CHAPTER – VI

CONCLUSION

It is very clear that the themes of death and alienation are central in all the three volumes discussed in this thesis. It is also very clear that the poems have a close link with the socio-political developments of the postwar 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.

_The Less Deceived_ draws the universal human concerns of love, friendship, alienation, time and death. Man is portrayed in this volume as the victim of his own self-deception in a world of illusions. Reality is ultimately death, the end of everything, and what one has chosen is nothing but an illusion of reality. This volume is a product of Larkin’s direct engagement with the postwar British society marked by economic degradation, human relationship crisis, etc. The accommodation of such issues in the poems of this volume makes it a mature collection, a development from the melancholic self-assertion of _The North Ship_: ‘In _The Less Deceived_, however, the poems are more or less accessible, situated, though not always,
against the backdrop of specific events.'

The poems selected for individual analysis in the third chapter show Larkin’s concerns—death and alienation—working so prominently.

For example the poem “Going,” which is the first poem in *Collected Poems* edited by Anthony Thwaite, shows the loss of the link between the ‘earth’ and the ‘sky’ which is a symbol of heaven. The ‘evening’ in the poem is an illusion created by human weakness as it ‘lights no lamps’ (CP 3) though it looks so attractive at first sight:

Silken it seems at a distance, yet
When it is drawn up over the knees and breast
It brings no comfort. (CP 3)

Ultimately, the poet brings in the image of death when he ‘cannot feel.’ This opening poem of *Collected Poems* is a poem of death which is a precursor of many such poems that follow. With economy of words, this poem raises a serious ontological question at the very outset. In the same way the image of death is brought in as a threat to the conjugal joy in what Anthony Thwaite called ‘the only completely happy poem of Larkin’s,’ “Wedding-Wind.”

The theme of death is forcefully and fearfully retained in poems such as “Next, Please” in which all attempts in life have proved futile and the ‘black-sailed’ ship of death becomes the last to anchor. Interestingly the diction and the theme of “Next Please” show a close combination to Larkin’s concern of time and its ultimate effect, death. “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album,” “Coming,” “Triple Time,” “At Grass,” etc. again prove Larkin’s obsession with time and death. The theme of alienation is
effectively kept stir in “Wedding-Wind,” “Wants,” “No Road,” “Toads,” “Deceptions” and “At Grass.” The horse which stands ‘anonymous’ in “At Grass,” ‘the wish to be alone’ in “Wants,” the road which has fallen to ‘disuse’ in “No Road,” the ‘solitude’ portrayed in “Best Society,” etc. are apt examples of Larkin’s close examination of life in the postwar English society where alienation is a prominent feature. In “Reasons for Attendance,” Larkin thus celebrates his solitude against the happiness of the married couples:

But not for me, nor I for them; and so
With happiness. Therefore I stay outside,
Believing this, and they maul to an fro,
Believing that, and both are satisfied,
If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied. (CP 80)

“Wants” and “Reasons for Attendance” vividly portray Larkin’s love of solitude. However this solitude becomes a ‘desire for oblivion’ in “Wants,” where the state of being alone becomes ‘loneliness.’ Similarly, a sense of alienation moves through the lines of “Church Going” with the speaker of the poem finding none inside the church to share his ideas and feelings of loneliness. The poem ultimately ends in an image of death ‘that so many dead lie round’ (CP 98). This poem is symptomatic of the postwar decline in religious congregations as narrated in the second chapter.

The title poem “Deceptions” draws a clear picture of the helplessness of individuals in a commercial society in which they have almost lost their control over their own desire. This poem portrays not only the individuals but also the relationship they have within a cruel society. Though Larkin brings in a social concern of the nineteenth century, the issue of human relationship drawn in the poem is fresh and exceptionally penetrative into
the postwar British society. The rapist and the raped represent the postwar Britain, a place for jobless and immoral people. Significantly, this poem unfolds the power structure in a society marked by consumerism and individual freedom. Ultimately, alienation becomes a social phenomenon widely prevalent across Britain in the wake of its economic degradation and the loss of imperial glory. Thus, the poem minutely shows Larkin’s ability to unfold the close relationship between the individuals and the society where they live in.

