CHAPTER – I

INTRODUCTION

Larkin and the Themes of Death and Alienation

Philip Larkin: Philip Larkin’s place in the history of English literature is well established today though his critics are not unanimous on various aspects of his life and work. By causing so much of controversy, Larkin has attracted so much of attention of his critics and readers thereby leaving the controversy unresolved. Interestingly enough, Larkin hits back to those critics who create such a controversy: ‘critics can hinder but they can’t help.’ Larkin writes poetry not for critics but for a pleasure seeking audience. The simplicity of his diction, the choice of everyday events and the pastoral scenes of his poetry make him different from the modernists of the first half of the twentieth century.

However, giving a definite assessment of the merit of his poetry is still a matter of hard labour and thorough research in the light of the contradictory opinions of the critics. It calls for a minute study of his poems vis-à-vis the contradictory opinions. This again inevitably necessitates a close examination of the influences on him in the light of the social and literary milieu of his time narrated in the second chapter of this thesis. Thus, writing on Larkin
requires a serious engagement with the issues confronting him in an era of new developments in arts, science and politics.

Larkin was born on 9 August 1922 to Sydney Larkin and Eva Larkin under unusual circumstances. He was born ‘nearly a month late, weighed almost ten pounds, and had luxuriant black hair’ which is strange compared to his bald head in the later years. His father wanted to call him Philip, after the Renaissance poet Philip Sidney, while his mother chose Anthony as the name of her only son. Later his parents compromised and named their son Philip Arthur Larkin; Arthur being the name of Eva’s brother. Larkin’s strangeness did not end there. He had a weak eyesight from early childhood and his back was long enough while his legs were comparatively short. He was a stammerer in his childhood. He called his childhood ‘a forgotten boredom.’ Later again in the poem “I Remember, I Remember,” he said that his birthplace Coventry was ‘where my childhood was unspent’ and ‘Nothing, like something, happens anywhere’ (CP 81,82). Thus, Larkin’s life developed with all such strangeness and this strangeness continued to appear in his poems causing much controversy:

No other English poet belonging to the second half of the twentieth century has been the subject of so much, and of so intense, critical controversy as Philip Larkin (1922-1985). There is hardly any issue relating to Larkin’s poetry on which his critics are unanimous.

He got his early education at King Henry VIII Grammar School in Coventry. Later he came to Oxford University in 1940 and befriended Kingsley Amis, John Wain, Alan Ross and Bruce Montgomery who helped him shape his literary career. He started working as a librarian at a public library in Wellington in 1943. Then he served as sub-librarian of the University College of Leicester
and Queen’s University, Belfast. Later he was appointed librarian of Hull University in 1954 and joined there in March the next year. He remained in Hull till he died of cancer in 1985.


Larkin was known for his lifestyle. He kept aloof from friends and relatives, drank regularly at night and loved jazz. He had many girlfriends who were never married to him. His failed relationships were debated time and again by many critics. The publication of his letters edited by Anthony Thwaite has been the centre of critical debates and criticism. These letters allegedly show Larkin’s ill attitude towards women and draws serious criticism.

Interestingly enough, a lot of negative remarks are made on Larkin. However such remarks are, though they may not wholly be true, helpful in examining the individual poems in the following chapters in this thesis. It is, however, so difficult to fix the identity of Larkin within a definite parameter. Thus, Andrew Motion writes: ‘It is hard to write a critical book on Philip
Larkin without feeling guilty.” His simplicity of diction brings him closer to the romantic poets of the nineteenth century. His love of natural scene in the poems such as “Whitsun Weddings,” “Dockery and Son,” “Here,” etc. adds more romantic flavour to his poetry. However, his concern for reality of everyday life in poems such as “Mr. Bleaney,” “Next, Please,” “Nothing To Be Said,” “Aubade,” “Toads,” etc. clearly shows that “His theme is the disparity between reality and desire.” What one desires is not realisable in his world of reality. Thus, life ends in death and anything beyond life is unreal to Larkin:

