

## JACK KEROUAC'S THE DHARMA BUMS AS ECO-CONSCIOUS, SPIRITUALLY SERIOUS AND MEDITATIVE TEXT

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### Abstract

The Dharma Bums, Jack Kerouac's one of the best novels is based on his life between 1950 and 1957. Kerouac devoted the Dharma Bums to Gary Snyder, a poet, an ecologist and Zen Buddhist depicted as Japhy Ryder in the novel. The Dharma Bums written in 1959 reflects scenes of spiritual seriousness, ecological consciousness and meditation which projects Kerouac's interest in Buddhism. The spiritual and philosophical discourse between Japhy Ryder and Ray Smith about Buddha's principles while climbing on mountain peaks and their approaches towards it show the awareness of writer's knowledge of Buddhism. Therefore, the present research paper will make an attempt to see how The Dharma Bums reflects Kerouac's spiritual quest and meditative stance and eco-conscious self.

**Keywords:** Hitchhiking, Dharma, Rucksack, Meditation

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**T**he Dharma Bums' is a 1958 novel by Beat Generation author Jack Kerouac. The semi-fictional accounts in the novel are based on events that occurred years after the publication of his epoch making work 'On the Road'. The main characters in the novel are the narrator Ray Smith (based on Jack Kerouac) and Japhy Ryder, based on the poet, essayist and Buddhist Gary Snyder. It presents many of the same Buddhist concepts interwoven through numerous stories and characters. The book also largely concerns the duality in Kerouac's life and his ideals, examining the relationship that the outdoor, mountaineering, hiking and hitchhiking through the West have with his city life of jazz clubs, poetry readings and drunken parties.

The Dharma Bums is an autobiographical novel. It is based on Kerouac's life from 1956 to 1960. The book focuses upon the relationship between Kerouac, who in the book called Ray Smith and his friend, the poet, Gary Snyder. Allen Ginsberg (Alvah Goldbrook) and Neal Cassady (Cody Pomeray) among others are also the characters in this book.

Jack Kerouac introduces the key figure of this novel Japhy Ryder, an alter ego of Gary Snyder who coined the term 'Dharma Bum'. Japhy Ryder, right from his childhood had an interest in animals and Indian folklore, Indian myths and mythologies. He studied Chinese and Japanese scriptures and discovered an interest in Chinese and Japanese Zen Buddhism.

Ray Smith and Japhy Ryder met for the first time at poets' congregation at the Gallery Six in town to give a poetry reading. They used to talk on their favourite Buddhist saints; Avalokitesvara or in Japanese 'Kwannon'. Ray Smith didn't show that much interest in Oriental Buddhism but was interested in Sakyamuni's Four Noble Truths; All life is suffering and suppression of sufferings can be achieved. The Lankavatara scripture which shows that

there is nothing in the world but the mind itself and therefore all's possible including the suppression of sufferings.

The novel starts with Smith on the railroad, hopping freights and ends with him alone on Mt. Desolation peak. Though there is poetry, drink, girls and various socially uncountenanced nonsensical huge jinks, even then the novel is marked with spiritual seriousness and meditative stance. In another sense, the novel is the tender exposition of idealism, compassion and small philosophical virtues.

At the centre of The Dharma Bums, a spiritual and literary heart is the character of Japhy Ryder (in real life, Gary Snyder, a noted ecologist, socialist and a poet). He is a devotee of Zen Buddhism and plays a foil for Kerouac's efforts to find peace and understanding the Dharma known as 'truth' and 'law' which is fundamental to the terminology of Buddhism and spiritual enlightenment. Ray Smith (Kerouac) in The Dharma Bums charts the spiritual quest of a group of friends in search of the Dharma or truth. Ray and Japhy, along with Morley the yodeller, head off into the high Sierras to seek the lesson of solitude and experience the Zen way of life. But, in wildly Bohemian San Francisco, with its poetry jam sessions, marathon drinking bouts and experiments in 'yabyum' they find the ascetic path very difficult to follow.