Poems such as “Myxomatosis” portrays a serious situation of the animals when they cannot understand what has happened to them. This situation of the rabbits in the poem allegorically alludes to the situation in which the rapist and the raped of “Deceptions” are trapped. “Toads,” “Deceptions,” “At Grass,” “Weddings-Wind,” “Wants,” “No Road,” “Church Going,” etc exhibit a strong sense of alienation of the characters in the poems. Other poems such as “Next, Please,” “Going,” “Myxomatosis,” etc. are controlled by a sense of defeat and death. Thus The Less Deceived is one of the three mature collections of Larkin’s poetry where death and alienation are so central.

In The Whitsun Weddings Larkin pays more attention to social rituals and tries to find solace. However, in most poems in this volume, the theme of alienation is again a pivotal current in association with the obsession of death. “Mr Bleaney,” “Toads Revisited,” “Here,” “The Whitsun Weddings,” “Self’s the Man,” “The Importance of Elsewhere,” “Dockery and Son,” “Reference Back,” etc. have the theme of alienation or the rejection of social behaviour by the individuals. Again, poems such as “Take One Home
for the Kiddies,” “Days,” “Ambulances,” etc. bring in the issue of death as the most problematic question before us. The whole drama of life is rendered into nullity at the thought of death. This volume shows Larkin’s rejection of marriage as a selfish institution. “The Whitsun Weddings,” “Self’s the Man” and “Dockery and Son” clearly show Larkin’s attitude towards marriage and celibacy. Life becomes once again an enactment of a drama of wrong choice: ‘Come and choose wrong’ (CP 65). The answer to the baffling ontological question—‘Where can we live but days?’ (CP 67)—is always wrong and ‘the priest and the doctor’ have failed to do their jobs.

The three-stanza poem, “The Importance of Elsewhere” exposes Larkin’s quest for a place other than England. It is because he thinks he can find a reason for his loneliness in any other place while he cannot do in his own native place. Thus the sense of alienation plays havoc to him even in his own motherland. Like in the volume *The Less Deceived*, time becomes a grave concern in poems like “Reference Back” and “An Arundel Tomb.” In the title poem of the volume, the speaker poet is completely outside the drama of wedding couples and tries to link them to a larger philosophical issue of ‘rebirth’ though he fails completely in doing so. In “Home is so Sad,” Larkin registers his loneliness, like in “The Importance of Elsewhere,” in his own home. “Afternoons” links the individuals—children, wives, husbands—to the national decline of imperial power and the development of a consumerist society. The minute details he describes about the places and people are so lucid that his friend, Kingsley Amis later calls him “The Coventry Chaucer” in the essay of the same title. The description of the wives in “Afternoons,” the portrayal of married couples in “The Whitsun Weddings,” the minute details of the hospital in “The Building” and the lifestyle of Mr Bleaney in “Mr Bleaney” are all apt examples of his Chaucerian style.
In his description of the pastoral England, a human interest is always associated and the characters, events, vocabulary, etc. clearly show that he belongs to the postwar period. The effect of war and industrialization is also seen in some of his poems such as “MCMXIV”:

And the countryside not caring  
The place names all hazed over  
With flowering grasses, and fields  
Shadowing Doomsday lines  
Under wheat’s restless silence;  
The differently-dressed servants  
With tiny rooms in huge houses  
The dust behind limousines; (CP 127)

Such portrayal of rural England is also seen in *The Less Deceived* as in poems such as “Wedding Wind,” “Church Going,” etc. and in *High Windows* as in “Going,” “The Explosion,” etc. The landscapes in his poems have a ‘human meaning’ and this meaning helps us establish the motif of the poems too. He sees the landscapes in juxtaposition with the humans including himself. The landscapes are, thus in most cases, described with artificial objects:

Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle, and  
Canals with floating of industrial froth,  
A hothouse flashed uniquely; hedges dipped  
And rose: and now and then a smell of grass  
Displaced the reek of buttoned carriage-cloth  
Until the next town, new and nondescript,  
Approached with acres of dismantled cars. (CP 114)

This is the description of the postwar England. The natural objects – ‘Wide farms,’ ‘cattle,’ ‘canals,’ ‘hedges,’ ‘grass’– are crisscrossed by the images of artificial objects— ‘industrial froth,’ ‘hothouse,’ ‘acres of dismantled
cars,’ etc. This description is consistent with the socio-economic background of the postwar Britain enumerated in the second chapter of this thesis. Thus Donald Davie also writes:

.. we recognize in Larkin’s poems the seasons of present day England, but we recognize also the seasons of an English soul—the moods he expresses are our moods too, though we may deal with them differently. On the literal level at any rate, no one denies that what Larkin says is true; that the England in his poems is the England we have inhabited.4

