

## **EXISTENTIALISM IN PHILIP LARKIN'S POETRY: DECEPTION AND LINES ON A YOUNG LADY'S PHOTOGRAPH ALBUM**

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### **Abstract**

The paper intends to analyze Philip Larkin's poems: *Deception* and *Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album* through the modern aspects of existentialism, the term established by Kierkegaard and Sartre. Existentialism is a philosophical idea that became very popular in twentieth century. It captured every form of human thought and expression including novel, theatre, poetry and art. In the twentieth century, every individual had a problematic existence with anguish, uncertainty, fear, alienation and despair in the daily life because of different negative socio-political and cultural events that affected every aspect of life in Europe. No great writer or poet could remain free from the influence of this time. Larkin was also not an exception. He was influenced by the powerful mood of existentialism of his time. Larkin belonged to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and his poetry reflects existential moods of his time. The whole atmosphere of Larkin's poetry is gloomy, bleak and despairing. From the very beginning he had his own consistent existentialist views concerning life, art, society, solitude, self-hood and otherness, belonging uncertainty, self-realization, anxiety, alienation and freedom of choice; he meditates on those big issues that preoccupied humanity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most of his poems present the typical problems of existence of an individual in the contemporary society. The aim of this paper is to explore how far we relate the above mentioned poems of Larkin with the ideas of existentialist philosophers. Since philosophy is closely related with literature, this paper may help to understand Larkin's poetry from a new perspective.

**Key words:** existentialism ,humanity, problematic existence, alienation, despair, uncertainty

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No other English poet belonging to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been the subject of so much and of so intense, critical controversy as Philip Larkin (1922-1985). When the English poet Philip Larkin started writing in the 1940s, Humanism was being questioned and Existentialism emerged and laid claim to the humanist heritage. It is the purpose of this study to show that his poetry can be read in the light of this controversy to demonstrate that his poetry bears an existentialist content. This argument leans essentially on the charges of pessimism and negativity leveled against Larkin. This study aims to show that Larkin's pessimism is only an aspect of an existentialist and more broadly humanist view of life.

In his poetry, Larkin deals with universal issues and others in relation with everyday life in modern British society. This negative aspect of life in his poetry is also known as 'a bleak attitude toward life'. Colin Flake, a great critic of Larkin, says that the element of consolation in Larkin's poems is based on what appears to him to be ultimately an anti-poetic assumption that our hopes and dreams must remain unfulfilled. As Flack contends:

"...by identifying himself with the drab, fantasy-haunted world of the waste land Larkin has not only downgraded the whole of real existence against an impossible absolute standard, but has also cut the ground from under the poet's feet ... The ideal, for Larkin, has become inaccessible, and being inaccessible it can only throw the real world into shadow instead of lighting up from within... Love and death, though they are the controlling ideas of the poems, can never inflame the individual moments of existence; instead they simply diminish them, and the boredom of this diminished existence is invested with a kind of absolute necessity".

(Quoted in *Philip Larkin: Poetry That Builds Bridges*, p. 1)

"I stick my finger into existence...it smells nothing".

(Quoted in *Note of Existentialism in the Poetry of Philip Larkin*, p. 99)

From the above quotation by Kierkegaard it can be easily said that existentialism is notoriously difficult to define. Existentialism is a term applied to the work of certain late 19<sup>th</sup> century and 20<sup>th</sup> century European philosophers which gives priority to human existence, that is to say, subjective experience of the world, rather than to abstract or objective structures or essences. According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Hornby, 2006-2007, p. 532) existentialism is a philosophical theory, which says that humans are free and responsible for their actions in a 'world without meaning'. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Hornby, 1989, p. 436) also says, it is a theory in philosophy derived from Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, and made popular by Jean Paul Sartre, the French philosopher, that man is a unique and isolated individual in a 'meaningless and hostile world' and responsible for his actions and free to choose his destiny. From Kierkegaard to Sartre, there is a big change in the idea of existentialism through the hands of many philosophers including Nietzsche, Heidegger, Camus. Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), (Existentialism.wiki), is generally considered to be the first existential philosopher though he did not use the term existentialism. He proposed that each individual, not society or religion, is solely responsible for giving meaning to life and living it passionately and sincerely or authentically. According to him there is God and that's why man exists. For Kierkegaard the truth of Christianity signifies the very paradoxicality of faith, that is, it is possible to go beyond the ethical and nevertheless or rather because of this very act of disobedience to be loved by God. Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844-1900), (Existentialism.wiki), concept of existentialism differs from the concept of Kierkegaard, he believed that men in society are divided ordered according to their own willingness and capacity to participate in a life of spiritual and cultural transformation. Nietzsche believed in 'nihilism' that is in the other word meaninglessness. Whereas, for Kierkegaard, the problem of meaning was to be resolved through the individual's relation to the Divine, for Nietzsche the problem of meaning is rendered possible at all because of the demise of the Divine. According to him God is dead and man is free to do according to his own will. He believed that the demise of the Divine could be the opportunity for the emergence of a being which derives the meaning of its existence from within itself and not from some authority external to it. In the hand of Sartre, the French philosopher, existentialism became most popular. Sartre posits the idea that 'what all existentialists have in common is the fundamental doctrine that existence precedes essence' (Existentialism.wiki). He gives the concept of "Being and Nothingness" (Existentialism.wiki). There are some strange themes by which the existentialist philosophers express themselves in their writings about their concrete human existence in this absurd world of life and death. In spite of variations among the

