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Rewriting Human Nature: Larkin's Reinterpretation of Human Nature in "Deceptions"

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Abstract: For centuries human nature has been the topic of intense and endless discussions that bewilder many a writer. Man's quest for defining it and the changing historical and political dynamics make such discussions more interesting in the wake of more open and permissive societies across the world. This paper is an attempt at finding an explanation to the intricate problem in human relationship with sex and desire at its core. The poem "Deceptions" contains sex, violence, desire, love, etc. interwoven together as characteristic pressures on human life and how individuals in a given historical period are rendered into mere subjects under such pressures. Thus, a transition from being an individual to being a subject corresponding to the given historical period to which the individual belongs is what Larkin's "Deceptions" presents before its readers. Admittedly Larkin's "Deceptions" is an apt portrayal of human nature as an outcome of man's interaction with the social and political dynamics of a given historical period.

Keywords: Philip Larkin, permissive societies, subject, pressures, political dynamics

Larkin's obsession with human nature is, despite endless discussions, an unresolved issue. Indeed one can hardly find any of his poems without a characteristic portrayal of human nature. This aspect of Larkin's poetry has been the subject of much debate for critics though no conclusive remark has been made so far. His poem "Deceptions", being one of the most discussed poems on human nature on which most critics have their contradictory observations leaving much space for discussion, is taken up in this paper for a close reading and analysis to locate his views on human nature. The title is not only about deceiving but also about undeceiving the people who are guided by their own set of assumptions on the basic human predicament of 'desire' and its ultimate effects on their lives. The poem is a response of Larkin to an act of rape which took place in nineteenth century England and recorded in Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*. In his characterisation of London, Henry Mayhew gives an account of a girl raped by a man. Larkin quoted a short passage from the book to give an introduction to the poem:

> Of course I was drugged, and so heavily I did not regain my consciousness till the next morning. I was horrified to discover that I had been ruined, and for some days I was inconsolable, and cried like a child to be killed or sent back to my aunt. (Mayhew 1851)[1]

The 'I' here is the girl raped. She has no parents and lives with her aunt. It hints at her insecure life without her parents apart from the grief of being raped. She was drugged before being raped and it means that she was not willing to have sex. Her suffering was so acute that the first stanza describes her psychological pang in a horrifying image: 'a drawer of knives.'

Larkin's description of the environment within which the rape takes place is dense with meanings:

> The sun's occasional print, the brisk brief
> Worry of wheels along the street outside

[1] Philip Larkin has made this reference to Mayhew's lines at the beginning of his poem "Deceptions".

Where bridal London bows the other way,
And light, unanswerable and tall and wide,
Forbids the scar to heal, and drives
Shame out of hiding. All the unhurried day
Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives. (Larkin 1988, 32)[2]

Larkin's response to the victim of this act of rape is:

Slums, years, have buried you. I would not dare
Console you if I could. What can be said,
Except that suffering is exact, but where
Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic?
For you would hardly care
That you were less deceived, out on that bed,
Than he was, stumbling up the breathless stair
To burst into fulfilment's desolate attic. (CP 32)

Thus, the two stanzas of the poem refer to the predicament of the raped girl and Larkin's assessment of the rape case at a higher philosophical level. The moment when Larkin says "Even so distant, I can taste the grief," we know that he has already shared the grief of the girl. However, he later concludes that she was "less deceived, out on that bed" than her violator who was "stumbling up the breathless stair/ To burst into fulfilment's desolate attic." The poet knows that the suffering of the girl is 'exact' but when 'Desire' has possessed the man completely, all his ethical readings become 'erratic.' Here, the poet sees one consolation for the victim as she will be sympathised with by anyone while the violator will be blamed for what he has done.