One of the recurring themes in the novel is its eco-consciousness which evident many a times when Japhy and Smith indulge in talks about climbing the Matterhorn Peak. Many such references about the places take readers to a critical flight where The Dharma Bums is looked upon as an eco-conscious literary text. During the course of the novel, Rol Sturlason talks about Ryoanji rock garden of Shokokuji monastery in Kyoto, Japan which is nothing but old boulders placed in such a way, supposedly mystically aesthetic in order to arouse peace in the minds of tourists.

During the novel, we witness many incidents about mountain climbings which indirectly make a scathing attack on the middle class mentality and promotes ecological consciousness. Smith, in the novel says, "Colleges being nothing but grooming schools for the middle class non-identity which usually finds its perfect expression on the outskirts of the campus in rows of well-to-do houses with lawns and television sets in each living room with everybody looking at the same thing and thinking the same thing at the same time while

Japhies of the world go prowling in the wilderness to hear the voice crying in the wilderness, to find the ecstasy of the stars, to find the dark mysterious secret of the origin of faceless wonderless crapulous civilization,.....'em all." (35) Moreover, Japhy considers mountain as a Buddha. He said, "Yeah man, you know to me a mountain is a Buddha. Think of the patience, hundreds of thousands of years just sitting there being perfectly perfect silent and like praying for all living creatures in that silence and just waiting for us to stop all our fretting and fooling." (58) Through these few incidents in the novel, we come across with The Dharma Bums as an eco-conscious text which finds resemblance to Henry David Thoreau's concept of Nature.

In the novel, many episodes take us to spiritual discussions about the forms of Buddhism. The discussions between Japhy Ryder and Ray Smith and Japhy's interest in Zen (Japanese) form of Buddhism propagated by Avalokitesvara of Kwanon in Japanese which believes in mythology. But Ray Smith's version of Buddhism was different than Japhy's. He preferred Sakyamuni's (Gotama) four noble truths. Moreover, the discussion on 'Yabyum' ceremony presents contrasting theories of contemplation of the characters in the novel. Japhy, while describing about Yabum says, "He sat crosslegged on the pillow and on the floor and on the floor motioned to Princess who came over at sat down on him facing him with her arms about his neck and they sat like that saying nothing for a while." (27) Japhy says that yabyum is a holy ceremony in Tibet which is done in front of chanting priests. But Ray Smith, in the novel does not prefer to indulge in the yabyum because he had been a celibate throughout the year and he believed that lust is the direct cause of birth which was the direct cause of suffering and death. But, later on, he could not hold his human instinct and joins it. Through these incidents, we find that our mind is at the core of everything; the world is nothing but the mind. There are many incidents in the novel which can be taken as a testimony to peep into the spiritual aspect of the text as well as the spiritual dilemma in the minds of the characters.

The essence of The Dharma Bums lies in its scenes of spiritual seriousness and meditation. Kerouac describes himself as a 'bhikku'- a Buddhist monk and had practiced celibacy for almost a year when the book begins. There is a sense of sadness and changeable character of existence and the value of compassion for all beings that comes through

eloquently in 'The Dharma Bums'. During the course of the novel, Smith and Ryder have many discussions about Buddhism at various levels of seriousness. Ryder tends to use Buddhism to be critical of and alienated from American society and its excessive materialism and devotion to frivolity such as television. On the other hand, Smith has the broader vision and sees compassion and understanding as a necessary part of the lives of everyone. Smith tends to be more meditative and quiet in his Buddhist practice. He spends a great deal of time in reading Buddhist texts and idling out. But, Ryder is much active and goes on hiking, chopping wood, studying and womanizing.