That this [death] is what we fear—no sight, no sound,
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with.
The anaesthetic from which none come round. (CP 208)

This endless fear of death while he is still alive carries a ‘tenderly nursed sense of defeat’ which is reflected in the poems time and again. If Larkin carries that ‘sense of defeat,’ it is under the compulsion of ‘his lifelong need to expose false ideals and illusions.’ Under this compulsion Larkin is a realist and not a romantic. He is a man of his time who cannot run away from the confines of reality. His world is the world of ‘electric fences’ (CP 48), of a ‘Sparkling armada of promises’ (CP 52), of ‘the priest and the doctor’ (CP 67), of ‘the toad work’ (CP 89), of the ‘upright chair, sixty watt bulb’ and ‘the jabbering set’ (CP 102), of ‘Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers’ (CP 136), etc. This world of his everyday life and its experiences make him distant from the imaginative world of the romantics though his love for English landscape is one of the most prominent features of his poetry. Such strange combinations of the features of his poetry make his poems interesting, yet painstaking to digest thoroughly.
As the arguments over the merit of Larkin’s poetry continue, the problem of death and alienation is an issue confronting Larkin poem after poem. The centrality of death and alienation has been, therefore, a special interest for many a critic against the backdrop of the prevailing social and political developments after the war. For example Calvin Bedient writes:

English poetry has never been so persistently out in the cold as it is with Philip Larkin, a poet who (contrary to Wordsworth’s view of the calling) rejoices not more but less than other men in the spirit of life that is in him.

In the same way Robert Richman calls him ‘Prince of Despair’ while Clive James sees him as ‘a sacrificial goat’ in their assessments of Larkin’s poetry. This is in contrast to what John Reibetanz said that ‘Larkin’s achievement as a poet demonstrates a more profound reappraisal of romantic values than is evident in any of his wryly dogmatic critical pronouncements.’ However, Stephen David Lavine insists that ‘Larkin’s central theme has always been survival in a world without value, a world with all coherence gone.’ Similarly Robert B. Shaw writes:

The bleakness of Larkin’s vision, present in the writing from the beginning, has intensified through time. The almost bottomless bitterness expressed in some of the pieces in High Windows may be taken, depending on one’s taste, as signaling either the perfecting of an artist’s individual focus or a surrender of his imaginative flexibility.

He further called Larkin’s last volume of poetry, High Windows, ‘a problematical [emphasis mine] achievement.’ It means Larkin’s identity is yet to be ascertained. What is ‘problematical’ has to be cleared by a close examination of the individual poems in the light of such arguments.
Defending himself against the charge of being so pessimistic Larkin once said: ‘The impulse of producing a poem is never negative; the most negative poem in the world is a very positive thing to have done.’\(^{17}\) Interestingly, Anthony Thwaite who edited Larkin’s *Collected Poems* said: ‘“Wedding-Wind” is the *only* [emphasis mine] completely happy poem of Larkin’s, the *only* [emphasis mine] one in which there is a total acceptance of joy.’\(^ {18}\) Thwaite’s statement implies that all poems Larkin wrote are sad poems except “Wedding-Wind.” This is in contrast to what Larkin said about his poetry being a ‘positive thing to have done.’ Further Philip Gardner stresses on Larkin’s ‘awareness of sadness at the back of things, of the passing of time and the inevitability of death’\(^ {19}\) in his poetry. On the contrary Andrew Motion says:

> By looking out a few of his recurrent themes, it is possible to see that his pessimism is not axiomatic, his attitude to death is in marked contrast to Hardy’s, and his hope of deriving comfort from social and natural rituals is resilient.\(^ {20}\)

Thus, Larkin’s vision of death is central in many of his poems though a clear picture of death and his attitude towards it is not properly assessed anywhere so far. It calls for a minute examination of his individual poems where the centrality of death is a recurrent theme.

