

Reassessing *The Dharma Bums*: Jack Kerouac's Critique of Consumerism, Materialism, and Cultural Conformity

Mr. Pranjali Pokharel
Research Scholar,
Department of Major Arts,
St. Xavier's College,
Kathmandu, Nepal

Mr. Shishir Kumar Bhusal
Lecturer and Head,
Department of Major Arts,
St. Xavier's College,
Kathmandu, Nepal

Abstract

This research examines Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* as a critique of American consumerism, mass culture, and conformity in the 1950s, thereby addresses and understands the lack of critical engagement with how the characters' rejection of materialism and conventional life denotes their resistance to the culture industry's suppression of critical thinking and individuality. Implementing a qualitative, library-based methodology, this study applies Horkheimer and Adorno's "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" and Edward Said's *Orientalism* to analyze the protagonists' struggles in their pursuit of authenticity. The findings establish the novel as a critique of the culture industry, as it places *The Dharma Bums* as an emanator of anti-consumerist and non-conformist convictions since it persistently challenges the homogenization of taste and the subduing of critical thinking imposed on the characters by the culture industry.

Keywords: Jack Kerouac, Adorno and Horkheimer, Consumerism, Nonconformist, 1950s America, Beat Generation, Orientalism

Introduction

Written during the tumultuous ethos of the mid-20th century, *The Dharma Bums* touches on the difficulties of spiritual exploration and ecocentrism amidst a conforming, uniform, and standardized society. The 20th century, after WWII, saw a significant turning point in American history as consumerist behavior became common among the masses and created a mainstream culture that embraced conformity and downplayed critical thinking, in turn, imbuing the younger generation with a profound desire to detach from entrenched societal norms. This emboldened counterculture movements across America. The main characters of the novel, taking this rebellious route, indulge in and pursue unconventional activities, such as Eastern spirituality, hitchhiking, and mountain expeditions, prioritizing adventure over family and socially acceptable employment.

The depression of the 1930s laid the foundation for a commitment to a stable domestic life but also paved the way for diverging perceptions on traditional family values, as writer Elaine Tyler May states that family values and stability gained considerable momentum after WWII (9–20). The average American was apprehensive about economic instability, and this made societal designations and expectations—suited to the government's

ideology based on conformism—easier to inculcate into the masses. This constrained societal structure, which in large part was consumerist and heavily manipulated by the culture industry, created discontent among the upcoming generation, and this dissatisfaction is specifically palpable in *The Dharma Bums*.

Consequently, what remains understudied is the culture industry's role in prompting the characters' rejection of the 1950s norms. As such, this study explores the challenges and rejections posed by *The Dharma Bums* towards the 1950s American mass consumption, materialism, and conformism by linking them to Horkheimer and Adorno's "Cultural Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," and it also delves into the characters' disillusionment with society in their attempt to attain authenticity. Likewise, the society wherein the characters reside is analogous to the environment asserted in "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," compelling them to set out on spiritual journeys, which act as counter-narratives to the mainstream consumerist and conformist American culture. Ultimately, these unconventional undertakings by the prominent characters of the book, Japhy Ryder and Ray Smith, show the fundamental incompatibility between spiritual enlightenment and the values disseminated by the culture industry.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative library-based research, with primary focus on the textual analysis of Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*, approaching it through the theory "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, supported by previously examined academic sources and Edward Said's *Orientalism*. The textual analysis primarily concerns itself with the circumstantial difficulties endured by the main characters, Ray Smith and Japhy Ryder. Additionally, this study has also employed notes from the book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, wherein "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" is posited.