A further examination of the poem hints at a bigger question: Where does this desire come from? Since desire is a natural human quality, giving way to it is also a human duty because he would have been more 'erratic' if the desire is not given a proper way out before it gets over to unmanageable size: "where/ Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic." This is to ascertain that desire is a gift of Nature within which

[2] All further references to the poem are to this edition, *Collected Poems*, edited by Anthony Thwaite; hereafter referred to as CP.

man acts: "Nature is blind power, man is conscious victim" (Kuby 44). The sexual drive of the rapist is "nature's power" (Kuby 47) and not his. The origin of the crime lies with Nature, not with the rapist. Thus, the rapist is cleared off the accusations made to him, as Sisir Kumar Chatterjee says:

> The poem is not about the rape of a girl, still less about rape as a criminal act. It is not a sociological treatise on the plight of the innocent rape victims of the 19th Century England. Larkin only uses the historical perspective to find room for reflection on universal human situation of suffering and gratification of desire. So, he hardly needed to go beyond the attic where the girl was raped, to concern himself with the consequence of the ruin of the girl. The consolation that Larkin offers is relevant not just for the girl Mayhew speaks of but for all those who have had the experience of suffering in some form or other. Mayhew's document, in short, provides Larkin with concrete particulars on the basis of which he could philosophically reflect on the general human situation. (Chatterjee 115)

This portrayal of the rapist as a victim of the power exercised by Nature suddenly drives the direction of the poem to a universal human problem other than the unethical act of rape.

What is more interesting about the poem is what the title "Deceptions" suggests. It is "Deceptions" and not "Deception.'' There is, therefore, more than one deception. However, searching for those deceptions will definitely call for a clear conceptual knowledge of what deception means literally and ethically. The verb 'deceive' is a transitive verb which means that there should be an object against whom the act of deception would be carried out by a subject. At the literal level the rapist is the subject who committed the crime of rape against the object, the girl. Here, the girl is the sufferer and the rapist is the one who gains enjoyment. However, Larkin's portrayal of the rapist is larger than such literal definitions of the act of deception. He portrays both the rapist and the raped as victims. The raped girl's grief is "Bitter

and sharp" and the light "Forbids the scar to heal, and drives/ Shame out of hiding." Throughout the day her "mind lay open like a drawer of knives." She is deceived by the rapist—"Of course I was drugged, and so heavily I could not regain my consciousness till the next morning" (CP 32)—but less than the rapist who was deceived by his own desire. The suffering of the rapist is so immense that he is rejected by himself and in his effort to console himself he was "stumbling up the breathless stair/ To burst into fulfilment's desolate attic." The last two lines of the poem clearly hints at the alienation of both the victim and the perpetrator. The epithets, 'breathless' and 'desolate' make the situation of the perpetrator more serious than that of the victim. Thus, to Larkin, the girl is 'less deceived' while the man is more deceived. Both are, thus, deceived but at different degrees. These deceptions are what the title of the poem suggests.

Indeed, there are critics who are critical of the treatment of the victim by the poet. For Larkin, "SEX is designed for people who like overcoming obstacles" (Larkin 1951, 135). The motif of the rapist is to 'overcome' his desire and not the destruction of the girl's chastity. The perpetrator still stands human even after destroying the virginity of the girl because, for Larkin, the problem of desire in the perpetrator is bigger than the grief of the girl:

> Slums, years, have buried you. I would not dare
> Console you if I could. What can be said,
> Except that suffering is exact, but where
> Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic? (CP 32)

The point Larkin hints here is at the 'desire' of the perpetrator and not at the perpetrator who is completely possessed by 'desire.' This 'desire' is not a human creation but an imposition of Nature on man. The perpetrator, being a man, is a victim of this imposition of Nature. His raping the girl is not an act aimed at destroying the girl but an effort to respond to the call of Nature, 'desire.' Thus, the rapist is still a 'human' man blinded by Nature. This is a universal human predicament and not for a Victorian rapist only.

Whereas, the universality of the theme of suffering and gratification of human desire is central in the poem, there is another set of arguments coming from the feminists. For example, Janice Rossen writes:

> The poet shows compassion for the girl's suffering; yet at the same time, the poem remains problematic because the poet also shows a great deal of sympathy with the man who has attacked her, and thus he ends the poem with a marked detachment from the woman's suffering, which he begins the piece in describing. This ambivalent view-point suggests a complex psychological structure underneath, where the poet can to some extent identify with the girl's victimisation—but only partially. (152)

Rossen's argument is that "Larkin's depiction of women has directly to do with violence against them, and he seems to speak powerfully both for a corporate group of men and from a deep subconscious level" (Rossen 144). The point, here, is that the poem is about Larkin's misogyny: "the masculine perspective on sexual matters" (Rossen 151). However, my attempt here is not to give judgment over gender politics, but to relate the sufferings of both the raped and the rapist as "a universal human experience and desire as a universal human imperative" (Chatterjee 115). Whether the act of rape is right or wrong is exclusively an issue that is beyond the scope of the present book. Yet, the sufferings of the characters in the poem form a universal human experience that causes 'alienation' of a serious nature in life.

