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Bob Dylan: A Fierce Poetic Soul of the ‘People’ in American Sixties

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Abstract:

To experience the spirit of the American Sixties, long-haired hippies dancing at Woodstock festival, protestors marching in at anti-war rally, it is imperative to note how songs like “Blowin’ in the Wind” or “The Times They Are a-Changin’” changed the face of generation. The significance of awarding 2016 Nobel Prize to Bob Dylan for literature does not lie so much in acknowledging of an individual poetic genius, as it does in reinstating the idea of ‘popular as political’. Bob Dylan’s songs act about the protest movements of the American 1960s also known as Turbulent Sixties. His hard-hitting lyrical trajectory transformed the legacy of country folk music into new socially engaged and politically provocative music. The paper tries to explore Dylan’s politically committed songs of 1960s which articulated a vision of society that was radically different from the existing political realities. It highlights the cultural resonance of Dylan’s radical lyricism amidst the countercultural era. Dylan in these folk songs appropriates and interrogates everyday struggles of the ‘subordinate,’ the ‘people’ or what Mathew Arnold called them as “populace”. In particular, the paper explores the relevance of Dylan’s hard-hitting folk songs during the Civil Rights’ Movement, anti-Vietnam War campaign and the Counterculture spirit of American Sixties.

Keywords: Poetic Soul, American, hippies, music, radical lyricism, countercultural era.

Introduction

The late 1950’s and early 1960’s saw a renewed interest in folk music, and the development of free jazz and avant-garde rock. From the political perspective, this period was significant because of its general instability where the tensions determined by class,

gender, race, sexuality, age group, and political ideology became the focal points for mass campaigns and demonstrations.

The socio-cultural understanding of the political music is undertaken through the critical perspective of Serge Denisoff's approach on 'folk' songs and John Fiske's critical understand of the 'Popular' culture. 'Popular' culture is always defined, implicitly or explicitly, in contrast to other conceptual categories: folk culture, mass culture, dominant culture and working-class culture. Theoretically, popular culture brings into play a complex combination of the different meanings of the term 'culture' along with the different meanings of the term 'popular'. John Fiske states that "popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry" (*Understanding Popular Culture* 1).

Fiske, thus, defines, "culture as a constant process of producing meanings of and from our social experience, and such meanings necessarily produce a social identity for the people involved . . . within the production and circulation of these meanings lies pleasure" (*Understanding Popular Culture* 30). Raymond Williams defines. "culture is a living, active process: it can be developed only from within, it cannot be imposed from without or above" ("Culture is Ordinary" 19). In a similar tone, Fiske creates a different space for the 'people' whom Arnold called 'Populace'. The 'people' is not a stable sociological category. He says "the people, the popular, the popular forces are the set of allegiances that cross all social categories; various individuals belong to different popular formation at different times" (*Understanding Popular Culture* 20). The development of the idea of popular culture is linked to arguments about meaning and interpretation, which predate but become strikingly evident in the debates over the mass culture. It is essential to distinguish whether it comes from above or below or imposed. It is essential to trace the influence of commercialization and industrialization on the popular culture. Fiske relates popular culture to a "culture of conflict," as it always involves the "struggle to make social meanings that are always in the interest of subordinate and that are those not preferred by the dominant ideology" (20). Stuart Hall states, "it is a site of contestation where everyday struggle between the dominant and subordinate groups are played out, won and lost" ("Notes on Deconstructing the 'Popular'" 11).

Hall unsettles the very distinction between 'high' and 'popular' culture. He adds thatd "transformations are at the heart of popular culture" (14). Hall points out that "one way or another, 'the people' are frequently the object of 'reform'" (27). Hall here makes a distinction of the 'people' for being used as an object. Hall defines the value of "resistance

and struggle” rather than “reform and transformation” (27). He views “transformation is the key to the long protracted process of “moralisation” of the labouring classes” (27). Stuart Hall shows that “oppressed, subordinate or minority groups can have a hand in the construction of their own vibrant cultures and are not merely dupes: the fall guys in a social system stacked overwhelmingly against them and dominated by Capitalist media and commercial provision” (446).