existentialists, they share some common feelings in dealing with such common themes as anxiety, death, alienation, nausea, despair, meaninglessness and nothingness of human existence. This dark and foreboding picture of human life leads existentialists to reject the ideas such as happiness and optimism. The picture of life created by existentialists is highly pessimistic and depressive in every way.

Philip Larkin was one of the most highly regarded and respected poets of the post world war Britain. He achieved considerable popularity although he was never an 'easy' poet, and many of his poems offer intriguing insights to the mind of a complex and flawed personality. He rejected the traditional thoughts of Romanticism and wanted to write the truth, to see life with a "clear-eyed realism". In his poems we can see the problematic human existence of the contemporary society of post-world-war Britain. Larkin wrote about discontent in life to tell his 'truths'. The speaker and the personae in his poems lack social contact, love, sex and happiness. Consequently they seem to be always long for them. Larkin's personae live and maintain that "Life is first boredom, then fear" (*CP* p. 153). Boredom is the daily routine of existence, fear a part of man's essence, because it becomes one of his life's permanent features. This meaning and truths stem straight from the fact of writing about the existentialist "individual in the world." Being experienced in his personal life, he insists on the themes of loneliness, freedom of choice, loss, the passage of time and aging, deceived expectations, death, the relation between the individual and the outside world and religion. John Powell Ward says:

"...it is melancholic and laconic; sited in a recognizable and familiar landscape; written and indeed spoken in ordinary everyday language preoccupied with domesticity, love, death; searching unavailingly for where true knowing may be found; inward and self-anxious; stamped with unfulfilled desires and longings and casting back to a secure lost world which in his case, he sardonically laments never existed".

(Quoted in *Philip Larkin: Poetry That Builds Bridges*, p.4-5)

For existentialists, Man is thrown into a Godless Universe, but he realizes himself through his free will and actions. With this freedom comes responsibility and then anxiety. Sartre claimed that reason alone was not enough to understand life. Thus the existentialists give importance to emotions. Existentialism is a subjective interpretation of life concerned with existence in its totality. For it, only the individual experience is real. Larkin wanted to write the truth to see life with a 'clear-eyed realism' that is evident in the poem *Deception*; the central poem of the collection under the title *The Less Deceived* in which Larkin says that he can

imagine the bitter and sharp pain which the woman experienced when she was raped. He then describes a few details of daily life in London, such as the noise of wheels in the street, which prevent the woman from forgetting her memory of the outrage which the rapist had committed on her. This poem about a rape is based upon an actual incident which took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and which had been recorded by a writer called Mr. Mayhew in his documentary study of the London poor under the title *London Labour and the London Poor*. At the beginning of the poem Larkin quoted a short passage to provide his poem with an epigraph:

“Of course I was drugged, and so heavily I did not regain consciousness until 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, *London Labour and the London Poor*

(CP, p.32)

According to the poem, a woman was first drugged heavily before being raped, so that she did not regain her consciousness till the next morning. When she discovered that she had been raped, she felt horrified and for some days she continued to be in a state of utter despair, crying like a child and wishing either to be killed or to be sent back to her aunt. The circumstances under which the rape took place have not been stated either in the note provided by the poet or in the poem itself. Those circumstances have been left to our imagination, and so the poem acquires a highly suggestive quality. We are free to imagine any circumstances. Perhaps the rapist acted under a sudden impulse; perhaps he had often been seeing this woman, had then made her acquaintance by some means, and had subsequently lured her into an apartment where he prevailed upon her to take some intoxicant so that she should not offer any resistance to his act; perhaps he first tried to make her agree to have the sexual act with him, and when she did not agree, he found some opportunity of drugging her and then gratifying his desire; perhaps he had a grievance against the whole female sex, and he chose the most easily accessible woman to take his revenge upon the whole class of woman. Thus there are many numbers of possibilities which the readers are free to choose from, “the possible basis for the poet’s plea on behalf of the Rapist”.