Thus it is clear that Larkin represents his age, the postwar English society and that *The Whistun Weddings* unfolds a clear picture of Larkin’s identity against the backdrop of the social and literary milieu of his time. He is an agnostic in “Faith Healing” and “The Whitsun Weddings”; a pessimist in “Toads Revisited,” “Ambulances” and “Dockery and Son”; a loner in “Self’s the Man” and “Mr Bleaney”; a death haunted old man in “Here,” “Nothing To Be Said,” “Aubade,” etc. The general mood of *The Whitsun Weddings* is what Larkin once described in a collage in his bathroom which he captioned “Ah, at last I’ve found you!” 5 The satirical ‘pantomime horse’ suggests the metaphysical failure as we see in poems like “Days” where the ‘priest’ and the ‘doctor’ could not make life possible outside the boundary of ‘days.’ Any attempt to do so becomes futile. The answer of the question—‘Where can we live but days?’—is always ‘out of reach’ (CP 137).

*High Windows* marks Larkin’s robust challenge against his impending death. Most poems contained in this collection end in an affirmative note compared to the poems of the previous collections. This is a marked feature of the Movement poetry. The ‘eggs unbroken’ in “The Explosion” is one such
example of the affirmative note so conspicuous in the poems of *High Windows* and those written after it:

Last year is dead, they seem to say,
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh. (CP 166)

All love, all beauty. (CP 178)

Regenerate Union. Let it always be there. (CP 201)

Work has to be done.
Postmen like doctors go from house to house. (CP 209)

. . . We should be kind
While there is still time. (CP 214)

And hope that in the future you
Reap ever richer revenue. (CP 218)

This affirmative note is in contrast to the negative mood working in the poems contained in the previous volumes. Three years before his death Larkin wrote:

Whatever was sown
Now fully grown,
Whatever conceived
Now fully leaved,
Abounding, ablaze—
O long lion days! (CP 219)

This is to say that Larkin has changed his attitude towards life in *High Windows*. In the early poems, the general mood is gloomy and naïve. In the previous two volumes— *The Less Deceived* and *The Whitsun Weddings*— Larkin sees death everywhere. However in *High Window* and the last poems he has learned
how to face it. The ‘sexual intercourse’ in “Annus Mirabilis,” the ‘eggs unbroken’ in “The Explosion,” the realization of the ‘great friendliness’ in “Dublinesque,” the ‘propitiatory flowers’ in “The Building,” the ‘Regenerate union’ in “Show Saturday,” etc. are significant affirmative features of the poems in *High Windows*. The case is same in some of his last poems written after the publication of *High Windows*. The last two lines of “Aubade”—‘Work has to be done./ Postmen like doctors go from house to house’ (CP 209)—are significant in the light of this change of attitude.

Thus, having examined the last three collections of poetry and the last poems which are not collected in any of the volumes, we can conclude that:

i) the themes of Death and Alienation form the nucleus of his poems and that the sense of alienation is associated with the notion of death.

ii) the sense of alienation and the fear of death are the result of the scientific, technological, political and intellectual developments of the postwar years.

iii) there is a pattern in the theme of the poems that Larkin appreciates the value of life more profoundly against death in his last poems.

In the eyes of Larkin, death nullifies the validity of life of any kind, big or small, as we see in *The Less Deceived* and *The Whitsun Weddings*. But *High Windows* brings in a sense of relief or at least of being logical and ethical in choosing life and nullifying death. While the priests and the doctors in
“Days” fail to address the ontological question of the poet, the ‘postmen’ in “Aubade” brings a healing effect when they take the role of ‘doctors.’

Larkin’s main concern, as his poems allude, is life and its confrontation with the various forces—love, hatred, friendship, deprivation, death, alienation, etc. Out of such confrontations, his poems ooze out in search of a place ideal for his life. Yet, the search for ‘elsewhere’ is also a failure. Everything in this world is unworthy and unreliable except one’s own life:

Reasons for the Larkin persona’s nonattendance at the altar are legion: he is selfish and would make a bad mate, he hasn’t met the person he loves; he seems to be operating in the wrong league, where all the women he meets are too ugly, or principled, or stubborn, or shy; art in any case should come first. The only good couple, he seems to be saying at his gloomiest, is a dead couple, like the earl and countess in “An Arundel Tomb”... the woman is altogether elsewhere.6