Horkheimer and Adorno state that "The culture industry endlessly cheats its consumers out of what it endlessly promises. The promissory note of pleasure issued by plot and packaging is indefinitely prolonged: the promise, which actually comprises the entire show, disdainfully intimates that there is nothing more to come . . ." (111). Similarly, for them, the culture industry, which is the puppeteer of society, permeates individuals with passive engagement and homogenizes their thinking. Given that, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" provides a fresh perspective on *The Dharma Bums*, which has been predominantly examined within the spiritual discourse, by approaching it with an anti-materialistic and anti-mass consumerist stance. Subsequently, the theory has offered critical concepts such as pseudo-individuality, compulsively rehearsed behavior, and ideological control, which have elucidated and brought forth the characters' motives that are rooted in ideas such as anti-materialism, anti-consumerism, and anti-conformism.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* is implemented as a secondary theory, though only certain relevant sections of the theory are incorporated to aid the comprehension of the Western perceptions of foreign cultures, as Said notes, ". . . from its earliest modern history to the present, Orientalism as a form of thought for dealing with the foreign has typically shown the altogether regrettable tendency of any knowledge based on such hard-and-fast distinctions as

‘East’ and ‘West’” (47). Said critiques Orientalism for rigidly dividing East and West, arguing that fixed and non-objective understandings have created stereotypes and reinforced cultural misrepresentation. Subsequently, these ideas have allowed for a deeper understanding of how Eastern traditions are exoticized and commodified by the foil characters in the book; these entail the disconcerting experiences faced by the characters during their spiritual and cross-cultural explorations, such as Ray’s and Japhy’s tension-fueled antipathy toward the commodified American attempts at cultural exchange in the 1950s.

Anti-materialism and Mass Culture

Materialism centers on the neglect of sentient entities and places emphasis on the physical aspects of worldly life (Richins and Dawson 304). However, in contrast, the place where Ray Smith lives, in Berkeley, is suggestive of the ethos he embodies, characterized by modesty and simplicity. Ray Smith describes his dwelling as, “The old rotten porch slanted forward to the ground, among vines, with a nice old rocking chair. . . .” (Kerouac 18). Ray Smith’s extolling description of his humble residence reflects what he understands as the authenticity of life. His leisure is reading the Mahāyāna Buddhist sutra (the diamond sutra) in an old rocky chair, surrounded by natural elements, redolent of nature itself. And his view on an anti-materialistic life is truly discernible when he heaps praise on the residence’s amenities, even though only essentials are to be found there.

A similar lifestyle is embraced by Ray’s Zen mentor, his luminary, and his friend Japhy Ryder. His dwelling is even more modest, as Ray describes Japhy’s residence as, “Japhy lived in his shack which was infinitely smaller than ours” (Kerouac 18). Contrasting with the consumer-driven culture of the 1950s American society, Japhy shows a dedicated commitment to a minimalist lifestyle. His straw mats, sparse furnishings, and authentic Japanese footwear all accentuate simplicity.

Likewise, in the notes of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno expound on the interplay between asceticism and materialism and how ambiguously interconnected these two concepts are. One of the aspects they highlight is asceticism as a means of resistance and defiance against domineering governance. Horkheimer and Adorno state, “Asceticism and materialism . . . are ambiguous in the same way. Asceticism as a refusal to participate in the bad existing order coincides, in face of oppression...” (177). Although they are assertive that asceticism can be employed as a tool by the ones in power: the elites, they also highlight its intricacies by depicting it as a resistance to the bad existing order. Consequently, Japhy and Ray’s minimal lifestyle, to Horkheimer and Adorno, would be deemed as a deliberate resistance to the commodification of life and the consumerist society.

Similarly, during a heavily intoxicated and opinionated discussion in Ray’s cottage, Japhy goes on a tirade accusing the passivity of American consumerism and envisions a contrasting movement called the “rucksack revolution.” Japhy rabidly asserts, “Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming...” (Kerouac 83). Japhy’s exposition particularly criticizes the consumerist cycle where individuals are indoctrinated to consume by working undesirable jobs. And due to this, they end up consuming commodities such as

“refrigerators, TV sets, cars” and other unnecessary mass productions. His views disapprove of the system set up and normalized by the culture industry, as it restricts the engagement of consumers during purchasing decisions thereby repeating the cycle of work, production, and consumption, with bare minimum choice.

