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DEATH, DECAY AND DISILLUSIONMENT: A STUDY OF CYNICISM AND AGNOSTICISM IN PHILIP LARKIN'S SELECT POEMS

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ABSTRACT



Philip Larkin (1922-1985) is regarded as a British national-cultural icon. Most of the poems are based on the gloomy atmosphere which is related to death, decline and disappointment. He is a pessimistic poet with sceptic and agnostic sensibility by dismantling the moral and spiritual grounds which are not in order in his contemporary time. In most of his poems, he talks about the hopelessness and meaninglessness of life in order to portray the bleak and devastating scenario of England after the Second World War. The gloomy atmosphere of his poems reminds us of sickness, helplessness, and uncertainty of life. His poems, related to the sense of death, frustration, futility and alienation, are very heart-rending and certainly force us to think about the negative aspects of life.

Keywords: *Disappointment, Pessimistic, Sceptic, Agnostic, Alienation.*

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Philip Larkin, a renowned British poet, novelist as well as a critic, has often been regarded as a hopeless and inflexible pessimist. He always treats the modern English setting in a withdrawn and non-sentimental manner. Eric Homberger in his book *The Art of the Real* has called him 'the saddest heart in the post-war supermarket.' (74) Through the ageing years, Larkin grew increasingly unsociable and developed a gloomy view of things as they were. This feeling of a general submission to the peril of life is characteristic of old age but Larkin Harboured such an attitude since his youth. When Larkin turned sixty, Anthony Thwaite, published a book on him in which Alan Bennett presented a summation of his bleakness towards life in apt words:

Apparently he is sixty, but when he was anything else? He has made a habit of being sixty; he has made profession of it. Like Lady Dumbleton he has been sixty for last twenty-five years. On his own admission there was never a boy Larkin, no young lad Philip, let alone Philip, ever. (*Larkin at Sixty*, 21)

His main purpose has been to direct attention to the expository, documentary, empirical and rational elements in his poetry. These are the qualities evident in work by other members of the Movement – the British literary group with which he was originally identified in the 1950s. Larkin has never allowed a consciously English attitude and formal practice to become inhibitingly self-conscious. Though he has rejected modernism in theory, in practice, he is remarkably inclusive writer. It is this flexibility, and his capacity to create a recognizable and democratic vision of contemporary society, that has made him such a potent force in modern English poetry. Through his career, Larkin's pessimistic and bleak attitude and outlook towards human life becomes central to his poetic stance. Death, decay, suffering, disappointment and the predicaments of human life have been the recurring themes in his poetry. However, Larkin's cynical and agnostic attitude plays a crucial role in moulding the inner personality and his poetic sensibility simultaneously.

The age in which Philip Larkin's course of life has been designed, is generally considered as the age of chaos and catastrophe on moral, spiritual and social grounds which were totally staggered by the burning flame of Second World War in nineteen fifties and late nineteen fifties. Being disillusioned with the contemporary lifeless and spiritless framework of societal policies, people with their bitter experience of death and destruction had started to raise questions against the existence of God. Larkin by experiencing such chaotic and devastating social life, presents a non-sentimental and agnostic attitude in his poetry to give a real touch with stark and harsh realities in his time. He with a pessimistic and non-romantic overtones, projects in his poetry the uncertain and unintelligible condition of human life that helps his poetry to attain the status of everlastingness with huge popularity. As an artist, Larkin has drawn very grim picture of his contemporary social life on social, moral and religious grounds with a neutral voice without engaging any emotion or sentiment. As a prolific writer, Larkin published four major volumes of poetry such as *The North Ship* in 1945, *The Less Deceived* in 1955, *The Whitsun Weddings* in 1964 and *The High Windows* in 1974 which are severely governed by the themes of alienation, death, detachment and disillusionment.

