beliefs and non-conformity towards the hegemonic tradition made them experiment with psychedelic drugs that left them in a hallucinated state of mind. The poet successfully and consecutively repeats the word 'who' to register protest against the disastrous repercussions of war and of military expansion of America. The best minds of the generation whose souls were destroyed by the capitalist hysteria were lost in the maddening crowd. They had become brain dead with no space for creativity. So many deaths, so many battered skulls and so many drained of their brilliance! It was a war of two worlds. One of freedom and one of control. Anaphora has cleverly been used

by the poet to enhance the face and form of the poem. It acts as an exemplary tool to make the rhetoric sound powerful, appealing and at the same time subversive. The poem *Howl* and its long narrative technique takes it nearer to the epic poetry. Its lofty style and series of events with a detailed narration makes it resemble an epic. Also, the communal character of *Howl* that embodies the thought process of an entire generation and its high seriousness of speech makes it akin to the epic form although not entirely so. The poet has deliberately chosen this form to intensify the theme of the poem eventually dropping the bomb on its readers. The almost breathless structure of this composition also compels one to experience the temperament of the starving, the naked, and the hysterical lightheaded hipsters who rebelled against the societal norms. Some part of the poem makes sense, is logical and flows thematically but later takes the form of jazz. So, it may be called as an 'epic in jazz form'. The boldness, the obscenity, the free use of foul words and the explicit portrayal of stark reality arouses a heightened sensory awareness among its readers. *Howl* wouldn't have lit a spark had it not followed the epic structure. It would have not been read and reread had it not portrayed the philosophy of the Beats. The spontaneity of the poem and its vagueness adds fuel to the fire. The epic like structure and its sheer nakedness definitely holds the key to reveal its true essence. It does create an atmosphere of high drama and pity as the reader too feels dystopic with the loss of the best minds of the generation. This loss is big enough, this loss is exhausting enough for the readers to feel the pain and agony. The horror of the sufferings is difficult to ignore. The blood curdling reality of *Howl* strikes the right chord. It hits the reader with full force and the impact is heart wrenching.

Mental Health is an area which has remained neglected for centuries together. The continuous discontinuity and abruptness of the poem engages the reader and makes one think whether the poem makes any sense or is simply a foolish endeavour of a mad man. This immediately reminds the reader of 'the mad woman in the attic' (Bronte, 1847) and how madness is perceived by the world. If it is possible to politicize the word 'mad' then it may be stated that anybody who subverts the ideology of the dominant class is declared to be 'mad' because it is the easiest way to handle any kind of revolt. It is often said that a child, an artist and a mad person can get away with any socially unaccepted remark. It is this mad man of *Howl* and his continuous unwarranted speech that has given voice to the marginalized. The marginalized are the ones who are oppressed and sidelined by the

people in the center, for being too vocal about their rights and for being the ones who cannot tolerate injustice. Madness is considered to be a crime in this self-proclaimed sane world. The derangement of mind is stigmatized and looked down upon. This poem is a mouth piece of this social stigma. Why nobody tries to examine the cause of this derangement? Why are these insane minds locked behind walls? Michel Foucault has answered these questions in his book titled, *The History of Sexuality* (Banerjee, 2021). According to Foucault, human body becomes the site of power- he has termed it as 'Bio-power'. He further points out how Law and Medicine mapped and categorized the body. Certain sections of the human population are classified as sick, mad or criminals. This regime of surveillance of keeping the mad in the asylum, the sick in the hospital and the criminal in prison was questioned by Foucault. Our identities are constructed, conditioned, and controlled by the powerful in the society. *Howl* too appears to talk about this very ideology of Foucault. All the 112 lines in this poem emphasize the importance of not just physical attributes of man but psychological well-being too. The quasi mad men of *Howl* who talked continuously, who suffered from drug abuse, who got busted by the police, who wandered hungry and lonesome, who bit detectives, who distributed Super Communist pamphlets, who broke down crying in the asylums naked, and shivering, who had suicidal tendencies, who demanded sanity trials, who dreamt of justice, who gave out a saxophone cry were the best minds of the lost generation. *Howl* can be said to be a metaphor for mental instability and hysteria. The entire 'yacketayakking' a term used by the poet in the poem for non-stop talking/ blabbering of vague words seems to be unreasonable and unfathomable to an average reader. But a critical and close reading of the poem reveals the truth. *Howl* is a burning example of mental agony and pain; it is a channel through which the poet has attracted the world's attention to the most neglected aspect of human existence. It is a composition full of deliberate absurdity and obscenity to make sure everybody who reads the poem is left speechless and when the real meaning of the poem sinks in, the truth is revealed upon the reader. *Howl* successfully brings to fore the most deserted facet of human psychology.

