

DIRTY AMERICA: READING CHARLES BUKOWSKI'S SELECTED FICTION

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ABSTRACT

It won't be an understatement to claim that American Literature reached its fruition in the post-war era. After the two wars, the range of themes in American literature, particularly fiction, showed a significant increase. The writers not only criticized the political and economic atmosphere of the country, but were painfully aware of the disturbing issues like racism and gender inequality. While the fiction of postwar America is usually replete with the names of literary giants like like Don Delilah, Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, William Burroughs, John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov, Toni Morrison, Joseph Heller, the one writer whose work is equally commendable but rather ignored or shooed away by the 'mainstream literary groups' is Charles Bukowski. While Bukowski is usually remembered as a poet, his fictional meanderings within the American landscapes provide the readers with a view of America hasn't predominantly found in any writer of his time. Bukowski fiction, through the image of his alter-ego character, shows the real underbelly of American life. With the incorporation of drug addicts, whores, thieves, menial jobs and an unhinged desperation to live the day, Bukowski not only enlarges the space of the novel, but also extends the scope for readers to look closely at the American life once the orgy of war is over. My paper tries to look at this and other themes like anxiety, paranoia, and loneliness among other through the novels of Charles Bukowski. It also tries to interrogate whether the term 'Dirty Realism', often associated with Bukowski, is an adequate term to refer to the flux of themes that bus. kowski presents through his fiction.

KEYWORDS: American Literature, Charles Bukowski, Fiction, Post Office, Factotum, Ham on Rye, Dirty Realism

Born into this

Into hospitals, which are so expensive that it's cheaper to die

Into lawyers who charge so much it's cheaper to plead guilty

In a country where the jails are full and the madhouses closed

Into a place where the masses elevate fools into rich heroes

Because of this

Fooled by this

Used by this

Pissed on by this

Made crazy and sick of this

Made violent

Made inhuman

By this

We are born into this sorrowful deadliness

We are born into a government 60 years in debt

That soon will be unable to even pay the interest on that debt

And the banks will burn

Money will be useless ¹

At one point Bukowski relates writing poetry to the act of shitting. He declares that writing a poem is "like taking a shit, you smell it and then flush it away... writing is all about leaving behind as much a stink as possible."² This strange analogy at once relegates the act of poetry (held in high regard as the best form of literature) and simultaneously opens up new frontiers and bunkers to view literature from. This scatological exemplification of writing poetry or writing in general is something which forms the crux of Bukowskian attitude towards life in general - a view of life that is cynical and comical at one and the same time.

The one thing this is most often overlooked in relation to Bukowski is the fact that his writings have rarely been contextualized within the historical ups and downs of American literature. Most of the material that is available with regard to Bukowski concentrates more on his whimsical personality, his low life adventures and his regard for the people who live on the fringes of society. What is, however, missing is a dire need to look at Bukowski's life and his writings from the very prism of American literary history and the need to draw inferences from the socio-political and economic milieu of the era of which he was an important product and opponent as well. The fact that Bukowski's writings are not erudite, at least academically, and that he distrusted any establishment of any kind, has had a huge influence (in a bad way, mostly) on his stature in not being canonized by the academic pundits within the literary academia. This point is also emphasized by Russel Harrison in the introduction to his book on Charles Bukowski in which he writes: Indeed, because Bukowski is so unmistakably American... the lack of a critical response in this country is all the more striking (11). It then comes as no surprise that important American Post-war literary histories give as little space to Bukowski as possible. Richard Gray in his book *A History of American Literature* sums up Bukowski's literary aura in this way:

There are no large gestures in Bukowski's work. Using an off-hand, free-flowing lines or sentence and an off-hand, casual idiom he simply records things as they pass in a cryptic, even sardonic way. And what passes before him, most of the time, is the other America: life among the underclass, the bums, the dropouts, the dispossessed who casts a shadow over the national dream of success. (Gray 636)

The references in his poems and novels alike to underclass people, people living at the edges of a developed nation, with prostitutes, workers, burglars, gamblers among others, makes Bukowski's writing in itself an act of defiance against the commonly held notion of literature where the nobility and notions of usage of proper language claim the upper hand. Living in Post-war America, Bukowski through his writings not only challenges the standards of American life but

¹ Charles Bukowski. "Dinosauria, we" from *The Pleasures of the Damned: Poems 1951-1993*. Pp. 475-476.

