

**BOB DYLAN'S LYRICISM: A COUNTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE**

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Bob Dylan, a songwriter, poet and a 2017 Nobel laureate in literature is often portrayed as the guiding spirit of the sixties counterculture. Dylan's politically committed songs in the 1960's articulated a vision of society that was radically different from the existing political realities. The paper highlights the cultural resonance of Dylan's radical *lyricism* amidst the countercultural era. It depicts the close affiliations that existed between Dylan's songs and liberation movements of the times.

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The counterculture milieu in 19th century Europe included the tradition and the cult of romanticism, bohemian and dandy. The countercultural wave in America got fillip through the creative cult of Beat generation and Hippies. Robert Allen Zimmerman popularly known as Bob Dylan was born in 1941 in Minnesota in a Jewish family. Dylan's early inspiration came from country, folk rhythm and blues music that he loved. His lyricism crystallized all his feelings of ambition, rebellion and individual identity. Youth in particular was touched by its credo of non-conformity. They identified with Dylan's generational amalgam of music, drug, sexual

freedom, anti-war, anti-racist and anti-commercial sentiments. Dylan through his hard hitting lyrical trajectory laid the foundation for their socio-political activism. He composed famous "Let Me Die in My Footsteps", as a critique of the Cold War hysteria that led Americans to build bomb shelters. His verses of "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall" portrayed fear of nuclear war. Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind", on the other hand, became youth's anthem for protest amidst the riptides of the sixties.

Counterculture was the term coined by Theodore Roszak. In his book *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic*



Society. Roszak argued that “the rational, science-based society of the twentieth century alienated men and women, especially the young, and propelled them into a search for meaning in drugs, spirituality, and dissent” (3). Strictly speaking, counterculture can be any confluence of social forces that oppose a “mainstream” culture (3). Roszak parallels the notion of counterculture as “culture so radically disaffiliated from the mainstream assumptions of our society that it scarcely looks to many as a culture at all, but takes on the alarming appearance of a barbaric intrusion” (52).

Rozzak's *The Making of a Counter Culture*, traces the countercultural phenomenon beyond the American streets. He delineates it within the European consciousness stretching from Germany, England to France. He states that the “the heirs of an institutionalized left-wing legacy, the young radicals of Europe still tend to see themselves as the champions of ‘the people’ (meaning the working class) against the oppression of the bourgeoisie (meaning, in most cases, their own parents)” (2). Central to his notion, is the apparent complicity of the dominant categories of political thought with what he calls the ‘technocracy’ (a managerial regime in which the whole of industrial society is subordinated to the controls of a technocratic elite) (56). He depicts how, “the technocracy grows without resistance, even despite its most appalling failures and criminalities, primarily because its potential critics continue trying to cope with these breakdowns in terms of antiquated categories” (8-9). Roszak contends how the nonconformist movement challenged the dominant structure of political parties like the Tory in England, the Republican in America, and the Communist in France (85). The similar spirit of enquiry manifests in Dylan's majority of radical lyricism interrogating dominant federal government of America. Roszak highlights how in Germany the major parties of the left opposition allowed themselves to be co-opted into the mainstream respectable sphere. Despite, the very small number of students, who risked the wrath of the police, stood against the dominant system. They stood for protecting the rights of ‘the people’. They joined the crusade beneath banners bearing the names of Rosa Luxemburg. Luxemburg, a German-Polish Marxist

was an anti-war activist, philosopher and a revolutionary socialist. Capturing the praxis in Britain Roszak opined, “as for the British working class, the only cause that has inspired a show of fighting spirit on its part during the sixties is the bloody-minded cry to drive the coloured immigrants from the land” (*The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society* 3).

These raging young iconoclasts composed mainly of white, well educated, middle-class young people who, despite their relative privilege, came to reject the dominant values of American society in the turbulent sixties. The Civil Rights Movement was one of the important offshoots of counterculture wave. The movement called forth demands that were rooted in the tangible improvement of existing reality, including desegregation of public facilities, voting rights, pay equalization, and employment quotas. The countercultural ethos were orientated more towards intellectual and spiritual fulfilment. The urge and the search for the alternative forms of society were often chased via retreat from the conventional politics.

The political tensions in the Civil Rights Movement often drew young Black activists into an alliance with the more idealistic elements of the counterculture. Its wide participatory bases made the young activist brigades like Students Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the white-led Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Black Panther Party work together. The countercultural idealism was often the source of frustration for the young activists. These activists were looking for the concrete political change. They attempted to draw the elements of counterculture into the orbit of the civil rights and anti-war protest movements.