Larkin's selection of the 19th century event to relate the "universal human experience" is apt in making the poem more realistic as he once said: ". . . I wouldn't want to write a poem which suggested that I was different from what I am" (Hamilton 223). Rape was not as rampant in 20th century as it was in the Victorian age and Larkin's concern is not about the rape but about the human sufferings. The poem is not about gender conflict but about a conflict between two humans acting within the dynamics of Nature. It is the critics like Rossen that pushes the poem within the sphere of gender politics against the wishes of Larkin: "critics can hinder but they can't help" (Hamilton 222).

Larkin's attempt in the poem is to expose human illusion in our attempt to fulfill our own desires. The choice of rape is not the choice of the rapist but "something hidden from us chose" (CP 153). Not only deception, the rapist's condition portrayed in the last two lines also alludes to the self-rejection of the rapist. His suffering is self-created, so he cannot blame anybody except "To burst into fulfilment's desolate attic." This is to ascertain what Peter R. King said:

> This attic image reveals the extent of man's delusions. The poem's implication is that the only value in a world of suffering lies in the individual divesting himself of any illusions including the illusion that being the less deceived can bring any comfort. There is no complacency in this paradox, and it is this exposure of the illusion concerning fulfilment that is a constant feature of Larkin's Poetry. (King 18)

It is this 'illusion' which forms the core of the poem. The highly charged sexual desire of the rapist, when acted out, rebounds and hit the psyche of the protagonist of sexual adventure by leading him to the "fulfilment's desolate attic."

The diction of the poem also helps in portraying the physical and psychological pains of the characters involved. When the poem begins with "Even so distant" in the first half of the first line, the time distance of the occurrence of the rape is clearly visible. Then, the line, "I can taste the grief," which fills the second half of the line shows that the poet shares the grief of the girl. The time distance cannot erase the sadness in the mind of the poet. He suddenly dwells into the historical past where the "brisk brief/ Worry of wheels along the street outside" the attic fails to share the grief of the girl and the rapist. Everyone was so busy with his/her own daily works. "The sun's occasional print" figuratively alludes to the penetration of the male sexual organ and the injection of semen into the girl while she was unconscious. The (sun) 'light' was "unanswerable and tall and wide" to the girl as it "drives/ [her] Shame out of hiding." The "brisk brief worry" becomes "unhurried day" once the sexual intercourse is over and the mind of the girl "lay open like a drawer of knives." The simile in the last line of the

first stanza completely exposes the mental crisis of the girl: "Your mind lay like a drawer of knives." The alienation of the girl and her rapist is also shown when the people of London completely reject them without noticing their presence: "Where bridal London bows the other way."

In the second stanza the rape which took place in the Victorian age becomes a different case of study. Place and time—"Slums, years"—have changed. The suffering of the girl is no more an important case though it is minutely detailed in the first stanza. The attention of the poet turns towards the suffering of the rapist now because the girl is "less deceived" than the rapist: "That you were less deceived, out on that bed, than he was . . . ." The case with the rapist is a conflict between 'desire' and his 'readings' in which the former overpowers the latter: "but where/Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic." Here 'readings' means the knowledge of the rapist which he learns while 'desire' is the creation of 'Nature' and not his. This desire is thrown upon him by Nature and its impact is too great to resist on his part that all his readings "grow erratic." And at last, he rapes the girl only to find "fulfilment's desolate attic." This portrayal of the rapist's psychological state is strengthened by the words such as 'erratic,' 'stumbling,' 'breathless,' 'burst,' 'desolate,' etc.