Is there a moral connect between *Howl* and *The Wasteland*? As discussed earlier in this paper, both the poems speak about the aftermaths of war. Both the poems have deliberately painted a dystopian picture through an equally dystopian composition. Both the poems have an angle of delusions and destabilized

minds. *Howl* connects not only to the past (*The Wasteland*) but with the present as well. *Howl* is like a war cry, post war of the 1900s and the ongoing war of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One should quickly understand how Ginsberg had made a bold statement through this poem. The counter culture practices of the Beat generation- the Beatniks who witnessed the horrors of war, who reacted against the orthodox and conservative attitudes of the then contemporary society, who revolted against the policing of the hegemonic forces, are brought together by the poet to counter question the ideologies of the prevalent system. Beats exemplified the true nature of man. The more the suppression, the more is the rebellion. This oppression and alterity gave birth to this rebellious poem. The second part of *Howl* disclosed how urbanization, industrialization had corrupted everyone's mind. The political machinery of capitalistic society overruled the merits of education. The merciless 'scholars of war' who fed their desires and wants sacrificed the young and gullible who were the best of the minds, by throwing them in the clutches of war. The poet has named the dollar obsessed mind of these scholars of war as 'Moloch' and tries hard to wake the mind from its deep slumber. Is there a hidden motive of Ginsberg behind the use of the word 'Moloch'? One may associate this name with the practice of child sacrifice. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 'Moloch' came to be used allegorically for any cause requiring excessive sacrifice. The 'Moloch' of *Howl* surely took his share. The sacrifice had no limits. Moloch, the mind who was without a conscience! The mind which was full of greed. The mind who pulled the poet out of his natural state, a state of pure bliss and threw him into an abyss. The abyss of oil and stone, the abyss of electricity and a cloud of hydrogen, the abyss in which the poet sat lonely dreaming of a utopian world but was woken up from this dream only to find himself in the dark vacuum where he was just a 'consciousness without a body'! The second part is the soul of this poem. It ends with the poet's portrayal of absolute dystopia. Soulless apartments, skeleton treasuries, demonic industries, spectral nations, invincible madhouses, monstrous bombs embody 'Moloch', the mind. The disastrous effect these materialistic ambitions had on the best minds of the generation were impossible to fathom. Further in the second part, the poet has used 'Moloch' as a metaphor for the city of New York. He has been vocal about how the Beat generation were beaten with the burden of lifting 'Moloch' (the city of New York) to Heaven with a capital 'H' symbolizing the so called industrial revolution and the American Dream. The poet remarks that this chase left the best minds of the

generation broken and disillusioned. The visions, the omens, the hallucinations, the miracles and the ecstasies of the Beat generation all drowned in the American river. Their aspirations literally went down the drain. The trauma was such that these people bade farewell to this overwhelming remorse by jumping off the roofs onto to the street or into the river. Their end came when they had just begun their lives, an abrupt end, and a violent end! An end to the dreams, to the adorations, to the illuminations, and to the epiphanies! The best minds of the generation jumped off the roof to solitude! ‘Mad generation down on the rocks of Time’, says the poet.

The last part of the poem puts forth the idea of mental asylums. The most pathetic and inhuman living conditions where the unstable are dehumanized. The poet mentions his mother and his dear friend Carl Solomon. The wild screams of the innocent souls shuttling between consciousness and hallucinations were capable of moving the most hard-hearted. Yet, nobody cared! The poem ends with the poet mentioning that he too is with his friend in the same asylum where they wake up electrified after the shock treatments still hearing roaring airplanes above. The poet dreaming of liberating themselves from the binds of the society compel the reader to ask these questions. Were they born mad? If not, then what made them go crazy? These questions are very disturbing. One can imagine, if merely probing these questions have such an impact on individuals what must have happened to the best minds experiencing such catastrophic events. Their tender minds and youth was robbed of its delicateness and beauty. They were left devastated, aimless, and wandering in the ghost cities and towns post war. One needs to understand, these were ‘the best minds of the generation’. If the best minds had gone bereft what about the mediocre? War had such disastrous and holocaustic effect on the entire generation who witnessed the calamity closely. To add to the grossness, nobody bothered or cared to give it a second thought. The best minds were lost in time!

## 2 CONCLUSION

Time is a very strange phenomenon. The Wheel of Time brings us back to the same setting. It is often said, ‘History repeats itself’. Today, the world is placed in the same setting that was true during the 1950s when *Howl* was penned down. Even today, humanity is facing the same calamities- of war, of materialistic goals, of rapid industrialization, of dystopic pleasures. Mental Health is still a taboo.

Thus, *Howl* can be read in the present context too. It is news that has stayed news. Its immortality is no surprise. The immortality of a nation depends upon the youth as the young are its assets. The youth are considered to be the hope of a nation. *Howl* contemplates this idea! Ironically, the youth of *Howl* were sans hope, sans aspirations, and were lost in dystopia! “Only in war does the madman become sane” (Ryan, 2015) is a befitting reply to those who considered the best minds of *Howl* to be mad, to be insane to write against the grain. *Howl*, the cry of dystopia is indeed a cry for justice!

## REFERENCES

- Arnold, M. (1865). *Essays in Criticism: The Function Of Criticism At The Present Time*. Macmillan and Co., Limited
- Banerjee, P. (2021). *Cultural Studies: Texts and Contexts*. Dattsons.
- Bronte, C. (1847). *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*. Smith, Elder & Co.
- Foucault, M. (1976). *The History of Sexuality*. Editions Gallimard.
- Ryan, A. (2015). *Queen of Fire – Raven’s Shadow # 3*. Orbit.
- Sen, S. (1975). *T.S Eliot: The Waste Land and Other Poems (A Critical Evaluation)*. Unique Publishers.  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49303/howl>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howl\\_\(poem\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howl_(poem))