Dylan's countercultural forays need to be traced within the New Left, a neo-Marxist school of thought. The New Left was a broad political movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Unlike the orthodox Marxist movement which mainly focused on class struggle, the New Left took a vanguard approach towards wide range of reforms ranging from civil rights, gay rights, gender roles and other social injustice. Dylan's trajectory of youth mirrors the early signs of the troubled counterculture generation. Dylan spent much of his youth drifting



through the South-western states, working and exchanging songs at travelling carnivals. His early streak of wonder is apparent when he decides to leave home at the early age of eighteen. Dylan pursued much of his artistic pursuits in Greenwich Village in New York City. The location served as the epicentre for bohemian artists and singers of the age. The place, thus, became the ultimate refuge for his alternative artistic pursuits.

One of the significant impacts on the countercultural era in America and Dylan in particular occurred via Beat Generation writers. Beat writers identifies with a loose- knit group of poets and novelists in the early sixties. They widely shared a non-conformist and anti-establishment attitudes in favour of unchained selfrealisation and self expression. 'Beat' was used to signify, both "'beaten down' (by the oppressive culture of the times) and 'beatific' (many of the beat writers cultivated ecstatic states by way of Buddhism, Jewish and Christian mysticism/or drugs that induced visionary experiences)" (Abrams 20-21) The group included writers like Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs and Gregory Corso.

The sixties era, thus, witnessed rapid changes in the cultural history of America. For Eyeman and Jamison, 1960s era is significantly a key stage in the "recurrent attempts by activist and artist alike to confront the dialectical tension between cultural and political practice" (*Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* 107-08).

Dylan's compositions dealt with civil rights movement, race, poverty, war and everyday hardship of the working class people. The countercultural wave could be best perceived through the close reading of his radical lyricism.

Dylan's album, *Times They Are A-Changin'* sings the concerns of the downtrodden, and the poor black people. This song established his status as a man of 'the people' in the counterculture wave of the sixties. The song poses many questions. The song is considered as a social commentary:

Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown

And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone.
If your time to you
Is worth savin'
Then you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'

(Dylan, Bob. "The Times They Are a-Changin'." *The Times They Are a-Changin'*, Columbia.1964).

Thus, countercultural individualism can be seen as intersecting with ideas of community, it was as a community of individuals defined by a privileged social status. But largely, the movement did touch upon the larger socio- cultural mandate of the times. It was definitely a youth's march closely bound up with a collective identity defined by social class, race, and generation.

One of the major templates that Dylan carried in his post-protest period, concomitant to countercultural wave, was the combative self-righteousness, which he spurned in his album *Another Side of Bob Dylan* (1964). Marqusee observed the mood of defiance in mid-sixties, where, the "upfront indulgence in personal unpleasantness was a far cry from the demure, upbeat or sentimental attitudes favoured by both folk and pop conventions" (162). In other words, "it was a new kind of sound in mainstream white popular culture" (Marqusee 162). Here, Dylan's composition- "Like a Rolling Stone", stood as a declaration of personal independence- "a macho disavowal of responsibility or permanence of affection" (163). The song lyrics said it all:

Well, my mother told my father,
just before I was born,
I got a boy child's comin'
He's gonna be, he's gonna be a rollin' stone

(Dylan, Bob. "Like a Rolling Stone." *Highway 61 Revisited*. Columbia, 1965).

Dylan's "Ballad of a Thin Man" best exemplified countercultural eras' anti-conformist node. Detailing its characteristic traits, it depicted the inadequacy of language, the difficulties of communication. It projects the impenetrable wall of incomprehension that existed between the conscious vanguard and society at large. The song at the very off set takes on media and its inability to



comprehend him and his music:

You walk into the room
 With your pencil in your hand
 You see somebody naked
 And you say, "Who is that man?"
 You try so hard
 But you don't understand
 Just what you'll say
 When you get home

(Dylan, Bob. "Ballad of A Thin Man." *Highway 61 Revisited*, Columbia, 1965).

The song also fashioned itself as a "Dadaist challenge to a reductive social order" (Marqusee 169). It was a staunch protest against labels in an era in which mass commercialization proliferated.

Dylan's most celebrated and powerful song of the era was "Blowin' in the wind". The ambiguous refrain—"the answer, my friend, is "Blowin' in the wind", seemed to be groping for the un-nameable. The refrain, in a big way touched a mood explored in Dylan's work through the rupture and riptides of the sixties. The song also recorded the horrors of war through his renowned composition, "Blowin' in the Wind"

Yes, 'n' how many times must a man look up
 Before he can see the sky
 Yes, 'n' how many ears must one man have
 Before he can hear people cry
 Yes, 'n' how many deaths will it take till he
 knows
 That too many people have died
 The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind
 The answer is blowin' in the wind

(Dylan, Bob. "Blowin' in the Wind."

The Freewheelin', Columbia, 1963).

CONCLUSION

Dylan's lyrical pantheism thus served as a seminal accompaniment to the social movement of the early sixties. It ranged from the Civil rights movement, to the anti-war stances of the young masses.

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