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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

PHILIP ROTH'S DECEPTION: AN INTRIGUING SEMI-AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL

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Abstract:

The whole novel is narrated in the form of dialogues and in this regard, it is comparable – of course, with a difference -- to Philip Roth's another novel entitled Portnoy's Complain (1969) [at times abridged as Portnoy in the body of this paper]. As the readers of Roth's fiction know, the whole of Portnoy is a conversation between Alexander (Alex) Portnoy and his psychoanalyst, Dr. Spielvogel. But in Portnoy, except for the punch-line, the psychiatrist is silent throughout the novel and only Portnoy's voice is reigning whereas Deception is also a novel narrated through conversation with a major difference that in Deception a number of other persons also participate in the conversation all the time. In short, Deception is a kind of orchestra of multiple voices and, hence, this kind of structure might prove to be confusing to some readers.

INTRODUCTION

On this technique used by Roth in Deception, Peter S. Prescott comments as follows:

> ... "Deception" is made up entirely of dialogue. "The Counterlife" is a heavy book; this one is quick and light. Perhaps no more than half a dozen words stand outside quotation marks. Roth never identifies his speakers, which causes problems. Poking at the paragraphs with a finger, the reader says: OK, this must be she speaking, so this is he -- and so on down the page.…1

Prescott feels that this technique too, however, has its own technical advantages for the writer which Prescott points out thus:

> The talk is often oblique – little glancing perceptions that the jeremiads of "The Counterlife" could not have accommodated. Give Roth his due: if the substance of his fiction doesn't change, its form does. So much dialogue lets him move deftly among a number of topics within only a few lines -- …2

Deception opens with a kind of questionnaire that includes questions on love-making, adultery, psychiatry, Jewishness etc which, by now, are some of Philip Roth's – as it were – perennial/constant themes/subjects right from the publication of his early books such as Goodbye, Columbus in 1959 and

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Portnoy in 1969. The questionnaire lasts for about two and a half pages of the opening of the novel. It appears that the questionnaire sums up -- or is an abstract or a synopsis of – the issues to be elaborately dealt with in the novel at a later stage.

It is almost towards the conclusion of the questionnaire that the issue related to Jews is raised when one of the participants in the conversation -- probably Philip -- asks the other person (his mistress): 'What are your real feelings about Jews?'

At that moment the question goes unanswered because it is immediately followed by the rest of the questions in the questionnaire. The answer to this question seems to be given by Philip's mistress some twenty four pages after it was asked where the woman says she loved Kafka and studied Freud. Similarly, she loved and deeply respected Jewish people and she admired their intelligence. The woman asks Philip if he thought the Jews in England tried harder. The author gives a positive answer. Philip, although being Jewish himself, generally has gentile girls -- hardly Jewish ones -- as his girl-friends. Hence, when he is asked a question about whether he had a Jewish woman friend, he says to the girl none so close to think of. But, on the contrary, he has Jewish men as close friends (D, pp. 35 & 36). The issue is later on mentioned on p. 38 when Philip and his girl-friend are talking about the room they are in at present where it is said about the room as follows:

Bookshelves built into the wall behind the desk. Much complaining about shoddy British workmanship while construction was under way. Books: Heine's Jewish Comedy by Prawer, The Jew as Pariah by Hannah Arendt, White Nights by Menachem Begin – on and on. Entirely too many books about Jews, by Jews, for Jews….'(D, p. 38).

The problem of conservatism of some Jews (mostly of old generation) and liberalism of other Jews (mostly of new generation) is reflected in the decision of one of Philip's brother's sons to marry a Puerto Rican. Philip's father (obviously a representative of old, conservative-minded generation) gets riled up (irritated) to hear this decision and there is a real problem in the house so much so that Philip's brother calls Philip to make their father understand the situation. Philip drives down from Connecticut to New Jersey and feels that his father needed a little history lesson. He tries to tell his father that Jews will have problems to face wherever they are. Contending along this line, he says:

"…You live in Poland and take the consequences of being a Polish Jew, or your live in Israel and take the consequences of being an Israeli Jew, or you live in America and take the consequences of being an American Jew. Tell me which you prefer. Tell me, Herm." (D, p. 77)

Made speechless by this argument of Philip's with an undeniable ring of history to it, Philip's father says: "Okay," … "you're right – you win! I'll shut up!" (D, p. 77) which could be taken as symbolic of the victory of liberal Jew's views over conservative Jewish opinions.