Ordinarily our sympathies are always with the woman who has been raped because, no matter what the circumstances are, a man has no right to use force against a woman to satisfy his lust. But Larkin in the poem is not concerned with the judgement of the rape case, he seeks here to analyze the relative worth of suffering as a universal human experience and desire as a universal human imperative. Within the subtext of the poem, it is intended to be taken as the

given of the poem so that the actual thrust of the poem has to be looked for in the narrator's reflective philosophizing on the value of suffering and of the consummation of the desire. In the poem Larkin only uses the historical perspective to find room for reflection on universal human situation of suffering and gratification of desire. In the poem there are two kinds of deception; first is the comparatively simple trick practised on the girl, she is drugged into unconsciousness and then raped, so she is deceived. Secondly, there is another level of deception, that experienced by the rapist himself. She is "less deceived than he", because while she has illusion thrust upon her, his deception is constitutive of his very experience. Larkin says:

"...the agent is always more deceived than the patient, because, action comes from desire and we all know that desire comes from wanting something we have not got, which may not make us any happier when we have it".

(Quoted in *Philip Larkin: Poetry That Builds Bridges*, p.116)

The girl in other words, is duped by an external human agent, whereas the man is deluded by himself by his illusory idea that his desire can lead him to the attic of his fulfillment. But the speaker does not believe in the reality of any such fulfillment. For him the rapist's fulfillment was not fulfilling but only disappointing, leading him not to a spiritual maturity but to a sterile, perplexing sense of emptiness. But his suffering is nameless and barren. Thus the poem's true value rests on its masterful articulation of a universal human predicament one that results from our desire which when unfulfilled, becomes maddeningly nagging, but which when fulfilled, leads only to desolation. The poet dramatized the woman's agony in the light of the rapist's dissatisfaction once the deed is done.

In the poem *Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album*, Larkin shares the existentialist emphasis on the individual experience. It is the opening poem of Larkin's poetic collection, *The Less Deceived*. The theme of self-deception in relation to our attitude to time finds the subtlest expression in *Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album*. R.J.C.Watt once recalls, "Larkin introduced a public reading of his poetry by pointing out that all his poems were about personal experiences"(Quoted from *Philip Larkin's Poetics: Theory and Practice*). The poem is about his personal experience of his young days. After graduating from Oxford University in 1943 Larkin became a librarian at Queen's University, where he met and had a brief love affair with a young assistant librarian named Winifred Amott, who later engaged to someone else. The *Young Lady* of the poem under review was Winifred Amott. The poem starts from the speaker's experiences of looking at snapshots in the album of a lady. The speaker feels affected by the photograph because he thinks, they overwhelmingly persuade:



“That this is a real girl in a real peace  
 In every sense empirically true.”

(CP, p.72)

The very next moment he feels that the photographs are affecting because they are the part and parcel of the past:

“Or is it just the past? Those flowers, that gate  
 These misty parks and motors, lacerate  
 Simply by being over...”

(CP, p.72)

The speaker's mood alters from levity to gravity.

“Not only at exclusion, but because  
 It leaves us free to cry. We know that was  
 Won't call on us to justify  
 Our grief, however hard we yowl across  
 The gap from eye to page.”

(CP, p.72)

The past moves us, the speaker reflects, simply by its pastness because it indulges our grief without questioning it. Most things which engage our emotions in the present have consequences of some kinds but the past being unreachable does not entail any aftermath whatsoever. So, he is left “to mourn (without a chance of consequence)”. Again a sense of frustration, which is a characteristic of existentialism, is created from Larkin's outlook on “change of time, brevity of fame and lack of communication” among the persons living together and so on. All individuals are shocked at the thought of the gap between their hopeful past and the hopeless present. The *Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album* presents the speaker's feelings of disgust or nausea. The pictures of the album and some backgrounds cause strong distress to the speaker because the lady's past has to come in an end. When we human beings are no longer what we used to be in the past we feel a great pain and we are also pained by feeling of our freedom to cry for a loss.

In the poem there is also the sense of alienation. The speaker is not only detached from the lady's present and future but also from her past which was filled by other chaps. But he looks upon his exclusion as a privilege, for it leaves him free to give vent to his feelings about being excluded and it helps him to distil a past that is exclusively his own. The poem seems to imply that all human being seek to escape from feelings of embarrassment about the present or about

uncertainty and apprehension about the future by taking refuge in the sense of a past seemingly arrested in a temporal frame of which photography is an instrument.

Larkin employed existentialism to render as faithfully as possible man's predicament in the modern world. He handled the issue of pessimism, that is the another way to recognize existentialism, very carefully in his poems *Deception* and *Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album* as well as his other poems in the *Less Deceived*. In his poems the individual is shown to be isolated and in need to choose and act in order to shape his own destiny. This feeling rises anxiety in him. Moreover this anxiety is aggravated by the consciousness that man is alone in a "godless universe" with no moral values or standards to guide him as we can see in these two poems. Embitterment, sadness, dissatisfaction, deprivation, anxiety, isolation these are the common themes of his poems. Deprivation is for him what daffodils were for Wordsworth. From Sartre's point of view, by revealing man's flaws, Larkin can be said to contribute to the fashioning of a new consciousness of man's reality. That is the need for man, the frail creature condemned to be free and anxious in his paradoxical situation.

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