His sense of alienation begins when he finds the woman of his choice elsewhere outside his reach or when those who are within his reach are not his choice. Yet, he is still ‘an original, obsessive, deep-feeling poet who consistently refused the consolations of conventional belief.’7

Larkin’s sense of alienation can be clearly understood only by close examination of his presence and the roles played by him in the poems. The images created in his poems show his psychological dissociation from the rest of the world. Thus he is in a ‘condition of aloneness which is identical with oblivion’8 in many of the poems such as “At Grass” and “Church Going” in The Less Deceived; “The Whitsun Weddings,” “Mr Bleaney,” and “Dockery and Son” in The Whitsun Weddings; and “Sad Steps” and “Here” in High
The condition of oblivious aloneness is, to be sure, a delicate one, is, indeed, an aspect of that aloof, dismissive attentiveness which is the inner value of all Larkin’s poetry. To be alone but aware of being alone is the painful state of loneliness.9

This ‘painful state of loneliness’ is prevalent in all the three volumes discussed in this thesis. However, the degree of painfulness is different as Larkin has got certain consolations in High Windows. In his last two collections, Larkin generalizes his own problem of death and alienation as a universal human predicament. Thus, in High Windows the poet learns life better and affirms its beauty:

This last collection [High Windows] presents a panoramic, almost epical, canvas of life, embodies a sunnier vision and celebrates the invincible dignity of human life, despite all its inherent limitations.10

This is to ascertain that Larkin is a changed man in High Windows. He has learned the limitations of life and therefore consoles himself by knowing that something is always ‘out of reach’ and the place ‘Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet’ (CP 114) is just an illusion. He has changed his style too. In The Less Deceived and The Whitsun Weddings he is angry and argumentative against all odds of life but in High Windows most poems end in the realization of the value of life and its limitations. It is because he has learned the odd opposites of life— the self and the others, the truth and
the illusions, the celibacy and the marriage, the past and the present. He has done serious juxtapositions of such binary opposites in his poems and ‘led a life of refusals’ for many years until he realizes that ‘Work has to be done’ (CP 209).

Larkin was unmarried, lived alone in rented houses and avoided public appearances. He dearly values the lost innocence of the past: ‘The lost paradise of innocence obsesses him and his poems. Only because of the forlorn; noisy, mean clutter of our lives does this innocence seem a “solving emptiness” for which we hunger and are sickened by.’ His subject matter covers a larger area of human sufferings: ‘Innocence, the pathos and grim humour of experience, the poignancy of the past (whether one’s own remembered past or the imagined past of another century), the change and renewal of nature, the dread of the future, death and all that leads up to it and away from it.’ However, Larkin deals with these subject matters with ‘his lucidity, his debunkery, his technical accomplishment and such “typical” attributes’ of which Anthony Thwaite later praises him saying that ‘with the publication of High Windows, and in the years since, there has been a consolidation of the general—both critical and popular—view that Philip Larkin is the finest living poet writing in English.’

Larkin’s greatness is also attributed to the way how beautiful scenes are created out of the ordinary surroundings thereby relating such scenes to his own emotions. He does it in such a way that ‘the actual scene and its meaning always complement one another.’ The comparisons between the external world and internal emotions, between Nature and artificial creations, between the ideal and the real, between the truth and the illusion
are placed with logical sense in his poems: ‘He has the ability to feel his way into complex emotion or resolution by beginning with a concrete situation, perhaps a quite trivial one and then to use that situation as a sort of parable implicit in his resolution.’ This ‘ability’ works in most of his celebrated poems and scenes created there are mostly disintegrated ones though it portrays complex human problems. The voice of the characters in the poems is of either anger or sadness while facing the reality of life. Thus a clear sense of alienation is always central in most of his poems.

While love, Nature, religion, family, etc. are other concerns of Larkin, his language is of special interest for many. This thesis, while emphasizing on the themes of death and alienation, cannot incorporate all such concerns of Larkin as it may enlarge the thesis to an unmanageable size. However, at the same time, this thesis has pointed out the possible areas of research on such concerns of Larkin.
NOTES


4 Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952) p. 64.

5 There is a collage in the bathroom of Larkin’s flat in 32 Pearson Park, Hull. It shows a pantomime horse’s front and back legs pulling apart in opposite directions and is juxtaposed with William Blake’s “Union of Body and Soul.” See Andrew Swarbrick, “Larkin’s Identities” *Philip Larkin*, ed. Stephen Regan (New York: Palgrave, 1997) p. 211.


12 Ibid., p. 259.


17 Ibid., p. 148.