In many of his poems, the outlook is so gloomy that man seems to be a helpless victim of circumstances. Man is depicted as victim of socio-political condition and the environment around him or as doomed to old age and death without being able to find any comfort or consolation in anything. Being a through-going agnostic, Larkin depicts man as a sceptic one who can find no comfort in life whereas a believer in the existence of God and in the immortality of the soul can draw enormous comfort from this belief. Larkin as a representative of Movement poets, aims at portraying the realities of life. Indeed, it is an article of faith with him to picturise the realities of human life in the sense of harshness, sternness and isolation. He depicts life as something happening to man but not as a man who moulds the circumstances and environment around him. In Hardy-esque framework, Larkin portrays man as a victim; not as an



architect of fate. So, his main emphasis is on the misery of old age and on the inevitability of death.

Larkin has composed his poetry in the context of his temperament and his personal views of life and religious dogmas. His most famous and ground-breaking poem 'Church Going' accounts the very time when people had become suspicious of the existence of God, and religion. The poem begins in a tone of mockery which indicates that he does not regard going to church as a sacred task or obligation. Larkin's sarcasm is well evident from the very beginning of the poem,

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
And little books, sprawlings of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence, (97)

As 'Church Going' indicates, Larkin's dilemma is not whether to believe in God but what to put in God's place; he is concerned in the poem, he has said in "Four Conversations" that with 'going to church, not religion. I tried to suggest this by the title - and the union of the important stages of human life - birth, marriage and death - that going to church represents.' (73) In other words, it describes a strictly secular faith; his speculations about what churches will become when they fall completely rather than partially out of use lead him to a conclusion in which the fear of death and the loss of religious beliefs are counteracted by an ineradicable faith in human and individual:

A serious house on the serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising

A hunger in himself to be more serious,

And gravitating with it to this ground,

Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,

If only that so many dead lie around. (98)

On the surface level, the poem cracks fun with church going tradition, but on the inner level, Larkin points out the gradual degeneration of a church by showing up the dilapidation of people's religious faith. Larkin emphasises on the time of general decline of attendance in church as people did not retain their faith, interests and attraction of church towards religion.

Larkin's 'At Grass', one of the great poems in his contemporary time, depicts the situation symbolically and relates his central idea to the devastating condition of the post-war England. The loss of Britain's loss of power and glory is connotatively presented through Larkin's treatment of the retired horses that are very much indifferent in their present state of grazing. Larkin's agnostic approach towards the state of post-war disillusionment in England is symbolically portrayed at the very beginning of the poem,

The eye can hardly pick them out
From the cold shade they shelter in,
Till wind distressed tail and mane;
The one crops grass, and moves about
- The other seeming to look on -
And stands anonymous again. (29)

The poem is imbued with eighteenth century pastoral convention and elegiac tone.

The poem simultaneously asks the wistful question -

"Do memories plaque their ears like flies"? (29)

In another poem 'Going', Larkin speaks of death as an evening which is coming across the fields, an evening never seen before, an evening which lights no lamps and an evening which brings absolutely no comfort. The poet feels uncomfortable and something despondent as he cannot see the tree which he once used to see; he cannot feel the object that lies beneath his hands; and he feels that there is some



weight which presses his hands downwards. This feeling excavates symbolically the poet's pessimistic attitude towards the lost England after Second World War and the poet's deplorable and helpless condition in the following lines:

Where has the tree gone, that locked
Earth to the sky? What is under my hands,
That I cannot feel?
What loads my hands down? (3)

The poem 'Next Please' again expresses the same attitude and approach with pessimistic tone. Here, life is portrayed as a series of promises and hopes which are never fulfilled in actual life at full extend. Larkin has compared beautifully these promises and hopes with ships which are expected to arrive at port but never arrive. He has presented death through the presentation of the ship, a black-sailed and unfamiliar one which is seeking everybody in order to mean that death is inevitable and no one can escape from it. The poet's such deep and heart-felt emotions are reflected at the very end of the poem in the following lines:

Only one ship is seeking us, a black-
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back
A huge and birdless silence. In her wake
No waters breed or break. (52)