It appears that the Shylockean image of the Jews is still lingering in the minds of most of the people of the world and it seems prominently so in the minds of the British; particularly, the word "Jew" in England seems to be a contemptible word. That is the reason why he finds that in England whenever he is in '… a public place, a restaurant, a party, the theater and someone happens to mention the word "Jew", I notice that the voice always drops just a little' (D, p.78)….And further adds, 'The way most people say "shit" in public, you all say "Jew". Jews included.' (D, p. 78)

There is a very long discussion on Arab-Israelis' hostility. Philip seems to be an adherent of melting-pot theory. He does not have any special love for Israelis although he is himself a Jew like Israelis are. In fact, he seems to be more American than Jewish and he seems to have identified himself with America and its policies so much so that he goes to the extent of defending America's dropping the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and also defends President Harry Truman against war crime charges. In fact, it appears he wants neither to be a Jew nor an American

but just human. This seems to be the tenor of his speech when he tells his mistress:

'…being a Jew and being an American in this country of yours is making me into a very contentious fellow. I'd forgotten about both, really….' (D, p. 84)

All the images of the Jews in the British popular mind / psyche seem to be the images that are associated with viciousness, wickedness, greediness etc. As an example of this image, one can cite Shylock's famous image in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice. The another well-known vicious image of the Jews is that of Fagin in Dickens' Oliver Twist. In British commercials on T.V., the image is used for showing miserliness. This upsets Philip to such an extent that he phones an old friend of his who is an

English Jew up in Hampstead. When Philip narrated him what he saw and how it disturbed him, the friend told that Philip would get used to it and the friend further asked Philip, " … why do you Jews make such a fuss about being Jewish?" (D, p. 106).

Answering the question from his girl-friend about '… what lay behind the British distaste for Jews -- , ' (D, p. 106) Philip answers that he thought it was actually snobbery. Even in this distaste for the Jews money/wealth plays a decisive role. Philip brings to the notice of the girl-friend that only poor Jews seem to be the victims of this British distaste for the Jews ' -- because it's not felt about those Jews who are part of the aristocratic establishment or upper-middle-class establishment.' (D, p. 106). Like in most of the religions, the poor in it are, by and large, the sufferers of adhering to that faith.

One more dimension of the issue that even '… Jews have the same snobbery about Jews themselves' (D, p. 106) is brought into discussion by Philip's mistress.

During one of the conversations with his Polish mistress, Philip's mistress is made to passingly mention anti-Semitism, different facial characteristics of the Jews etc. The mistress, who was probably under the influence of the old description of the Jews, feels it strange when she talks about Jews who are executives with briefcases. But Philip makes her aware of the changing situation among the Jews and tells her that '… Stranger today are Jews with side-locks. …' (D, p. 171) and not with briefcases.

The Indian people's opinion that there is considerable amount of slackness on the front of man-woman relationship in America gets confirmed when one reads Philip Roth's novels. In Roth's fiction, we meet wives who are carrying on love affairs behind the back of their husbands. We meet male professors who are having physical relations with their girl students or at least want to have relations of that kind with the girl students. And of course, we meet males who are involved in adultery with women. Apparently, this appears an unpleasant thing to most of the traditional Indian minds. But on a deeper thinking one is likely to reach a conclusion that, in fact, Roth's dealing of man-woman relationship is more of a realistic nature. Adultery, seduction or occasional deceptions in such matters, as one can see on a deeper thinking, have been continuing -- on a major or minor scale and with the change of setting and details -- since men and women came into existence on this planet and there is nothing very strange or new about it.

In fact, this aspect of human life could very well be traced right down to the story of Adam and Eve. What Eve did towards Adam after she first ate the fruit of knowledge was nothing else but a kind of seduction and deception of Adam. And Adam and Eve are -- according to Christianity -- the original/first ancestors of the mankind. If we accept Adam and Eve in the role of our original ancestors, then in other words, it would mean that seduction and deception in sexual matters are at the very root of human existence itself as exemplified by the behaviour of Adam and Eve. It is in this sense that, I think, Philip Roth is being quite realistic. This also further means that as far as the aspect of physical relations between men and women in America is concerned, Philip Roth has been giving us an authentic picture and is not hiding the usually embarrassing side of American society – or, for that matter of any human society -- which many other American authors are likely to hide.