Another prominent obsession of Larkin is alienation— a twentieth century concern for most writers. This is, in association with the theme of death, a matter of serious concern which makes Larkin a prominent representative of the postwar British literature. His lifestyle, his celibacy and the social conditions of his time are to be read properly to come to a definite conclusion on his sense of alienation widely prevalent in his poetry. For example Sisir Kumar Chaterjee, commenting on “Mr Bleaney,” writes:
“Mr Bleaney” is effectively a neutral, objective documentary on an ordinary, unambitious, unimaginative, unadventurous, low-keyed existence of a modern lower-middle class individual, a victim of alienation [emphasis mine].  

This Bleaney is the representative of a threatened commercial life in England in the second half of the twentieth century and the characteristics he exhibits are symptomatic of the consumerist life of that period. The horse that stands ‘anonymous’ in “At Grass,” the husband leaving his beloved all alone in “Wedding-Wind,” the rapist and the raped who are not paid any attention by the people in the busy city of London in “Deceptions” are apt delineations of alienation in The Less Deceived. Similarly, “Mr Bleaney,” “Toads Revisited,” “The Whitsun Weddings,” “Self’s the Man,” “The Importance of Elsewhere” and “Dockery and Son” show the centrality of alienation in his poetry which are both biographical and social sketches. Such poems are Larkin’s commentaries on the link between the individual and his society. Any study of such relationships between the individual and environment inevitably calls for our serious engagement with the social, political and scientific developments of twentieth century which Eric Hobsbawm aptly called the ‘Age of Extremes.’

Larkin’s lifestyle also shows his failure to link himself to the society: ‘Beyond all this, the wish to be alone’ (CP 42) always supersedes all acts of being in company. He once said that he saw ‘life more as an affair of solitude diversified by company’ thereby remaining celibate throughout his life. Again he wrote:

No I have never found
The place where I could say
This is my proper ground
Here I shall stay; (CP 99)
Similarly, Coventry, his birthplace becomes a place where he has lost his childhood:

‘Was that’ my friend smiled, ‘where you “have your roots”?  
No, only where my childhood was unspent,  
I wanted to retort, just where I started: (CP 81)

This failure to find a ‘proper ground’ and the uprootedness of his past are constitutive in the creation of his alienation. This is an interesting area of investigation against the backdrop of the postwar social and literary milieu described in the second chapter of this thesis.

Larkin’s childhood was ‘unspent’ in Coventry as ‘Nothing, like something, happens anywhere’ (CP 82) and later he told Miriam Gross in an interview: ‘Deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth.’ 24 This deprivation of friendship, childhood freedom and above all love is pivotal in many of his poems such as “I Remember, I Remember.” Larkin was a stammerer and this problem kept him away from developing friendship with many people. When asked about his being ‘semi-recluse,’ he once told Ian Hamilton:

I began life as a bad stammerer, as a matter of fact. Up to the age of 21 I was still asking for railway tickets by pushing written notes across the counter. . . . I do find literary parties or meetings, or anything that considers literature in public in the abstract rather than concretely, in private, not exactly boring— it is boring, of course— but unhelpful and even inimical. I go away feeling crushed and thinking that everyone is much cleverer than I am and writing much more and so on. I think it’s important not to feel crushed.25

The point Larkin hints at is that the world is out there to crush him and that being alone makes him avoid being ‘crushed.’ The dilemma between socializing
his life and keeping himself aloof from this crushing world finds its place in many of his poems. He said, ‘I suppose I always try to write the truth and I wouldn’t want to write a poem which suggested that I was different from what I am.’\textsuperscript{26} It means that the pessimism in his poems is what his dreary life has given to him.

Thus, death and alienation form the core issues of his poems in all the three volumes of poems discussed in this thesis. The present thesis will examine these two themes in his poems, its origins and the implication it has in the reading of his poems. It also includes socio-political background of Larkin’s time and its literary implications. Along with this the literary movements of his period is another important aspect that will help interpret the poems with accuracy. It is here that the Movement, a literary movement of the 1950s, will play an important role in unfolding the real motif behind Larkin’s poems.

