

De-Constructing the Keatsean Edifice of Imagination: A Study of *Ode to a Nightingale*

Subhadip Konar

Ph.D. Research Scholar

The University of Burdwan,

India

Abstract

Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* is famous for the poet's flight of imagination to attain the blithe spirit of the nightingale. It is considered that the poem shows the ruing poet over the misery, sufferings of the earthly existence and he finds the coveted place of the nightingale only through the medium of imagination. The present paper will negotiate the efficacy of this consideration and will examine the poem unearthing the subtext from the perspective of Derridean deconstruction to destroy the Keatsean edifice of imagination as found in the poem. The paper will serve to pinpoint the emergence of philosophically realized Keats in *ode to a Nightingale*.

Keywords- Imagination; Deconstruction; Realization; Subtext

Introduction

Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* is a poem which sustains the spirit of lamentation, explicit in the odes like *Ode to Psyche*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* etc. Keats rues and laments for his vain attempt to attain immortality, permanence, eternity and he can't accept the natural cycle of birth-life-death process. He is almost obsessed and preoccupied with the notion of how to be immortal, denying the ravage flux. But for his own part he still is unable to find the means through which he can be out of the prey of time and also he thinks it not only for himself, but for the entire mankind. In this poem, *Ode to a Nightingale* Keats is in search of permanence which may be culminated in the song of nightingale. However, critics like Harold Bloom have pointed out that, in the ode *To Autumn* this spirit of lamentation is negated, and the 'personal' Keats becomes 'impersonal' and 'objective'. This is why *To Autumn* is often appellated as the cornerstone of the philosophic realization from the poet's part. It is ostensible that in *To Autumn* we can

perceive the philosophic perception of Keats which leads him to accept the natural cyclic order and further to negate the lamentable spirit. But my point is that this very process of the acceptance of the natural order finds its culmination in *To Autumn*; it is not the initiation of this philosophic process. Rather *Ode to a Nightingale* is the poem where the process of philosophic realization of Keats finds its genesis. My object in this paper is to unearth a philosopher Keats ulterior in *Ode to a Nightingale* with the help of deconstructive study of this poem.

Now, what is deconstruction and why I have chosen this theory to prove my point- this will be discussed at length. The year 1966 saw an advent of new critical discipline when at John Hopkins University, Jacques Derrida presented his sprawling paper, *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences*. This new discipline is deconstruction. Now what is deconstruction? To define deconstruction it will be pertinent here to provide that the very discipline itself troubles our notion of definition because of its intense concern with singularity. So, we can affirm that deconstruction is a resistant of definitions of any object. But, as far as, deconstruction as literary criticism, is concerned it will be just to claim that deconstruction does not point to a single, fixed, definite meaning; it is one of the potentially infinite series of uses of the same word in different contexts to communicate different meanings. In Derrida's words, "All sentences of the type 'deconstruction is x' or 'deconstruction is not x' a priori miss the point. (Waugh, 301)

However the very concept of deconstruction puts in question the basic metaphysical assumption of western philosophy since Plato. The western philosophy has always told about the 'centre' and the 'presence' and people desire centre because it guarantees being as presence. This desire for centre is called 'logocentrism'. While constructing deconstruction Derrida has made comments upon the nature of the spoken word and of the written word. In the western philosophy the spoken word is always privileged than the written word and this very process is called 'phonocentrism' which is a classic feature of logocentrism. The notion was that is a contaminated speech because it can discard a 'presence' and it may be interpreted in various ways which the speaker has not meant. On the contrary, in the spoken word, there is always a 'presence' and it cannot be the victim of affectation by anyone. But Derrida has refuted 'this violent hierarchy' and he has also proved that this violent hierarchy can be undone and reversed. According to him:

It was necessary to begin thinking that there was no centre, that the centre could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the centre had no natural site, that it was not a

The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English
UGC Approved

fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. (Waugh,303)

Hence, the speech becomes the species of writing. This reversal is the first stage of Derridean deconstruction. Then comes the very issue of 'difference'. The term includes both 'differ' and 'defer'. Derrida believes that signification of a text, like the signifiers, is indeterminate and deferred endlessly due to the presence of contradiction, paradoxes, metaphors, allusions and references. A deconstructionist believes that a writer is never able to express what he wants to tell through his writing. In deconstruction, ideas like 'centre', 'main', 'truth' are not for granted and assigned canonical status, but placed under 'eraser'. So, deconstruction actually shows its reliance upon plurality of meaning, substitutions, individualism, intertextuality and reversals. Barbara Johnson has defined deconstruction in the following terms in *The Critical Difference* (John Hopkins University Press, 1980):