In another poem 'Afternoons', Larkin has depicted the changing social and cultural climate of the late 1950's and early 1960's in a quite deliberate way. The climate is presented by the references to the new recreation ground, to husbands in skilled traders, to an estate full of washing, to the albums lettered 'Our Wedding' lying near the television. In this poem, we find the poet expressing the view that the beauty of the women has thickened with the passing of time, and that something is pushing them to the side of their lives. One thing is very clear that Larkin's poetry encompasses the sense of dissatisfaction and isolation as reflected in his presentation of social and cultural change in this poem. In this poem, Larkin portrays the inability and futility of human life that seem irresistible to the human life, in a sceptic and

agnostic approach. Towards the end of the poem, the poet's mood and attitude gradually becomes humorous and satirical:

That are still courting-places
(But the lovers are in school),
And their children, so intent on
Finding more unripe acorns,
Expect to be taken home.
Their beauty has thickened.
Something is pushing them
To the side of their own lives. (121)

Larkin's poetry is always impregnated with the thought of death, decay, disappointment and isolation that drive the human life and mind to the ultimate deprivation and frustration. His pessimistic, agnostic and cynical attitude is caused by the horrific and destructive scenario after the World War II that he has experienced with an understanding of the process of isolation, alienation and predicament of human life. He has projected human pain, suffering and helplessness in his poetry to bring people close to the reality without deceiving them.

In the poem 'Ambulances', Larkin points out the impossibility of escaping from disease and death and the very presence of ambulance in every street which is visited by death and disease. In a utter bitterness, he has captured the very sensitive issue of human life by emphasising the universality of death without any ray of comfort or hope:

And sense solving emptiness
That lies just under all we do,
And for a second get it whole,
So permanent and blank and true.
The fastened doors recede. *Poor soul*
They whisper at their own distress. (132)

The poem namely 'Mr.Bleaney' is a dramatic monologue in which the character of a man called Bleaney has been portrayed in a very pathetic



manner reflecting the bleakness of the modern civilization after World War II. The person is depicted as poor fellow without any belongings and without any house of his own. He had been living in a boarding house which was inadequately furnished. The speaker is quite convinced that he deserved no better than that little room since he seemed to be a man of dirty habits and lacked any amount of motivation or ambition to achieve good things in life. The poet describes this condition of life in the following-

That how we live measures our own nature,
And at his age having no more to show
Than one hired box should make him pretty sure
He wanted no better, I don't know.

Thus, as the pessimistic philosophy counters the idea of progress and modernization, the poem too, seems to highlight the fact that the advancement that the world has been in terms of science and technology have been futile. The poem harps on the philosophy of existential nihilism which suggests that there is no inherent meaning of life and that man is pretty insignificant in the overall scheme of things. Donald A. Crosby cites Schopenhauer's example as the perfect "exponent" of the idea of existential nihilism claiming:

For him, as for existential nihilists in general, human existence in all its manifestation exhibits an inescapable and unalterable absurdity. Strut, fret, and delude ourselves as we may, our lives are of no significance, and it is futile to seek or to affirm meaning where none can be found. (*The Spectre of the Absurd*, 32)

The poem entitled 'The Whitsun Weddings' also begins with a dismissive attitude, and then becomes contemplative. The train is three quarters empty when it leaves the railway station of Hull. Larkin captures the fleeting glimpses of the scenery on the way, though none of it is very interesting, and much of it is squalid and polluted. It is only the third stanza where Larkin observes the wedding parties at each railway station with the dismissive attitude of

someone who is a life-time bachelor and an alienated outsider. Larkin presents himself as an observer, detached from the adventure of life and captivated by it. From the disappointment of lovelessness and his dread of the absolute alienation of death, Larkin returns with a reluctant gratitude to life, resolving the ambiguity in art. An ironical and detailed description of the various sights takes up the later parts of the poem. The sense of isolation is certainly diminished to a great extent in the conclusion but the whole poem is dominated by this undercurrent:

There we were aimed. And as we raced across
Bright knots of rail
Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss
Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail
Travelling coincidence; and what it held
Stood ready to be loosed with all the power
That being changed can give. We slowed again,
And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
Send out of sight, somewhere becoming rain. (116)

The sense of alienation from society, caused by his extremely agnostic and cynical perspective, is to be found in his another poem 'Dockery and Son'. In this poem, Larkin does not find anything attractive about a man getting married and begetting children. Most people in this world are involved with sexual affair to satisfy their urge and after the sexual urge has been satisfied, a man feels the need to perpetuate himself through his offspring. But in this poem, Larkin dismisses such an attitude as a result, not of any real or natural or irrepressible urge, but of custom and habit. Thus, in his eyes, marriage and children are not essential at all. Larkin's tone becomes grave and depressing than his argument regarding marriage and children:

And how we got it; looked back on, they rear
Like sand-clouds, thick and close, embodying
For Dockery a son, for me nothing,
Nothing with all a son's harsh patronage.



