

Allen Ginsberg's Poetry: A Zizekian Psychoanalysis

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Abstract:

The present paper aims to understand the psychoanalytic framework of Slavoj Zizek. Further, it will investigate how linguistic dimension of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Lacan's model of subjectivity helps Zizek to study the cultural criticism and political theory. Finally, Zizek's ideas will be applied on Ginsberg's poetry to see the practical implications of his theory. Here Zizek's ideas are pertinent, since they theorize human life, its nature and culture. Thus Zizekian insights help in the comprehension of psychoanalytic aspects of Ginsberg's poems. This revisiting of Ginsberg's poetry through Zizekian framework will unravel the efficacy and versatility of Zizek's concepts as it will help elucidate plethora of issues and concerns that Ginsberg is dealing with.

Keywords: Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Popular Culture, Politics, Jouissance, Ideology

Discussing Slavoj Zizek's idea on psychoanalysis we can say he is one of the prominent exponents of Lacanian Psychoanalysis¹⁶

16 Lacanian Psychoanalysis – Lacan introduced the innovative method of reading Freud under the light of structuralism which was sometimes accompanied by Hegelian, Marxian or Heideggerian twists. He saw it essential to “return to Freud”. He advise to all the psychoanalysts that “we can do no better than to return to Freud's work” (2006, 228). This return to Freud was a linguistic return. He started to read between the lines and restructured the edifice Freud had built in a unique way in order to make it fit his own understanding.

He opines that Jacques Lacan's return to Sigmund Freud marks a paradigm shift in the domain of psychoanalysis. It is noteworthy that Lacan had revisited the writings of Freud to comprehend the workings of the unconscious through an analysis of the structure and functioning of language. So he tried to introduce the study of language into psychoanalytic theory. Zizek in *How to Read Lacan* (2006) has asserted that “the unconscious is structured as language” (2). One of the main themes of Zizek's project has been the problem of subjectivity. What Lacan offers Zizek is the model of subjectivity in which primary organising force is desire. For Lacan desire is what links the subject to an object. The medium of this is language, it is through language that the subject captures the object in a network of meanings. This linguistic intervention allows Zizek to study the popular culture and politics through the lens of psychoanalytic approach.

Out of the triad of ‘the real’, ‘the symbolic’ and ‘the imaginary’, for Lacan language is of the symbolic order and it is this symbolic order vis- à-vis language that shapes our subjectivity and aids in providing meaning to the world around us. Lacan opined the real is inexpressible since we cannot make sense of the real without it being mediated through the symbolic order of language.

Zizek uses such insights from Lacanian psychoanalysis to expatriate upon current events in the domains of art, politics and culture. He also explains how people navigate through this fast-paced world and the manner in which ideology helps people to cope- up with reality. Thus, Zizek has re-established the relevance of psychoanalytic criticism for comprehending the complex networks of events in the era of Global Capitalism. This is explained by Mathew Sharpe in *Zizek and*

Politics, (2010):

Zizek revived psychoanalytic criticism by making it more political, more philosophical and ultimately more popular: and he achieved all this by shifting the emphasis from analysis of imaginary and symbolic representations to an engagement with that which resists representation: the real. (12)

Therefore, Zizek's combining psychoanalysis with Marxism helped to make Lacan more palatable to contemporary critical issues by demonstrating how it offers less an account of the individual than of society. *Jouissance*¹⁷ is an important concept in Lacanian Psychoanalysis. Zizek elaborates upon this idea to comprehend the functioning of ideology vis-à-vis the people affected by it. He goes on to redefine the theories of subjectivity and ideology to deploy them for his grand project of political emancipation. Notably, such psychoanalytic understanding of language, subjectivity and *Jouissance* will be applied on Ginsberg's poetry further in this paper.

Ginsberg transmutes his personal experiences to be used as the subject matter for his poems. These first hand experiences provide authenticity to his poems, widen his mental horizon, since the com-

17 According to Lacan there is a *Jouissance* beyond "pleasure principle" that compels transgress prohibitions imposed on enjoyment. Thus, transgressing pleasure principle is not more pleasure but pain. There is certain amount of pleasure that a subject can bear beyond that it is pain and that 'painful principle' is called *Jouissance*. Zizek tends to alternate between 'jouissance' and 'enjoyment' but the connotations of the French word should still be understood even if it is translated in English.

positions emerge out of his personal endeavours. Here Zizek's ideas are pertinent, since they theorize human life, its nature and culture. Zizekian insights will be of immense help in the comprehension of psychoanalytic aspects of Ginsberg's poems.