²Quoted in Tony O'Neill's article Don't Blame Bukowski for Bad Poetry.

also of literature. At a time when writers like Saul Bellow, Don DeLillo, Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, William Burroughs, John Barth, Vladimir Nabokov, Toni Morrison, Joseph Heller were not only challenging the traditional way of writing and inserting new themes in their writings, Bukowski found himself quite at distance with all of them. What is also important in reference to this is Bukowski's committed act of not being straightjacketed with any movement or school of thought. His lack of a proper training in literary academia also in a way paves to his unreceptivity in the canon of 'high literature' of the academia.

Bukowski's committed act of writing about the commonplace, average man disgruntled with the political and the economic situation of the country in a language that is at once vulgar yet thought provoking has had a deep influence on his legacy fraught with controversies. All the three selected novels - *Post Office* (1971), *Factotum* (1975) and *Ham on Rye* (1982) deal with the adventures or misadventures of a drifter, who drags a poetic soul within himself, and his entanglement within the common vicissitudes of ordinary life. Charles Bukowski's novels are actually underrated documented personal histories of a writer cum poet's dislocation and alienation in a world of corporate hegemony. These personal novels are actually stories of what he shouldn't have been doing in a world which forced him to do so. These stories are dramatic retelling of how an ordinary being is caught within the intricate complications of the economic structure of a post industrialist America. The numerous jobs that his alter-ego Chinaski takes up and quits within the narrative of *Factotum* rather than being a way to praise the so called American Dream (where jobs are rampant) is actually a scathing criticism of the economic system showcasing the alienation of the working class.

In one of his interviews, when asked about his works being autobiographical, Bukowski openly declares that "[a] almost all... [n] inety-nine out of hundred" (Kaye) of whatever he has written has not been made up. Bukowski's disclaimer therefore sounds exactly like him as opposed to the commonplace declarations of imaginative flights. His novels, therefore rather being called fictions can easily be categorized under faction – a form of fiction which takes real events as a basis of dramatization or what is now commonly referred to as the non-fictional novel.

His novel *Post Office* tells the story of Hank Chinaski and his life as a mail carrier in United States Postal Services. The fact that the novel is "dedicated to nobody" is emblematic of the fact that the novel has lessons for everyone who is discontent with his/her ordinary lives. Within the narrative of the novel the protagonist harbors a cynical view of the world while drinking and 'whoring around in his local town. It is through the protagonist's attitude and way of life that Bukowski is able to comment and criticize not only the economic but social and political ambience of the then America. At one point in the novel, while the protagonist who is now applying for postal clerk after his brief time as a mail carrier in the service describes the 'perks' of getting a menial but permanent job in the over-crowded town in such a way that clearly displays the hypocrisy of not just the established organization but also of their so called rules. He says:

After swearing us in, the guy told us:

"All right now, you've got a good job. Keep your nose clean and you've got the security the rest of your life."

Security? You could get security in jail. Three squares and no rent to pay, no utilities, no income tax, no child support. No license plate fees. No traffic tickets. No drunk driving raps. No losses at the race track. Free medical attention. Comradship with those with similar interests. Church. Round-eye. Free burial.

Nearly 12 years later, out of those 150 or 200, there would only be two of us left. Just like some guys can't taxi or pimp or hustle dope, most guys, and gals too, can't be postal clerks. And I don't blame them. As the years went by, I saw them continue to march in in their squads of 150 or 200 and two, three, four remain out of each group—just enough to replace those who were retiring. (Post office 55)

The quote by Chinaski captures his cynicism towards the general condition of human beings who spend most of their lives trying to steady and 'rectify' their life through the so called freedom of choice. Bukowski here is not only criticizing the lifestyle that normal citizens crave for but also the role of organizations in creating an illusion of security that they'll provide. At other instances as well Bukowski comments and points out the seeming glittering, attractive and scintillating surface lives of people which at the end turn out nothing but shallow and hollow. The element of loneliness and seclusion of people living, like his character, in an overpopulated and jobless Los Angeles is aptly put forth and discussed through the narrative of his novels. In fact, it won't be an exaggeration to declare that it is the jobless wanderers disseminated irregularly through his narrative who are the real protagonists of Bukowski's fictive world. There's a particular scene in the novel *Post Office*, which throws ample light on the ennui of the then techno-centric seemingly progressive America. Bukowski in a way here claims that everything as such can be bought in America with the help of money except a tranquil soul. The protagonist has this to say about the politics of offices in America:

What I am trying to say is, there is a certain game played in offices all over America. The people are bored, they don't know what to do, so they play the office-romance game. Most of the time it means nothing but the passing of time. Sometimes they do manage to work off a screw or two on the side. But even then, it is just an offhand pastime, like bowling or t.v. or a New Year's Eve party. You've got to understand that it doesn't mean anything and then you won't get hurt. Do you understand what I mean?" (*Post Office*71)?