'The Dharma Bums' offers a picture of a portion of American Buddhism during the 1950s. It also offers a portrayal of what has been called a 'rucksack revolution' as Smith and Ryder go outdoors, climb the Matterhorn in California's Sierra Mountains. In the final chapters of the book, Kerouac spends eight isolated weeks on Desolation Peak in the cascades as a fire watchman. But at the end comes back yearning for human company.

The Dharma Bums is a fundamentally American book that offers an opportunity for spiritual exploration to its people. It begins with Ray Smith bumming a ride to the San Francisco Bay area on a freight train. He shares a boxcar with a hobo who shows him a slip of paper containing a prayer by Saint Teresa. This is the first of several Dharma Bums from the novel which finds expression into. The other Dharma Bums are Japhy Ryder (Gary Snyder), Alvah Goldbook (Allen Ginsberg), Neal Cassady, Cody Pomeray (Dean Moriarty) and Jack Kerouac as Ray Smith. In the book, Ray Smith, Alvah Goldbook and Japhy Ryder spend most of their time arguing over whose brand of Buddhism is most enlightened. When Japhy Ryder brings a beautiful girl named Princess for 'Yabyum' ceremony, Ray Smith is frozen with dilemma whether to succumb to contemptible sexual desire or adhere to the spiritual consciousness embedded into his life by Japhy Ryder.

The main theme of the novel is the contrast between Ryder and Smith's approaches to spirituality. Japhy Ryder is a Zen Buddhist who calmly indulges himself in tea drinking ceremonies, inventing haikus and arranging sessions of yabyum with beautiful women. On the other hand, Ray Smith, a disciplined Buddhist looks towards life as an all-or-nothing battle between lustfulness and purity.

The Dharma Bums, undoubtedly, is a fiction but at the same time presents itself as an autobiography of the author himself which begins and closes with exact time period of September, 1955 and August, 1956. The main protagonist in the novel, Ray Smith, an alter ego of Jack Kerouac himself delves in his geographic as well as spiritual adventures and the other characters in the novel are no one but his own friends addressed with other names. The Dharma Bums revolves around the theme of Buddhism which influenced the writer's personality later on culminated into its study, practice and praxis. Kerouac's friends and literary contemporaries also followed his footsteps in practicing the Oriental religion, Buddhism. In 1953, according to him, Kerouac discovered Buddhism by way of Henry David Thoreau: "Well I went to the library to read Thoreau. I said, 'I'm going to cut down from civilisation and go back and live in the woods like Thoreau.' And I started to read Thoreau and He talked about Hindu philosophy. So I put Thoreau down and I took out, accidentally, The Life of Buddha by Ashvagosa."

While talking about the title of the book, The Dharma Bums symbolises juxtaposition of classical oriental language and the American slang. Kerouac himself, at the beginning of the novel says: "At this time I was a perfect Dharma Bum myself and considered myself a religious wanderer." While talking about the ancient oriental tradition and juxtaposing it with mid-twentieth way of life, Japhy Ryder and Ray Smith, in the novel cast themselves as Han Shan and Shih-te. During many of their conversations, Japhy and Smith see the emergence of New America in the 1950s where Dharma Bums seems to be refusing the general demand of consumption as the hallmark of bourgeois society. They epitomise to shun the idea of consumption as the privileged mannerism. They didn't want any refrigerators, TV sets, cars, etc. They dreamt of a great rucksack revolution where thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray. They imagined a utopian society where everyone would be kind and also by strange unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom to everybody. At the end of the novel, Ray returns to civilisation after a long solo trip to a mountain in Washington's North Cascades, envisions him to be Han-Shan.

There is a sense of sadness and changeable character of existence and of the value of compassion for all beings that comes through eloquently in 'The Dharma Bums'. Smith and Ryder have many discussions about Buddhism at various levels of seriousness during the course of novel. Ryder tends to use Buddhism to be critical of and alienated from American society and its excessive materialism and devotion to frivolity such as television. Smith has a broader vision and sees compassion and understanding as a necessary part of the lives of everyone.

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