Zizek's understanding of political framework is based on his Lacanian reading of psychoanalysis. He asserts, prior political philosophy has placed too little emphasis, on communities' cultural practices that involve what he calls "inherent transgression". These are practices sanctioned by a culture that nevertheless allow subjects some experience of what is usually exceptional to or prohibited in their everyday lives as civilized political subjects—things like sex, death, defecation, drugs or violence. Such experiences involve what Žižek calls *jouissance*, term he takes from Lacanian psychoanalysis. *Jouissance* is usually translated from the French as "enjoyment." As opposed to what we talk of in English as "pleasure", though, *jouissance* is an always sexualized, always transgressive enjoyment, at the limits of what subjects can experience or talk about in public. Žižek argues that subjects' experiences of the events and practices wherein their political culture organizes its specific relations to *jouissance* (in first world nations, for example, specific sports, types of alcohol or drugs, music, festivals, films) are as close as they will get to knowing the deeper truth intimated for them by their regime's master signifiers: "nation", "God", "our way of life," and so forth.

Zizek explains that political orientation of subject is determined by the master signifiers like freedom and democracy. These signifiers align subjects with a particular ideology. A change in them

can lead to the altering of the political orientation of subjects of particular political community. Thus, ideology is an important category in Žižek's political theories. But he does not subscribe to traditional Marxist understanding of ideology as 'false consciousness'. Sharpe explains this fact in his work *Žižek and Politics*:

As a Marxist thinker, Žižek approaches human condition with the concept of 'ideology.' He has not used this in the sense of 'false consciousness' that supposedly distorts the truth of material conditions. The Žižekian use of ideology stresses that ideology is always a spectral support to human life and there is nothing like post-ideological human existence. Here, reality is not contrasted with illusion, whether illusion is perceived as a necessary support to reality.
(12)

Though Žižek argues that a shift in master signifiers can lead to a shift in the ideology which can further lead to a shift in political orientation, he asserts that there is sometimes an inertia that does not allow a subject to change its ideology even if subject is disenchanted with adopted ideology. Even if he changes it, it will not become a part of his political inertia of inaction. According to Žižek this is because of *jouissance* or enjoyment.

So Žižek's claim to have theorized 'enjoyment as a political factor' is not just a claim to have noticed something interesting about political ideologies. It is claim about how the most basic element in human nature affects political communities. It is this psychoanalytic understanding of the subject that shapes Žižek's understanding of

the working of ideology and then politics. This will help analyse the political angle in the poetry of Allen Ginsberg. Which means the political scenario of 1950's in his poems.

Žižek is also a famous cultural critic and theorist. He has made Lacan indispensable to cultural studies just like Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose who a decade earlier made Lacan's idea important for a rigorous understanding of feminist theory. Žižek is able to explain sundry manifestations of cultural phenomena with his understanding of Lacan. He himself has explained that his blending of Hegelian Marxism, with Lacanian Psychoanalysis provides a critical perspective for cultural matters which makes aesthetic an important part of the schema. Beat generation, for instance, affected popular culture by combining literature, lifestyle, music and the freedom of the press. Thus, popular culture transformed through the radical views and bold approach of the Beats. Žižek's cultural theory will help in understanding the influence on popular culture by the beat generation and Ginsberg's poems.

Žižekian insights helps to study the poems of Irwin Allen Ginsberg. Ginsberg belonged to the 'Beat Generation', which was a literary, social, and political movement that flourished in US after the World War II. Its objectives were liberation of sex, rejection of materialism and experimenting with drugs. John Clellon Holmes in his article "This is the Beat" states:

More than mere weariness, it implies the feeling of having been used, of being raw. It involves a sort of nakedness of mind, and, ultimately of soul; a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness. In short it means being ungrammatically pushed up against the wall of oneself. (New York Times, 1952).

We can better understand the above discussed ideas of Zizek by taking few instances from Ginsberg's poems and applying Zizekian frame work on it. Ginsberg's first notable poem "Howl" discusses drugs and the associated hallucinations:

Peyote solidities of hall, backyard green tree cemetery dawns, Wine drunkenness over the rooftops, storefront boroughs of teahead joyride neon blinking traffic light, sun and moon and tree vibrations in the roaring winter dusks of Brooklyn, ashcan ratings and kind king light of mind. (13)

In the above-mentioned poem, poet has named the places visited in connection with the consumption of drugs. Beat poets used to be high on drugs almost everywhere whether it is a street, a cemetery or a rooftop. Peyote mentioned in the above lines was a hallucinogenic drug, originally used in Native American religious rituals. Its consumption produced strange visions and hallucinations which the Beat Generation poets explained as a spiritual state. Even Ginsberg once said that consumption of drugs enhanced his concentration. Zizek analyses such experiences, calling them a state of *Jouissance* (enjoyment). This concept of enjoyment is explained by Zizek as playing a key role in thinking about the subject and his relation to society and ideology. Thus, Zizek's explanation is particularly suited to our comprehension of drug addiction and consumption. He elaborates upon the concept in *Parallax View* (2006). He says:

What drugs promise is a purely autistic jouissance, a jouissance accessible without a detour through the Other (of the symbolic order) – jouissance generat-

ed not by fantasmic representations but by directly attacking our neuronal pleasure centers. It is in this precise sense that drugs involve the suspension of symbolic castration, whose most elementary meaning is precisely that "jouissance is accessible only through the medium of... symbolic representation. This brutal Real of jouissance is the obverse of infinite plasticity of imagining, no longer constrained the by rules of reality. (190)

Since drug reduces the feeling of alienation felt earlier by the subject, removing the feeling of lack and the person feels complete and experiences a sensation as if floating in the air. The demoralizing feeling of 'castrated subject of desire' is momentarily removed from the consciousness of the drugged person and he is possessed by the feeling as if he is a 'de – subjectivised body of desire'. Thus, Ginsberg's personal experiences the Zizekian jouissance.