In the same way, Horkheimer and Adorno state, “Even during their leisure time, consumers must orient themselves according to the unity of production. The active contribution which Kantian schematism still expected of subjects” (98). Horkheimer and Adorno give reference to schematics, which, in Kantian philosophy and stripped-down form, is organizing our sensory experiences to formulate coherent concepts which further confronts that the culture industry discards the process of schematics through enforced pre-manufactured experiences, tailored-made by the producers, which result in no critical consumer engagement. Japhy’s idea of the “rucksack revolution” contrasts this by rejecting consumerism and encouraging an authentic, self-driven, spiritual experience. Both Japhy’s and Horkheimer and Adorno’s assertions condemn consumerism that limits meaningful and active involvement on the part of the consumer, begetting a homogenization of taste.

The threat to homogenization of taste and passivity contrived by the culture industry in America is also addressed by Ray, following his discussion with Japhy, as the character of *The Dharma Bums* expresses, “... if you take a walk some night on a suburban street and pass house ... the little blue square of the television” (Kerouac 88). Ray, especially, is apprehensive about the homogenization of thoughts in the American suburbs which are discernible to him. Silent, identical homes with families engrossed in the “blue square” of the television, devoid of social characteristics, denote the absence of taste and interaction, but Ray is still able to find solace with his fellow “Zen-Lunatics.”

Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the culture industry pacifies consumers to maintain control as it commodifies its products and presents them as cultural or societal necessities, reinforcing the existing power structure. The industry exploits communication and entertainment—Television, films, and radio—to disseminate and suppress ideas and maintain control, as Horkheimer and Adorno state further, “Films and radio ... are nothing but business.” (95). Their contention expresses that films and radio, and similar mass media, have discarded any pretense of art and now openly operate as a profit-driven industry, intending for financial gain by subjugating and controlling the masses.

Ray Smith also has a dream of being sedated by the culture industry, “... to just sit with a hundred other patients in front of a nice television set in a madhouse, where we could be ‘supervised’” (Kerouac 103). Here, the television, like films and radio, reinforces the power structure, as Ray’s dream depicts it as central to the supervision, leveraging its capacity to keep patients critically sedated: a metaphor for the American society of the time. Thus, the “Madhouse” is America, the “patients” are “Americans,” and the “nice television” is the tool working on them, inculcating the culture industry’s odious ideologies.

Individualism vs. Community

Lipton, in one of the early exploratory books on the individualism and lifestyle of the Beats, *The Holy Barbarians*, writes that it was the dilemma of some of the Beats, who wanted

to embrace simplicity, but were voluntarily running away from reality and responsibility (251-252). Yet, Ray Smith, in *The Dharma Bums*, constantly introspects as he questions the decisions to pursue nature exploration and Zen Buddhism, since they result in minimal salutary effects. Despite that, he persists because of the shallow and restraining impositions of the prevalent Western lifestyle demonstrated in the conflict with his family members.

During Ray's visit to his mother's home in North Carolina, his identity is relentlessly questioned by his relatives, especially by his brother-in-law. Alienated by the household's animosity, conflict arises when Ray repeatedly unchains the family dog, Bob, for meditation. His brother-in-law objects, "I've got too much money invested in that dog..." (Kerouac 121). Ray's contrasting ideas and lifestyle, not in the slightest, align with those of his brothers-in-law and other relatives, as no one from his own family comes to Ray's defense.

Similarly, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, "Individuals are tolerated only as far as their wholehearted identity with the universal is beyond question" (124). Ray's disconnection, even in unshackling a dog, divests him of his individuality because his distinct belief system has no place in an unreceptive society. He is only "tolerated" as long as he conforms to the "universal" system, as made apparent when his brother-in-law stresses investment in the dog's rearing, which foregrounds the form of materialism in the society. As for the culture industry, it demands the population under its control to be utmost utilitarian and inhibit any acts of expression since they are seen as deviating from the belief system that purports to be authentic, cultural, and necessary.

