ABSTRACT

Philip Arthur Larkin became the most admired poet of England in the 1970s. Though rooted in the thirties, he was recognised as a different poet only in the late 1960s. The past forty years have witnessed various studies on his poetic theory and technique related issues as well as biography. Very few tried to make a close analysis of his individual poems categorising different themes and their imagery. This close textual analysis is a consolidated study of his major themes as well as the characteristic image patterns. Larkin published four collections with nearly ten years interval between each. The first The North Ship, often ignored as juvenalia, has been given especial attention in this thesis to trace original bearings of his poetic sensibility. The remaining three, The Less Deceived, The Whitsun Weddings and High Windows have traced phenomenal phases in his poetic development. The predominating themes and the corresponding imagery were found to vary from phase to phase. Each separate theme has its own very private set of images. The Less Deceived, The Whitsun Weddings and High Windows evidence the many phases in his poetic development. The prime concern of this thesis extends
beyond mere critical discussion of his poetry as a whole as has been done so far. It concentrates upon the prominent themes and the inter-woven imagery which establish his entire poetic universe

Chapter I lays bare the social, cultural and intellectual milieu in which Larkin honed his creative instinct and reached the acme of poetic excellence. Pre and post-war political and cultural upheavals, literary movements, influences of different schools of poetry and leading poetic figures as well as Larkin's biographical impact have been discussed to determine his place as a poet. The Movement poetry of 1950s and Larkin's advertent or inadvertent indebtedness to it has been considered also.

Since, this study finds that the theme of death has multi-dimensional bearings and is approached quite unconventionally, Chapter II gives it extensive treatment. Death, traditionally a mysterious phenomenon marked by inevitability and impenetrability becomes in Larkin an occurrence or event internalized as an intimately personal encounter. Probing into its recesses Larkin rediscovered the meaning of death without relapsing into the easy solution of immortality. The death group of poems are apparently fear obsessed, but their manner of
deeper probe demystified the trauma offering simpler meaning to the mysterious phenomenon. The image cluster are quite unusual making the approach of death a felt, heard and seen experience.

The next chapter deals with the theme of Alienation, another predominant issue in Larkin's poetry. Analysis of poems in this segment finds that both external and internal constraints had contributed significantly to shape the withdrawal psyche conspicuous in Larkin's poetry. His disjuncted personal life much less than reflections of a contemporary shattered social and political ambience, latent scepticism and wariness alienated him from absolutes, dogmas, and rituals. This personal stance itself prompted a mistrust of emotions. It led to a concerted working on a group of poems in which Larkin very clearly emerged sceptical, agnostic empiricist and quite estranged from religious belief, social and traditional institutions, and absolutes. It was an incompatibility and a deliberate distancing, and, enclosed him within his own psyche.

The illusion of the freedom to choose because man is a trapped victim of events rather than personal decisions is what is inferred from the analysis of poems under Chapter IV. Enveloping all the
fundamental issues of life the Theme of Choice encompasses the poems which often appear to have treated other subjects, but are actually concerned with the theme of choice. These poems are dramatic monologues in which Larkin uses the speaker-personae to help cancel the available options, alternatively, so that, what finally emerges is negative sublimity in all that is left to existence.

This study also finds that Larkin treats themes, otherwise not so dominating with no less seriousness. His other preoccupations categorised by critics have been love, sex, change, time, old age, faithlessness and inconclusiveness. Among these, agnosticism, time and old age and incompleteness were thought more prominent, and therefore, Chapter V devoted to study these. Poems analysed under the theme of Agnosticism deduced that Larkin's ruthlessness was largely a part of self disillusionment rather than the expression of the post-war sceptical mood. Faithlessness as guarantee of personal integrity had long become an integral part of Larkin's psyche. The Self is jealously guarded against all challenges to its integrity. However, Larkin was not altogether irreligious. He felt a dire need of a secular faith which he often expressed in his poems. But Larkin did not approve the
concept of spiritual edification or eternal bliss pleaded by religion. Therefore, the Time-Theme poems state that time as eternity, or, immortality has little meaning. Time is ingraspable and Past, Present and Future for a human being cannot exist all at once together. The Theme of Old Age too is full of its horrors, Larkin appears furious at the humiliation of old age and horrified at the thought of sensibility that would follow final decay.

Finally, there is the Theme of Incompletion. Death, Alienation, Time, Old Age and illusive Choice make the poet also think of incompletion. Poems worked out in this context specify that Larkin remains inconclusive about his themes in all poems prior to the appearance of High Windows. In this last collection he emerges direct and declarative, harsh and conclusively polemical. He bursts into lyricism breaking all constraints and restraints. Poems in this volume are witness to Larkin's persistent conflict between the identity of the 'self' and the perception of an aesthete. The 'self' is effaced for infinity and absence, the beauty of 'somewhere you're not.'

For a deeper probing into his poetry his image-cluster were to be anatomised to see how they become integral to themes. Larkin has
created his own universe of images which engross our imagination with all senses together. Since they grow out of the very subject, they can scarcely be seen apart. At times Larkin utilized conventional images but with a unique fervour. He treats his theme at very next attempt with newer and better words, phrases, epithets and image-patterns. His imagery is, therefore, direct reflection of his strong obsession with his subject. The conclusion, therefore, defines the manner in which the persistent themes and singular images intertwine into each other to impart to Larkin's poetry his own peculiar flavour of expression.