The Indian people's opinion about moral slackness in man-woman relationship in America is likely to get confirmed by Roth's Deception also wherein we come across explicit discussion between Philip and his beloved about adultery. Here is an example of one such discussion. Philip's beloved asks him: '… You were an adulterer, were you not?' (D, p. 112) and Philip says, very frankly: 'Still am'. And the discussion continues:

'With the wives of friends?'
'Sometimes. More often with the wives of
strangers, like you."And with whom was the
treachery more perversely enjoyable? Whom did you delight most in sadistically betraying, friends whose wives you ruthlessly seduced or strangers whose wives you ruthlessly seduced?' (D, p. 112)

In Roth's fiction, one of the reasons why people seem to resort to adultery is to escape the drudgery, dryness and prosaic aspect of routine marriages and married life. That is, in Roth's fiction, it is to continue to experience romantic feelings that people indulge in love affairs behind the back of one's spouse. It is almost the same thing that Philip and his beloved seem to believe in when firstly Philip says:

'One of the unfair things about adultery, when you compare the lover to the spouse, the lover is never seen in those awful dreary circumstances, arguing about the vegetables, or burning toast, or forgetting to ring up for something or putting upon someone or being put upon. All that stuff, I think, people deliberately keep out of affairs….' (D, p. 132)

Reciprocating Philip's feelings in the same direction Philip's beloved says:

'Yes, with the lover everyday life recedes. Emma Bovary disease.… "A kind of permanent seduction," Flaubert calls it.' (D, p. 132)
But this happy / pleasant state of affairs doesn't last very long. The hold of practical life tightens its grip over both the partners in the love and the affair starts losing its initial romantic aura, and…
'… Then, with time, the fantastical lover erodes into the workaday lover, the practical lover -- becomes a Leon, a rube after all. The tyranny of the actual begins.' (D, p. 133)
'… The Prince who saved you from your boring existence is now the slob at the core of the boring existence. Dull, dull, dull…. The once perfect man is a despicable failure…. Actuality has triumphed over the dream.' (D, p. 134)

Dissatisfaction in marriages seems to be one more reason of the increase in the cases of adultery. Hinting at what marriage is to most of the Americans, Philip says: '… The attempt to escape the marriage is an ingredient of marriage.' (D, p. 182)

Some of the adulterous husbands are frank enough to tell their wives that they have a girl friend. That is the reason why before Philip asked his beloved '… "Has your husband committed adultery?" ' (D, p. 25), his beloved has already answered him saying: 'My husband's girlfriend gave him a present the other day. She's very pretentious, a very jealous and ambitious kind of person.…'(D, p. 10). So, she knows that her husband has a girl friend because the husband himself has told her about it.

Like open-minded husbands, in Roth's novel, we also meet women who are frank enough to tell their husbands that they were going to meet their lovers irrespective of their husbands' suggestion that they spent their time with their baby. But the woman does not care about baby when it comes to choosing between the baby and the lover. To her, her lover is more important than their baby. Here is a conversation between a lover and his beloved. The lover first asks her as follows and the conversation between the two rolls:

'So how did you get out?'
'Well, it was really quite difficult, because my husband was
expecting that I'd come home from work and stay and have
tea with the baby.'
'So what did you say?'
'I said I was going out.'
'And he said?'
'Where to? And I said, I'm not going to tell you. But in a very friendly way. And – so I went. And here I am.' (D, pp. 44-45)

The adulterous couple makes enquiries and counter-enquiries like why aren't they happy with the partner they are married to. Philip's beloved asks him:

'Why aren't you happy with your wife? Why isn't it
enough?' (D, p. 45)

To which Philip answers with a counter-question for his beloved.

'Why isn't your husband enough?' (D, p. 45).
Or, 'How many men or women do you have to have at one
time?' (D, p. 8)

One's dissatisfaction with the married partner results into one's thinking about imaginary partners while staying with the married one. Philip thinks this is applicable to most of the married males and females. He puts it as follows:

'… I am not the only man who thinks about imaginary women while in the bedroom with the woman he regularly sleeps with. There may even be women who behave just as impurely in their bedrooms with the men they regularly sleep with. The difference is that what I impurely imagine, I am impelled to develop and write down. A mitigating circumstance: my work, my livelihood. In my imagination I am unfaithful to everybody, by the way, not just to you…. (D, p. 179)

Deception, it seems, is, to a large extent, a fictionalization of the life of author (Philip Roth) himself. In this regard, R. Z. Sheppard writes:

The Roth-like character in Deception is a distortion of Roth, the man in the book–jacket photo whose intense gaze can penetrate 18 inches of solid Philistine. Readers attempting to nail the real Roth end up with a tinkling of broken images.