The Movement is the most prominent literary movement of the 1950s. According to Lolette Kuby ‘Philip Larkin first came to the attention of the poetry interested public as a member of the Movement.’\textsuperscript{27} Thus a clear understanding of the Movement is necessary for proper examination of Larkin’s poetry. The basic features of the Movement are highly controversial though J.D. Scott puts it as:

\begin{quote}
The Movement, as well as being anti-phoney, is anti-wet, sceptical, robust, ironic, prepared to be as comfortable as possible in a wicked, commercial, threatened world . . . .\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

However, on the contrary, most Movement poets frequently are not aware of their participation in the Movement and ‘Larkin has said that he had “no sense at all” of belonging to a movement.’\textsuperscript{29} These contradictory claims necessitate a
thorough research to ascertain the validity of such claims. Apart from this, the change in the attitude of Larkin towards death and the lifestyle he adopted to counter the thought of death will also be examined to unfold his world of death and alienation. This will be carried out through the minute reading of his poems in terms of theme, language, technique and style.

Though Larkin is considered as one of the most prominent poets of the postwar period, Michael Kirkham considers him as a ‘minor poet.’ This is contrary to what Robert Richman says that ‘Philip Larkin brings together what may be the most important body of poetry written in the post-World War II period.’ It is against the backdrop of such arguments and counter arguments that his poems will be examined.

**Death and Alienation:** Death has been defined differently in different books. Traditionally, the cessation of the function of heart is believed to be the basis for declaring one dead. However, in recent times the cessation of the functions of both brain and heart is the only basis available to declare one’s death. In other words, death is the end of life. It means that the definition of death also defines life. Most religious beliefs, however, assumes that there is life after death too.

Death has been the concern of many a writer from the ancient times. While religious beliefs of the ancient people show that death is not the end of life, most writers in Larkin’s time are sceptical of the notion of life after death. Renaissance author Francis Bacon’s essay “Of Death” rejects the useless fear of death while confessional poets of the postwar years like Sylvia Plath are obsessed with a search for the experience of death before the actual end of
life. Confessional poets believe that death is a way of relieving themselves from the anxieties of life. Thus death is an issue confronted by many writers throughout the different ages of history. However, Larkin’s fear of death is not a mere sense of the painful experiences of dying. It is an outcome of his love of life and rejection of religious belief that there is life after death. For him life ends in death and there is nothing after death. This notion makes his life dearer and makes him write poetry. This is contrary to what Donne, a metaphysical poet of the seventeenth century, thought of death. His sonnet “Death, Be Not Proud” begins with:

> Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
> Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;

and ends with:

> One short sleep past, we wake eternally
> And Death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.32

The religious notion of life after death is the working theme of many a poem in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. However, the centrality of death has got a new turn in the twentieth century literature against the backdrop of the changing socio-political realities. The advancement of science and technology, the two world wars, man’s journey to the moon, etc. have seriously changed the philosophical orientation of the people questioning the validity of god and life after death. The poetry of T.S. Eliot is dense with the theme of death and so are the novels of Ernest Hemingway.

In the same way, alienation is also an unmistakable characteristic feature of the twentieth century literature. In general sense it means ‘turning away or
keeping away from former friends or associates.\textsuperscript{33} Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English gives two meanings of the verb ‘alienate’ — i) to lose or destroy the friendship, support, sympathy, etc. and ii) to cause somebody to feel different from others and not part of a group.\textsuperscript{34} The meaning of the word differs from subject to subject. In psychology the meaning of the word is given differently by different psychologists. The concept of alienation is believed to be first elaborated by George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel whose definition is very close to the Christian concept of ‘original sin.’ However Hegel, Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx who are all German philosophers are considered to be the people who elaborated on alienation explicitly:

. . . Hegel, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Karl Marx were the three thinkers who first gave an explicit elaboration of alienation and whose interpretation is the starting point for all discussions of alienation in present-day philosophy, sociology, and psychology.\textsuperscript{35}

Interestingly, Bertolt Brecht, a German Marxist playwright, used the term ‘alienation effect’ as a theatrical device used to describe a social condition:

His [Brecht’s] alienation effects were dramatic or theatrical devices, deployed in order to bring home to audiences, the strangeness of social and economic conditions they took for granted. The basic aim is to draw attention to social structures, ideas, principles, motives or conflicts that would normally be ignored, and to draw attention in such a way as to prove them alterable.\textsuperscript{36}

Brecht coined the term Verfremdung which means ‘a method of making that condition [of the alienated proletariat] clear to audiences’\textsuperscript{37} of his plays. He thought that the condition of the alienated workers were taken for granted. He presented that condition on stage by using the device called ‘alienation effect.’
According to Gwynn Nettler, alienation is the state of a normal person ‘who has been estranged from, made unfriendly toward, his society and the culture it carries.’ Karen Horney, however, tries to elaborate it in terms of the false standards created by the alienated person for himself. Such false standards frequently create conflicts in the mind of the individual when he or she cannot achieve the standards he or she aims at: ‘In contrast to authentic ideals, the idealized image has a static quality. It is not a goal toward whose attainment he/she strives but a fixed idea which he/she worships.’ The individual who identifies himself with such ‘idealized image’ consequently meets failure and dissatisfaction. Thus, he becomes ‘self alienated.’

In a simpler way Eric and Mary Josephson define alienation as ‘an individual feeling or state of dissociation from self, from others, and from the world at large.’ This definition is brief but carries a lot of meaning. The term ‘self,’ ‘others’ and ‘world’ need further elaboration to fix the concept of alienation. In *The Critique of Capitalist Democracy*, Stanley Moore defines alienation as ‘the characteristics of individual consciousness and social structure typical in societies whose members are controlled by, instead of controlling, the consequences of their collective activity.’ Yet, Melvin Seeman says that self estrangement or self alienation is ‘the degree of dependence of the given behaviour [of the individual] upon anticipated future rewards, that is upon rewards that lie outside the activity itself.’

In the light of the above variety of definitions it is hard to fix a clear cut definitive concept of the term alienation. However, the term alienation covers a large area of human estrangement, a sense of dissatisfaction with one’s personal existence. Thus, the individual feels fragmented and cannot find
recognition of his own in the society. Marxists describe the loss of workers’ control over the product of their own labour as a case of alienation. In the process of alienation one loses his sense of belonging to a group which he can claim as his.

The present chapter is followed by the second chapter which deals with the social and literary developments in the postwar English life including the influences of those developments on Larkin. Thus, the second chapter is devoted to the investigation of a large number of ‘new’ developments which are both literary and non-literary. The third chapter studies the poems contained in the volume *The Less Deceived* while the fourth chapter examines the poems in *The Whitsun Weddings*. The fifth chapter gives a detailed analysis of the poems in his last collection *High Windows* and the poems written after the publication of this collection. The last chapter sums up Larkin’s obsession of death and alienation after a comprehensive assessment of his poems in the previous chapters. Larkin’s first collection *The North Ship*, however, is not given any space for thorough discussion as it is an immature collection that cannot bear the pulse of the postwar life in England.
NOTES


9 Throughout this thesis ‘war’ means the second world war except in cases where a different definition is given.


17 Philip Larkin is quoted to have said so by Andrew Motion. See Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin, op. cit.*, p. 59.


22 Eric Hobsbawm gave the name *Age of Extremes* to his book which documents the extreme developments of the twentieth century including the two world wars. This book also bears a subtitle. This nomenclature is a symbolic representation of the ‘extreme’ nature of man and the suddenness of the events


37 Ibid.