Roszak’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 thesis, 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 that “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 to the nonconformist movement that 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 that interrogated dominant federal government of America.

Roszak highlights major parties of the Left opposition in Germany allowed themselves to be co-opted into the mainstream respectable sphere. Despite, the minimal 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 was a German-Polish anti-war Marxist, 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. The Civil Rights Movement was one of the essential offshoots of the counterculture wave. The movement called forth demands rooted in the tangible improvement of existing reality, including desegregation of public facilities, voting rights, pay equalization, and employment quotas. The countercultural ethos stressed more towards intellectual and spiritual fulfilment. The urge and the search for the alternative forms of society were 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 counterculture elements. Its wide participatory bases made the young activist brigades like the 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 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 must 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, 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 Southwestern 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.

Richard Carlin, an expert of country music and a critic, states that Dylan's country song reflected folk tradition with "unique events and attitudes of his time" (*Folk* 1). Elaborating upon the definition of folk song and music, Carlin further states that "folk music means many different things to different people" (*Folk* 10). Commenting upon folk songs during war time and post-war scenario, he reflects the folk music genre as a significant voice of the 'people' (10). He further adds that "folk songs not only connect the performers,

whether professional or amateurs, and their audiences to a fascinating historic past but also to the vibrant present” (13).

Folk songs have been set under some definitional criteria. Harold Lasswell, an American political scientist, in his *World Revolutionary Propaganda*, points out that the “author of the folk song is anonymous” (39). He traces the impact of Dylan’s songs as his “songs are orally transmitted from one generation to the next” (39). These songs create some meaning in the life of people. He further states that the song must experience verbal alteration during generational transmission. Concentrating upon the depth of the folk music through “oral transmission”, he expresses the feelings of folk communities about their concerns and issues (39).

Dylan in his early age experimented on different styles of music. Most of his influences were from the musical genres of country, folk, rhythm and blues. Dylan’s deep inclination towards traditional American folk music stemmed from his folk music idol, Woody Guthrie. Guthrie, an itinerant folk singer in the age of the Dustbowl and the Great Depression, was one of Dylan’s early heroes. He depicts his committed allegiance towards himself by stating, “What I was into was a traditional stuff with a capital *T* and it was far away from the mondo teeno scene as you could get” (*Chronicles: Volume One*, 228). He opines, “I could make things up on the spot all based on folk music structure and it came natural . . . outside of Woody Guthrie, I didn’t see a single living soul who did it” (228). Dylan often highlighted his heavy indebtedness towards Guthrie and wrote many early folk songs like “Blowin’ in the Wind”. By keeping in mind his melody in particular and his persona in general, he states, “My life had never been the same since I’d first heard Woody on a record player in Minneapolis. . . when I first heard him it was like a million-megaton bomb had dropped” (229). Dylan even adopted Guthrie’s “Okie accent” (a term used by Journalist Ben Reddick for the descendents of Oklahoma, who were affected by the ‘Dust Bowl’ in 1935 and later moved to New York) (Swiss and Sheehy 22). Rodnitzky writes, “Whereas Woody had drifted around the country to escape small-town depression, Dylan adopted Guthrie to escape small-town monotony” (*Minstrels of the Dawn*, 105). Ed Cray depicts how “Guthrie made a stirring expression of the popular front’s claim on the nation, as what was at stake was national self-definition” (*Ramblin’ Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie*, 151).

In his initial composition, Dylan was not interested in producing any other songs than folk songs. Suggesting his deep allegiance towards folk music, he contends, "I had no song in my repertoire for commercial radio anyway" (*Chronicles: Volume One* 34). He visualized the "songs about debauched bootleggers, mothers that drowned their own children, Cadillacs that only got five miles to the gallon . . . rivers weren't for radiophiles" (34). He highlights the struggle by stating, "There was nothing easy-going about the folk songs I sang" (34). To validate the struggle through songs, R. Serge Denisoff, a cultural theorist, argues that "an economy where the question of jobs or basic necessities of life are rarely raised produces a wider range of protests and a culturally aware demography" (*Folk Music and the American Left* 438).