Philip in Deception is himself a novelist/ a story writer. Whenever he publishes any of his fictional writings, he finds that most of the people misinterpret the characters, situations, etc in his books. The people's responses are personal and divergent. Philip experiences that

'… He's found a tremendous lack of objectivity in people's responses to Zuckerman. Everybody gives him a different

story. There are two nightmares for a biographer, he says. One is that everybody gives you the same story, and the other is that everybody gives you a different story….' (D, p. 93)

Many a time people's judgments are contrary to the author's intentions behind his writings. In this regard, Philip says,

'… I write fiction and I'm told it's autobiography, I write autobiography and I'm told it's fiction, so since I'm so dim and they're so smart, let them decide what it is or it isn't….' (D, p. 184)

After a certain period, Philip gets fed up with thinking on what people think of his writings. Justifying his act of writing, he tells,

'….I write what I write the way I write it, and if and when it should ever happen, I will publish what I publish however I want to publish and I'm not going to start worrying at this late date what people misunderstand or get wrong!' (D, p. 185)

Philip seems to have a theory of creation of his own which is that,

'…"By the time a novelist worth his salt is thirty-six, he's no longer translating experience into a fable -- he's imposing his fable onto experience."…' (D, p. 121)

Philip, the novelist, is charged by his readers of exploring the murky/ impure side of life. Readers expect Philip to be scrupulous in choosing his experiences for narration. But, for Philip, talking of only pious experiences of life in a piece of writing is indicative of timidity clothed as 'discretion'. In fact, for him, exploration of impurity is the practice followed by many epoch-making authors; that is the real nature of a real writer. He traces the history of writing to justify his stances as follows:

' "… The self-imprisoning scrupulosity, the block against contaminating experience that all but strangled his art they monumentalize into his pious memorial. All that timidity, disguised as 'discretion', about a man's contradictions and pagan urges. The fear of desanctification and the dread of shame. As though it's purity that's the heart of a writer's nature. Heaven help such a writer! As though Joyce hadn't sniffed filthily at Nora's underpants. As though in Dostoyevsky's soul, Svidrigailov never whispered. Caprice is at the heart of a writer's nature. Exploration, fixation, isolation, venom, fetishism, austerity, levity, perplexity, childishness, et cetera. The nose in the seam of the undergarment – that's the writer's nature. Impurity. But these Lonoffs – such a suffocating investment in temperance, in dignity, of all damn things. As though the man wasn't an American novelist but was ambassador to the Holy See!…" Isn't that enough for now?' (D, pp. 98-99)

Those readers who have kept track of Philip Roth's writing career will immediately understand that his Deception is, largely, a combination of Roth's styles and themes in his other earlier works such as Portnoy's Complaint (1969), The Professor of Desire (1977) and the novels in Zuckerman trilogy – which include novels such as My Life as a Man (1974), The Ghost Writer (1979) and Zuckerman Unbound (1981). This kind of opinion can be easily justified because on pp 93 to 100 of Deception, there are direct references to some of the characters such as Nathan Zuckerman and E. I. Lonoff -- both from Roth's works like The Ghost Writer. This observation further proves that Roth's Deception is a semi-autobiographical novel.

The point about Deception being a semi-autobiographical novel can further be proved by what Edward B. St. John states as follows:

The book ends with Philip's impassioned defense of self-referential fiction. The issue, however, is not self-referential fiction in general but simply Roth's own peculiar version of it, which consists mostly of unabashed editorializing through the mouthpiece of Philip. A textbook example of the novel as soapbox,As is usual with majority of Roth's works, there are detractors/critics for Deception also. While assessing the

organization (structure/composition) of Deception on its use of self-references, David Klinghoffer states:

> Self-references within self-references: Roth's games-playing amounts to a kind of broken record of self-absorption. But we read fiction to be moved in some way, not merely to be impressed by a clever author and his desk-drawerful of literary tricks. Not surprisingly, the result you get from all these tricks is a degree of emotional shallowness unprecedented in Roth's other work.6

In his critique of the novel, Peter S. Prescott writes as follows:

> Here's Philip Roth revving his motor again, his gearshift still stuck in neutral. The noises can be effective, but there's no forward motion. The fact is, there hasn't been any movement in Roth's fiction since 1979, when his last really good novel, "The Ghost Writer" appeared. "Deception" has its pleasing moments, but it's little more than a spinoff from the "Christendom" section Roth's previous novel, "The Counterlife"
> …….
> Some of these night thoughts and left-over insights are graceful, others don't work well.…
>
> Roth remains a skillful writer; he knows all the moves. Anyone who has kept up with his books will want to read this one, but if a young reader who didn't know Roth's work were to pick it up, what would he make of it? The answer is, not much. He could only ask: What's all the shouting been about?7

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