The above quoted passage succinctly sums up the cost of living in a world where rituals are more important than real life ventures. The character of Betty and her life crisis brings yet another aspect from which to view the worthlessness of human lives which Bukowski wittily describes by the inability to touch and make contact with their bodies when she comes one night to his house. Chinaski retorts by summing up their misadventures in a world which is at once cruel but beautiful by saying:

It was sad, it was sad, it was sad. When Betty came back we didn't sing or laugh, or even argue. We sat drinking in the dark, smoking cigarettes, and when we went to sleep, I didn't put my feet on her body or she on mine like we used to. We slept without touching. We had both been robbed. (79)

In the novel *Factotum*, as the title itself suggests, Bukowski describes the life of his alter-ego Henry Chinaski and his life as a drifter in the mean and lowlife streets of Los Angeles. What distinguishes the Chinaski of this novel from the former is the character's realization and awareness of his vocation as a writer. The character of Chinaski according to a critic "resembles an automaton unable to manufacture the requisite "taste" for a job required by capital..." (Dobozsy52) One thing which should be pointed here is the stark similarities of Bukowski's real life crisis and the problems that his alter-ego Henry Chinaski faces throughout the novel. The constant rejections from corporate publishers and the problem of making one's ends meet in the then America is given ample space throughout the narrative of the novel. At one point while commenting on the tussle between the aesthetic purpose of art and the

immediate materiality of life and art making, Chinaski writes:

That was all a man needed: hope. It was a lack of hope that discouraged a man. I remembered my New Orleans days, living on two five-cent candy bars a day for weeks at a time in order to have leisure to write. But starvation, unfortunately, didn't improve art. It only hindered it. A man's soul was rooted in his stomach. A man could write much better after eating a porterhouse steak and drinking a pint of whiskey than he could ever write after eating a nickel candy bar. The myth of the starving artist was a hoax. Once you realized that everything was a hoax you got wise and began to bleed and burn your fellow man. I'd build an empire upon the broken bodies and lives of helpless men, women, and children—I'd shove it to them all the way. *I'd show them!* (Factotum 63)

The passage forms the crux of the novel *Factotum* and in general the problem of Bukowski's writing career. Bukowski's place in the history of post-war American literature is seminal to his choice of themes not only in his poetry but prose as well. Had Bukowski not been born into the kind of family that he was and had he not been rejected by the so called high end publishers his writing might not have bred the kind of cynicism that it supplies. In this regard a critic writes:

It was during the 1970s, when the harsh reality dealt the average American many a severe blow after the hard-to-assimilate defeat of the Vietnam War, and when hippies slowly awakened from their LSD and marijuana-induced dreams to acknowledge the failure of the revolution of the 1960s, that Bukowski appeared on the scene to successfully win the audience's approval with his unvarnished, all-too-direct poetry. (Debritto 6)

The lack of opportunities, the need to live and the need thereof to prove oneself in the short span of one's life in the cutthroat competition of the world famous a prosaic but a central triangle of sorts in his writings. The monotonous monstrosity of the humans of late capitalism is succinctly brought into focus through the narrative of the novel.