In a similar tradition, Dylan's songs voiced the uneasiness of life and protested against the system through his lyrics. Jerome Roberts opined that "his music jumped out of the tiny radio like pure energy" (*Bob Dylan: Voice of a Generation* 7). He further says that his songs "voiced the dream" of the entire nation (7). Carrying on the folk music legacy, Dylan began his musical career in the early sixties. Bob Dylan is often portrayed as the guiding spirit of the Counterculture of sixties. His youthful years in particular were touched by its credo of non-conformity. They identified with its generational amalgam of music, drug, sexual freedom, anti-war, anti-racist and anti-commercial sentiments. Dylan's compositions dealt with civil rights, race, poverty, war and everyday hardship of working class 'people'.

The intellectual climate in the 1950s was very stifling. The post-World War II scenario had disturbed the whole world, particularly America. The space for alternative perspective constantly shrank and due to that intellectuals felt suffocated. The level of material wealth was increasing because of the post-war tension, particularly in the white communities. The folk literature author, Robert Cantwell writes, "The 1950s was perplexingly divided by the intermingling of an emerging mass society and a decaying industrial culture" (*When we were Good: The Folk Revival* 319). Dylan emphatically raised the growing concern of the age through his folk lyricism. Anthony Scaduto juxtaposes the stifling conformity of Dylan's birth place Hibbing against music where he argues, "opened Bob Zimmerman's head as it opened the heads of so many growing up at the end of the repressed fifties" (*Bob Dylan* 5). To understand how music created the path, Lawrence Epstein defines "Dylan found it Hibbing conformist, culturally oppressive, a place in which he couldn't be creative enough — music, again, provided a refuge from cultural stagnation"

(*Political Folk Music in America from its Origins* 143). Music, for Dylan, became a form of travelling.

Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" became the anthem for 1960's Civil rights movement. His most celebrated song, "Blowin' in the wind" was so powerful that it became song of the era. The ambiguous refrain of the song, "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 as it stated below:

How many roads must a man walk down

Before you can call him a man?

Yes, how many times must the cannon balls fly

Before they're forever banned?

How many times can a man turn his head

And pretend that he just doesn't see?

The answer my friend is blowin' in the wind'

The answer is blowin' in the wind.

("Blowin' in the wind." *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, Columbia, 1963).

Dylan strongly blasted with his chilling Civil Rights songs, "Oxford Town" with the theme of racial violence. Dylan here posed his lyrical effrontery to the incident happened in University of Mississippi, when a student, James Meredith sought enrolment as first black student which followed strong white opposition across the South; "All because his face was brown" (Ricks 46).

Oxford Town, Oxford Town

Ev'rybody's got their heads bowed down

He went down to Oxford Town

Guns and Clubs followed him down

All because his face was brown

Better get away from Oxford Town

(“Oxford Town.” *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, Columbia, 1963).

Just when the students in large numbers were taking up action against the Pentagon and weapon industry, “Masters of War”, unmasked the military-industrial nexus:

You fasten the triggers

For the others to fire

Then you set back and watch

When the death count gets higher

(“Masters of War.” *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, Columbia, 1963).

Conclusion

For years, the reviewers of popular culture have referred to Dylan as the voice and the generation's conscience. His popularity reached its pinnacle when he received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016. Dylan is uncontested poet laureate of the rock 'n' roll era, pre-eminent singer and song writer of modern times. He is an abiding presence in the American cultural history. He not only influenced American public but also has inspired other rising singers of the era. He served his life as inspiration for socially conscious artists like Joan Baez, Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix, Bruce Springsteen and many others. Dylan's use of prophecy, parable, accusation, doggerel, metaphor and confession make him a poet of a unique kind. His songs are legitimate means for making space in the academic world. His songs interrogate the structured notion of socio-cultural issues like class, race, and slavery. The *Topical* musical streak of his songs has long lasting impact on the 'people' and that's why he is labelled as a “Spokesman of the Generation”.

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