Deconstruction is not synonymous with 'destruction'. It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word 'analysis', which etymologically means 'to undo'...
(Barry,68-69)

A deconstructive reading exposes the 'textual subconscious'. It looks for evidence of gaps, breaks, fissures and discontinuities of all kinds. It actually explores the subconscious elements about which the poet is unaware and brings into fore this element of subconscious self to judge a work of literature. Thus it becomes impossible to sustain a 'univocal' reading and the language explodes into 'multiplicities of meaning'. Thus, it can be asserted that 'deconstruction begins when we locate the moment a text transgresses the laws it appears to set up for itself'. However, it will not be impertinent to say that Keats has a deconstructive mindset. Keats' poetic vision and psyche is governed by his ideal of 'negative capability' which is defined by him as 'a state of mind in which man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'. Keats' letters also bear the testimony of the fact that he had a preference for paradoxes and self-contradictions because he believed 'that in the intensity of paradox, in the dramatic conflict life could best be realized'. In his letter of 27th October, 1818 to Woodhouse, Keats writes:

As to the poetical Character itself... it is not itself- it has no self- it is everything and nothing- it has no character- it enjoys light and shade: it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated. It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the camelion Poet.
(Gittings, 157)

The negative capability enables the poet to accept the world as it is- in its light and shade, pain and joy. He wrote to Bailey:

I scarcely remember counting upon any Happiness- I look not for it if it be not in the present hour- nothing startles me beyond the Moment. The setting sun will always set me to rights- or if a Sparrow comes before my Window I take part in its existence and pick out the Gravel. (Gittings, 38)

This uncertainty, indeterminacy, impersonality, scepticism, openness to receive contrastive experiences reflects Keats' deconstructive mindset, no doubt about that. Hence, my choice of deconstruction as a critical theoretical discipline to prove my point. Now, straightway, I will enter into the deconstructive discussion of the poem, *Ode to a Nightingale*.

The poem begins with the firm assertion of the poet that his heart aches and he is now going under a 'drowsy numbness'. The pain is so much so that it has numbed his sense. To explicate the loss of sense of the poet, he has brought the reference of 'hemlock' and of 'opiate'. Both these two elements actually benumb the sense of the senses, meaning they actually devitalize the neurotic organs of human being through which a man can feel something or can sense something. They become oblivious of the entire world- his present situation, his past situation everything. In this poem, this very forgetting faculty is alluded. The poet himself has enounced that he is now in a condition in which he is drowned in the river, Lethe. We all know that Lethe stands for oblivation. So, in the very first four lines, the poet has made it explicit that he has now lost his senses; his plight is hemlock or opiate affected. He cannot feel anything. He is out of this real world:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains

My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,

Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains

One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk: (*Ode to a Nightingale* 1-4)

But, most interestingly when we peruse stanza five, we get surprised at what the poet is feeling, seeing and smelling. Stanza five informs that being unified with the nightingale, he now cannot see the flowers for darkness; he cannot smell the incense, pervaded in the darkness. But the very next line shows that he can name the trees and the flowers. He is well aware of what month it is now. He gives the account of the trees and of the flowers with ease- the grass, the thicket, the fruit-tree wild, white hawthorn, pastoral eglantine, musk-rose. Now, the point is that if the poet has lost his sense (as deciphered in the stanza one), how can he name the trees and flowers? How can he be aware of the month? How can he be absolutely

The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English
UGC Approved

perceptible about the time of musk-rose's coming? He not only knows about the month, even he has clarified that 'musk-rose' is mid-May's child. How can he be so meticulous, so perfect about the time, if he has lost his sense? He knows that the colour of hawthorn is white; he knows that the eglantine is pastoral; he knows that the month is sweet and seasonable. He may know all these things without losing his sense, but, how he can know being numbed, being oblivious, being forgetful? This is the question. The critic, Middleton Murry has espoused this sudden advent of sense by pointing that the poet has acquired a strange insight into the mystery. But, being oblivious can a human acquire 'insight'? The question remains. The answer is probably 'no'. The stanza five shatters the built up imaginative edifice. This is the first deconstructive reversal of 'violent hierarchy' in *Ode to a Nightingale*. The hierarchy is between the loss of sense and the coming back of sense. Now, I will enter into the second deconstructive reversal. In the first stanza, it is told that the poet, being happy in the happiness of the bird wishes to experience that troublefree, sorrowless, happy, blithe, joyous, ecstatic world of the nightingale. The poet feels a yearning to participate in the bird's life, according to Cleanth Brooks and Warren. To that purpose, he makes choices about how he can relive that state of nightingale. Then, at first, he wishes for a drink of wine for a stimulant that would lift him out of his own self. He has referred to the 'dance', 'the Provencal song', 'sun-burnt mirth'. The image of a glass of warm, richly coloured, bubbling wine is vividly realized and as R. H. Fogle happily suggests that the beaker recalls bleary Silenus with purple-stained mouth, winking, and drunken eyes. But the wine also receives a heightening by being linked to the inspirational waters of Hippocrene since in classical mythology Hippocrene is a fountain in Mount Helicon and is sacred to the muses. The third stanza with its grim picture of actuality clarifies the need for and the urgency of the mind's release from the mortal condition. He seeks, here, an escape from flux, from the world of process. But, discarding the charioted 'Bacchus and his pards' the ultimate choice which the poet has made to escape from this world is the poetry:

Away! away! For I will fly to thee,

Not charioted by Bacchus and hid pards,

But on the viewless wings of poesy, ... (*Ode to a Nightingale* 31-33)

But, on the contrary, the poet has escaped from this mundane world and advanced to the world of nightingale, not 'through' poetry, but 'in' poetry. The poet has intended that by writing poetry he can have what he wants, meaning he will have the access to the unique, care-free, weariless space of nightingale. It sounds that the outcome of the composition of poetry will be that coveted world. But, the

The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English
UGC Approved

opposite notion has been induced in the poem since 'in this poem' he has become unified with the nightingale and he is thus out of the clutch of weariness, troubles, tension etc.:

Already with thee! Tender is the night,

And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,

Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays; (*Ode to a Nightingale* 35-37)

The vow to be in the celestial state through poetry is reversed as he is in that world in poetry. This is the second reversal in *Ode to a nightingale*. The third point is very short but significant enough. In the very first stanza of the poem the song of the bird, to the poet, is melodious whereas in the last stanza the same song is reduced to a 'plaintive anthem'. This points to the subjectivism of the romantics as well. But, this is also a 'difference'. A reversal of attitude to the bird's song from the poet's part is made here explicit. This is indeed a deconstructive 'difference'. The fourth and the final point is the most important one. In the earlier stanza the poet has a yearning to ascend to the world of nightingale descending the world of stark reality. It has been made clear that the poet wants to be unified to the happy, complacent state of the melodious bird. By doing so he wishes to become completely unaware of the 'weariness', 'the fever' and 'the fret', 'leaden-eyed despair' where 'palsy shakes a few'; where 'youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies'; where 'Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes'. Thus the nightingale becomes a dominant symbol of the poem and the poet's attempt at identification with the bird constitutes the chief motif. The tension between ephemerality and eternity has engulfed the poet's psyche entirely. At the very first the nightingale's song has an ensuring impact upon the poet which is that, if the poet can forget the real, earthly self and unify himself to that of nightingale's enchanting self, he may be beyond the grasp of the miserable sufferings of the world. Thus the preponderant motif becomes the identification of the poet to the nightingale's state- 'Already with thee!'. But perhaps in the poem, at the end, the poet all of a sudden acquires a deconstructive mindset. Earlier, winged by the poetic imagination the poet has aspired to the intended state, but contrarily and astonishingly enough the before- beloved 'fancy' has got the appellation of 'deceiving elf'. According to the poet, the fancy is a mere cheat, a deceiver. But it will continue to deceit one's self until one is out of the rapport. The attribution of the female sex to the fancy incorporates a kind of *femme fatalean* deceptive attitude. But the question is that whether the poet wants to be out of the trance or not. If the answer is yes, it is ostensible that the poet has no mood to be out of the rapport. The negation will imply a different mindset. Though from the poet's part there is no overt assertion, it is comprehended that he will prefer to accept the natural order, the earthly miseries, the insufferable sufferings, refuting the lamentable spirit as depicted in the earlier stanzas. The poet finally has discarded

The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English
UGC Approved

the recourse to imagination. By bidding adieu the poet has clarified that his intention is to leave that deceptive, illusory world far behind him and to lead himself to a world where he can accept the world as it is and acquire a philosophic realization. Thus the rejection of the moaning, repine human spirit and the projection of the philosopher Keats. The poetic self of Keats has been elevated to that of philosophic self. Finally a philosophically realized Keats is absolutely at home to accept the natural order. Thus it becomes clear that between waking and sleeping he will prefer, being a realized person, the waking rather than sleeping:

Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-sight; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?