The artistic life the protagonist desires to live is at regular intervals being juxtaposed with the material concerns of this world. Bukowski writes:

It was true that I didn't have much ambition, but there ought to be a place for people without ambition, I mean a better place than the one usually reserved. How in the hell could a man enjoy being awakened at 6:30 a.m. by an alarm clock, leap out of bed, dress, force-feed, shit, piss, brush teeth and hair, and fight traffic to get to a place where essentially you made lots of money for somebody else and were asked to be grateful for the opportunity to do so? (*Factotum* 127)

While as both *Post Office* and *Factotum* deal with themes that overlap quite a bit about the restlessness and the material endeavor of a person who's yet to find the solace that he at least thinks he deserves, *Ham on Rye* on the other hand is predominantly biographical. This narrative follows a straight coming of age novel, which deals with Henry Chinaski's life from his childhood to his college days. As is usual of Bukowski, he recounts his character's life through the prism of cynicism and black humor. He recounts his father's brutal regular weekend beatings and his Sisyphian inability to overcome those. Bukowski frequently associates his character's father's joblessness with his propensity for violence. What he is actually trying to point out through this figure is the effect that the economic depression had on people like him. The economic problems and the way people deal with them becomes a central point in the first half of the novel.

These problems, therefore bear a direct impact on Chinaski's life as well. His cynicism and his inability to relate and make emotional contact with people are actually rooted in his problems relating to his father. When one of the character's (Frank) father commits suicide due to the ongoing economic problems he is casually mentioned by Chinaski as if suicide is a beautiful used to life. This casual recognition of suicide, depression and other mental health problems form an essential component of the novel throwing ample light on the then country of dreams - America. The mention of the War and the protagonist's problems with nationalism find their due course as the novel progresses. What is central to Bukowski's narration is the fact how he relates or rather equates Sports with War. Together with this, the protagonist finds it equally difficult to choose between the two as bait for him are as boring as hell. Regarding these numerous evils he at one point writes:

The problem was you had to keep choosing between one evil or another, and no matter what you chose, they sliced a little bit more of you, until there was nothing left. At the age of 25 most people were finished. A whole goddamned nation of assholes driving automobiles, eating, having babies, doing everything in the worst way possible, like voting for the presidential candidate who reminded them most of them. (Ham on Rye, 192)

Bukowski's narration is usually fraught with events like these where an innocent human soul is pitted against ideologies of those kinds which seem normal to certain people, but are disastrous to those who bear the capability to think and act. In all the selected novels Bukowski's narration tries hard to balance the aesthetic imaginings of a soul and the materiality and the cruelty of the actual world out there. Regarding the war and the nationalism attached to it the protagonist writes:

"There are no good wars or bad wars. The only thing bad about a war is to lose it. All wars have been fought for a so-called good Cause on both sides. But only the victor's Cause becomes history's Noble Cause. It's not a matter of who is right or who is wrong, it's a matter of who has the best generals and the better army!" (Ham on Rye, 263)

Charles Bukowski often relates to a particular mode of writing called Dirty Realism. In the *Granta* edition dedicated to the writings of certain writers Dirty Realism is defined as related to those writings that "write about the belly-side of contemporary life – a deserted husband, an unwed mother, a car thief, a pickpocket, a drug addict – [these writings however]... write about it with a disturbing detachment, at times verging on comedy. [These narratives are] [u] understated, ironic, sometimes savage, but insistently compassionate..." (Bufford 6) In his book *The Dirty Realism Duo: Charles Bukowski and Raymond Carver*, Michael Hemmingson gather five important elements of Dirty Realism around which this particular brand of fiction revolves. They, according to him are a) Alcohol b) Cancer c) Work d) Women e) the Ugly (Hemmingson 42-46). These five components of fiction put together enumerate the workings of Dirty Realism as a form of fiction, which follows what is commonly called as possessing the aesthetic of the ugly. The first thing however that should be kept in mind about Dirty Realism is that the only thing dirty about it is that it is concerned with truth. There's no denying the fact that these elements find references in the works of Charles Bukowski, but these elements should only be taken as localized references to tell a greater truth about the condition of humans living in a late capitalist society - a society which is at once thriving due to money and corporate set up but which simultaneously breeds poverty and joblessness. Though America finds a central place within these narratives, but his themes can now easily be seized and discussed in reference to the geopolitical scenarios of the third world countries particularly India.

As a critic puts it:

Trying to understand the writings of Bukowski and other outsider Beats requires positioning their output not just in relation to literature, but broadly in terms of 'popular' culture and discourses of exclusion, applying a number of theoretical tools and fields of study in order to capture the possibilities of representation. (Clements 2)

If Bukowski's writing is anything at all, it is a robust critique of American society, narrated by a person whose first hand victim of that very society. Rather than sidelining Bukowski's writings as ordinary and dirty, the need however is to re-contextualize and re-read Bukowski in the crisis that we find ourselves in today.

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