Life is first boredom, then fear.

Whether or not we use it, it goes,

And leaves what something hidden from us chose,

And age, then the only end of age. (153)

In his poem 'Marriages', his manner of dealing with the idea or theme is somewhat cynical but realistic as he depicts marriage in most cases is a matter of accepting an undesirable and unwanted partner. He labels marriage as the loss of one's freedom and personal space and as a result a man feels boredom and becomes a failure. Larkin's cynical and realistic viewpoints do not drive to idealise relationship, marriage, sex and sexual gratification, rather he creates an atmosphere of utter disillusionment and frustration and self hatred:

So they are gathered in,

So they are not wasted,

As they would have been

By intelligent rancour,

An integrity of self-hatred

Whether they forget

What they wanted first or not

They tarnish at quiet anchor (64)

Again the theme of reality and suffering with a profoundly thought provoking event has been captured by Philip Larkin in his poem 'The Explosion' in a very critical and agnostic approach. The poet depicts the scenario of a pit head in the coal district of Wales on the very day of fatal explosion. The very beginning of the poem hints at the fatal fate that awaits the miners. In this we meet three men as they come down lane of life, "Coughing oath-edged talk and pipe smoke". One of them, who breaks free from the group to chase a rabbit, returns with "a nest of lark's eggs". Larkin does not give the detailed description of the circumstances; rather he prefers to understate the physical reality of what happened. With very serious and cynical way, Larkin presents the dead men's funeral service:

The dead go on before us, they,

Are sitting in God's house in comfort,

We shall see them face to face- (175)

The funeral image is really an unforgettable one. Larkin provides us a minute detail of the people, places and events from the pit heads of Wales to England. The ambiguous and equivocal nature of Larkin's poem always leads us to consider some deep and profoundly thought provoking ideas.

The terseness of expression in Larkin's poems is a brilliant specimen of enunciating the his stark argument to create an everlasting impression. He believes in the fact that everyone has to face death and life is just an insufferable pain of existence that constantly harasses the human psyche. Milton Sarkar observes that Philip Larkin's poetry is inspired by the 'post-imperial situation' wherein the loss of the power and glory of British Empire greatly and immensely affected the perspectives and sensibilities of an entire generation in which Larkin was belonging to. He argues –

The term post-imperial has been used here in the particular context of the post-war situation, as it has been felt that the loss of the empire affected the mindset not only of the political leaders of the nation but also its common middle class population who felt the impact in their lived experiences. It was a very important factor no doubt, but in artistic and cultural representations the impact may not always be directly stated. Mediated through artistic sensibilities, the percolated experiences were not always rendered in political terms. (*Englishness and Post-imperial Space, Introduction*)

Thus, it is evident from the above rapid survey of some of Larkin's poems that his poems are always impregnated with the sense of death, disillusionment, isolation, alienation and stoic resignation that help Larkin to see the world with cynical and agnostic perspectives. It is also very clear that the poems of Larkin have a close link with the



socio-political developments of the post-war period. The characters in his poems exhibit a psychological burden of either alienation or death and the expression of this burden is strengthened by the language he uses to communicate his concerns. In this context, Sarkar comments in *Englishness and Post-imperial Space: The Poetry of Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes* :

One cannot deny the presence in contemporary works of an overwhelming sense of frustration and ennui as well as of a pressing need for resurgence and regeneration both of which can be, in some way or other, related to the political situation of the time. (*Introduction 1*)

However, Larkin has managed to combine familiar and time-honoured techniques of storytelling with a degree of literary self awareness and self-irony which the modernists make part of their stock-in trade. His achievement is major one – but it is hard to imagine a more modest and in some respects, a more reluctant pioneer.

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