The Critique of American Values

American perception or even studies of other societies, in most matters, seem to lack introspection, appear superficial, and evince self-centeredness. Prominent critic Norman Podhoretz, who was critical of the Beats in the late 1950s, follows a similar trend as he points out that Jack Kerouac's writing exhibits a rejection of reason and civilization in favor of an irrational, primal worldview that is linked to juvenile delinquency. As an example of "inverted racism," he criticizes Kerouac's romanticization of non-white culture and argues that the Beats' devotion to spontaneity was a literary and intellectual mistake (Podhoretz 315). However, the critique never explores what propels a generation toward exploration and alien cultures. And Japhy Ryder reviles this Western gaze, finding no similarities with fellow Americans of the time, as demonstrated by his conversation with Ray on people who are funding his trip to Japan, "They spend their good money fixing elegant scenes of gardens and books and Japanese architecture and all ... for cats to hang out in and be Buddhists . . ." (Kerouac 171). Japhy, although in a passive tone, disparages the affluent Westerners', especially Americans' inclination to narrow down rich, foreign cultural traditions—exemplified here by the native "gardens," "books," and "architecture"—to their own fantasies. This distaste is palpable, especially when he says, "rich American divorcees on Japanese cruises," which represents pretentious consumption over unfeigned cultural admiration.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* reinforces Japhy's dissatisfaction with consumerism as he argues, "The Orient that appears in Orientalism, then, is a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces... a product of certain political forces and activities" (Said 202-203).

As per Said, the “Orient,” is demarcated without any merit and lacks a credible representation rather the West views the Eastern hemisphere as one hotchpotch of cultures fundamentally different from them. Consequently, both Japhy and Said are alarmed at the misrepresentation and consumption of Eastern cultures by the West.

Georgia Woodroffe also states that *The Dharma Bums* tries to alter the Western perspective on masculinity through tea. Woodroffe’s study posits that tea indicates Kerouac’s infatuation with Eastern lifestyle, as she describes the role of tea in *The Dharma Bums* as, “Kerouac has few women... white American masculinity” (63–64). Tea, to Woodroffe, acts as a bridge between Buddhist practices and ancient Asian traditions by rejecting the rugged masculinity of the West.

Likewise, Japhy in one of his profound monologues asserts, “. . . just think how truly great and wise America will be...” (Kerouac 84). Although he criticizes America’s misplaced priorities, such as the 1950s space exploration, Japhy is hopeful of America’s possibility of becoming a spiritually driven nation. However, in contrast, Horkheimer and Adorno write, “The masses, demoralized by existence under the pressure of the system and manifesting civilization . . .” (123). Horkheimer and Adorno’s concept of compulsively rehearsed behavior explains how industrial culture suppresses both revolutionary instincts, vital for historical change, and barbaric instincts that help to fuel the former.

Beaudry, a minor character and truck driver, expresses both his dissatisfaction with his toiling job and his indignation towards Ray’s nomadic lifestyle as he candidly says, “. . . Here I am...you or me?” (Kerouac 109-110). Despite his struggles, he remains fixated on material standards and exudes Western hubris, even as he recognizes Ray’s freedom. Similarly, as theorized by Said, “The Orient was almost a European invention . . .” (Said 1). Beaudry here mirrors the Western gaze of the Orient, where any form of Eastern culture and philosophies is seen as impractical, unviable, and condensed to exotic concepts. Thus, despite Beaudry’s fascination with Ray’s lifestyle, he cannot get over his American predispositions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the anti-materialistic and nonconforming sentiments discerned in *The Dharma Bums* mirror Horkheimer and Adorno’s concern about the culture industry’s suppression of individuality. And to limit such impositions, Ray and Japhy embrace simplicity and spiritual pursuits as forms of resistance against a consumerist system that has coerced individuals into the cyclical nature of production, consumption, and pseudo-individuality. On top of that, the tension between individuality and societal conformity in *The Dharma Bums* exposes how deeply the influences of the culture industry have penetrated the American society of the time, evident in the conditioned collective thoughts of people around Japhy and Ray.

Kerouac’s critique of American values in *The Dharma Bums* also accentuates the superficial nature of American cultural exploration of the 1950s, characterized by materialism and gaudiness. Said’s *Orientalism* has provided a channel to assess these predispositions as he argues that the Western perception recognizes non-Western traditions as inferior and made for their own interests. The novel rejects the American tendency to commodify and

appropriate foreign cultures, as most Americans at the time—mirroring Said’s assertions—held confining perceptions regarding the rest of the world. Concludingly, by making connections between two similar ideas, Kerouac’s counterculture and Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of the culture industry, this study illustrates how true individualism remains elusive under a conformist and consumerist society.

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