The poem is about desolation and confusion in life in our effort to reach out to the things which are "out of reach" (CP 137) in life: "One longs for infinity and absence, the beauty of somewhere you're not."[3] The case of the rapist is his attempt to reach out to "somewhere he is not" to fulfill his desire. This desire is completely thwarted and he is boxed within the "desolate attic." However, Larkin's portrayal of the raped and the rapist hints at a more complex phenomenon of human relationship, particularly of the male-female relationship. This can be examined further in the light of the socio-economic background of the Victorian age.

The victim lives in the Victorian slum; she has no parents; and consequently, she has a concern for economic security. Her economic

[3] "An Interview with John Haffenden," in Philip Larkin, *Further Requirements: Interviews, Broadcasts, Statements and Book Reviews, 1952-1985*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 47-61, p. 59.

condition defines her life style and as such she can be examined further in terms of the socio-economic condition of the period. Graham Holderness writes:

> The quotation from Henry Mayhew is there precisely to locate this dramatic situation in a real history, that of the London proletariat in the mid-nineteenth century. The social world Mayhew documented is that of Dickens: a world of extreme contrasts [of *Hard Times*] between wealth and poverty; a world of deprivation and undeserved suffering; a world of cruelty and exploitation. (87)

Holderness's assertion assumes significance because the poem itself talks about a social reality. The Victorian fast life is alluded by "the brisk brief/ Worry of wheels outside" the desolate attic where the rapist is "stumbling." The rejection of the 'allegedly' immoral girl by the society is quite clearly indicated when the "bridal London bows the other way" in disgust. This society is no match for the victim to challenge. Its cruelty is so "tall and wide" that it does not allow her "scar to heal"; instead, it drives her "Shame out of hiding."

The word 'slum' also hints at the economic reality of the Victorian age in which the rape case becomes a reality which is in turn constitutive of the social reality of that age. Thus the 'less deceived' victim and the 'more deceived' rapist are products of that social reality of that period of history. The idea conveyed by 'deception' is larger and wider in the social and historical context than the mere betrayal of an innocent rape victim of the Victorian age:

> This [social context] is the true importance of the poem, which consists in Larkin's recognition that every member of that oppressed Victorian underclass— not merely its most obvious casualties— was a victim of deception, blinded by ideological illusions to the real conditions of their lives. The man who exploits woman is himself in turn exploited by a more powerful agency. His 'desire' begins as the most basic human need— for

> love, for recognition, for an end to isolation. But in these conditions of *alienation* [emphasis mine], where men and women cannot know either themselves or one another, can only see and use one another as objects, this 'desire' is deflected, distorted and turned to cruelty and appetitive lust. 'Deception' is thus a general condition, typical of the universal social context dramatized in this stereotypical situation of exploitation. (Holderness 88)

This is how we see the poem beyond the conventional framework of the melodrama of the Victorian age. This is about an individual's subjection to the reality of the society in which he or she lives. The conflict is not between the man and the girl but between the individuals and the social system which gives room for exploitation. The rapist and the victim are alienated in the cruel atmosphere of the Victorian society which is marked by poverty, destitution, prostitution and oppression. Both of them are blinded by their own illusions which are rooted in that system of the society. Thus, the centrality of the key word 'deception' has a wider implication in the social and historical context than the feminist arguments raised by critics like Janice Rossen: "He may be spiritually unfulfilled, but he has physically brutalized her, an act which one may assume is not spiritually enlightening for her so much as it is damaging" (Rossen 154).

The concluding lines of the first and the second stanzas show the condition of the raped and the rapist. The physical and psychological condition of the victim is exposed as:

> All the unhurried day
> Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives. (CP 32)

and that of the rapist as:

> . . . stumbling up the breathless stair
> To burst into fulfilment's desolate attic. (CP 32)

The portrayal of the acute sufferings of the victim and the rapist contains a larger question— why so much suffering? Both the rapist and the victim cannot answer this question; they are both limited within

the 'desolate attic' and the 'drawer of knives.' The girl "cried like a child to be killed" and the rapist stands completely confused after the act of rape. Their problem is a case of alienation in a cruel society devoid of human compassion and both of them are already subjects, not individuals, of that society. As such the nature of man is a social production within which individuals are rendered into subjects from their individual selves.

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