Fled is that music:- Do I wake or sleep? (*Ode to a Nightingale* 75-80)

By pointing to the absence of the nightingale's song which is endowed with the promises of eternity transcending time, the poet wants to convey his loss of faith in finding the petty means of immortality and his belief upon the worldly order which again foreshadows the philosopher Keats. Thus the 'personal' Keats becomes 'impersonal' and 'objective', leaving far behind his mourning spirit. This is a deconstructive reversal of 'violent hierarchy' and indeed a 'difference'. The difference is between the poet's intended intention and the then philosophic realization.

Another article of A.W. Crawford will further substantiate that the spiritual crisis was over in Keats while he was composing *Ode to a Nightingale*. This poem was composed in May, 1819. Brown has related how and when Keats has versified the poem. In one morning, the poet took his chair from the breakfast table to the grass plot under a plum tree where he sat for some hours and he was listening to the nightingale that had made her own nest near the house. So, it is clear that the time was mid-day. Sir Sidney Colvin has also supported this point. But, significantly enough in stanza four the time is changed into 'night'. The phrases like 'the Queen-Moon', 'starry Fays' indicate this reversal of time. Now it is of paramount significance that why the time is changed all of a sudden. To understand this, we should go back to the time when he wrote this poem. At that time, Keats was passing from the youthful poet and lover of beauty to the philosophic age in which he was no longer satisfied merely to enjoy the glory of the fullness of life as seen through his poetic imagination. He had passed from the poet to the philosopher. Then Keats was undergoing a sharp spiritual crisis. As a consequence of this crisis Keats was not satisfied

with the brilliant and aesthetic achievement of his poetry. Keats knew this change himself and he welcomed the change. He willingly gave up the poetic innocence of his youth for the more profound mystery of life that came with the philosophic mind. In a letter to Taylor (24th April, 1818), he says to 'turn all my (Keats') soul to the latter', that is to philosophy and while composing *Ode to a Nightingale* in the summer 1819 he settled his attitude towards philosophy. Now, provided with this background, the 'darkness' in stanza four becomes significant. The most obvious meaning is that Keats loved the quiet and the stillness and even the darkness of the night more than the gaudy day. This notion of Keats is echoed in *Endymion* too- 'Of all my life was/ Utmost quietude'. (Book III). He becomes the votary of the Queen-Moon and of the Night. The very notion of night is associated with 'the weariness, the fever, and the fret'. Thus, with this change of attitude we are led to have a glimpse into his knowledge of human life and of death. All these again reinforce the philosophic attitude of Keats rather than the 'poetic Keats' in *Ode to a Nightingale*. Keats' predilection to the night brings in his philosophic realization and acceptance of the natural order in the world.

To conclude, *Ode to a Nightingale* captures the Keatsian deconstructive mindset through which he has gained his access towards the realized acceptance. The same tone and attitude is reflected in the ode *To Autumn* composed in 19th September, 1819 as the letter to J. H. Reynolds suggests. It is of no doubt that *To Autumn* is a celebration of his adult philosophic perception which has been initiated in *Ode to a Nightingale*. The negation of the spirit of lamentation is achieved by Keats in *Ode to a Nightingale*; the poet acquires the greatest possible obliteration of the self in this poem. The deconstructive study of *Ode to a Nightingale* has unveiled and dismantled this philosophic realization from the poet's part. The overt suggestion of the poem is to find the means of acquiring immortality, a triumph over time from the poet's conscious self whereas, on the contrary, the subconscious self of Keats which has been retaliated leads him to reject the repining human spirit, the means of achieving immortality and to project a covert philosophically realized acceptance and an adult philosophic perception. Thus the final assertion is that *Ode to a Nightingale* is the initiation of the philosophically realized Keats whereas *To Autumn* is the celebration of this ascetic realization and the theory of deconstruction is apt and appropriate to show the philosophic realization of Keats in *Ode to a Nightingale*.

Works Cited

Albert, Edward. History of English Literature. 5thed. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979.
Print.

-
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. New Delhi: Viva Books Pvt. Ltd, 2008. Print.
- Chatterjee, Bhabatosh. *John Keats: His Mind and Work*. Calcutta: Sarat Book Distributors, 1971. Print.
- Keats, John. *Keats' Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Henry Ellershaw. London: Clarendon Press, 1922. Print.
- Keats, John. *Letters of John Keats*. Ed. Robert Gittings. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1970. Print.
- Selden, Raman, Peter Widdowson and Peter Brooker. *A Readers' Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. 5thed. New Delhi: Pearson Education Ltd, 2005. Print.
- Stole, B. *Keats and the Dramatic Principle*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1958. Print.
- Thomson, Alex. 'Deconstruction'. *Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Patricia Waugh. United States: Oxford University Press, 2006. Print.
- <[http:// www.jstor.org/ stable/ 2914866](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2914866)>. Jstor. Web. 29th June 2012.