This feeling of being ecstatic was further lengthened by the poet's persona by using LSD, marijuana, benzedrine, mescaline, philocybin, morphins, nitrous oxide, ether and laughing gas. In fact, Ginsberg wrote a number of poems in drugged state that Zizek in *Parallax View* (2006) explained as the subject's entry in an "autistic masturbatory and 'asocial' jouissance" (311). He even explained that it is this state of mind in which the real manifests itself at the level of individual subject.

Ginsberg in his poem 'America' discusses the life of American individuals. He writes: "when can I go into the supermarket and buy what I need with my good looks?" (15). The phrase "good looks"

used here underlines racial austerecism and apartheid between the American whites and blacks. Ginsberg criticizes the former as he was the spokesperson of the latter. It also reveals his sensitivity and comprehensive sympathy towards the other. The American dream envisaged that any American can succeed and gain a good job through hard work and risk, irrespective of the colour of his skin. Ginsberg repudiates racism that exists in America. The dream had begun to turn awry as opportunities and jobs were much more easily available for the whites than blacks. Zizek explains that, in reality, racism always existed and the subject of racism is a fantasy figure as it merely envisions that such a harmonious society is possible because in reality, according to Zizek, the society is always already divided. The fantasy racist figure merely attempts to cover up the impossibility of a whole society or an organic symbolic order that is self-sufficient. Zizek explains these ideas in *Tarrying With the Negative* (1993). He says:

What is the cause for our hatred of him, for our hatred of him in his very being? It is hatred of the enjoyment in the other. This would be the most general formula of the modern racism we are witnessing today: a hatred of the particular way the other enjoys... (109)

Zizek also elaborates upon the concept of racist fantasy. First type of racist fantasy revolves around the fear that the other desires our enjoyment and he want to loot us of the specific of our fantasy. The second racist fantasy that Zizek explains is that the ethnic 'other' has entry in same strange jouissance that we are having. Thus, by trans- versing the fantasy, we come to know that the figure of racism em-

bodies the truth of the failure of our society to constitute itself as a complete. Zizek enjoins people to come together in the solidarity of a common struggle and writes in *The Ticklish Subject* (1999) "[when we] discover that the deadlock which hampers [us] is also the deadlock which hampers other" (220).

Ginsberg, a little further in the poem America says, "America I am the Scottsboro boys." The incident alluded to carried feelings of deep antipathy in the minds of American blacks, since it reminded them of a terrible event that took place in Scottsboro. Nine black boys were subjected to coercion and harassment since they were indicted of dishonouring (raping) white women. The boys were not listened to and they received scant sympathy because the whites believed that those dark-skinned boys could indulge in such horrendous acts. Much later it came to light that there was no truth in the story and the boys were prosecuted because of their coloured skin. It is in *Tarrying With the Negative* that Zizek explained the phenomena of racism. He said: "To the racist, the 'other' is either a workaholic stealing our jobs or an idler living on our labour, and it is quite amusing to notice the haste with which one passes from reproaching the other with a refusal to work to reproaching him for the theft of work" (109).

Herein Zizek finds political correctness problematic. He considers it inadequate since it is not helping in diminishing inequality and racism. He advocates a number of methods to fight racism. First, we must not try not to intrude on the fantasy space of other individuals whenever possible. Second Zizek proposes that we continue to use the state as a buffer against the fantasies of civil society. Third he talks about the practice of traversing or going through the fantasy, to

show that, on the other side of fantasy, there is nothing here.

Ginsberg in the poem “Howl” also says: “Who balled in the morning in the evenings in rose gardens and the grass of public parks and cemeteries scattering their semen freely to whomever come who may go” (38). Thus, Ginsberg asserts that printed text (his poem ‘Howl’) will not permit his country to deny what everybody knew was natural. We humans are divers in our desires. Even Zizek asserts that he agrees with everyone that all talk about toilets, sado- masochism and erections is utterly obscene, nevertheless, it is incumbent upon us to theorize all aspects of life . These lines exhibit that poet is at odds with prevailing American norms. Such outpourings were considered inappropriate and he was accused of dealing with titles in obscene. Zizek talks about obscene which is influenced by psycho-analytic theory of Jaques Lacan. Lacan says tension arises because the moral ideals are often different from practical actions taken by government. Lacan thinks that contradictions arise when they place demands upon us, abetted to the Freudian id. Such tensions lead to repressed urges that are considered by society as taboo. Zizek says for every moral behaviour in the society or any law there exists an offence or transgression in the society that is deemed immoral. This suggests that Beats didn’t want to keep it hidden but rather howl it out in the world i.e. to articulate at the top of their voice. By effacing the line between Id and superego Zizek implies in the darkest desire.

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