INTRODUCTION

Since the appearance of The Less Deceived in 1954 till date, criticism of Philip Larkin's poetry has had its variety. However, a study of the prominent themes individually has not yet been done. This thesis proposes to analyse outstanding themes in his poetry, as well as, mark the imagery through which the themes are successfully conveyed. With this in perspective Chapter I is specifically devoted to the context, and the background, in which Larkin evolved as a poet. The chapter covers the various stages of his poetic development, ranging between the influential bearings of the thirties in his formative period, and the period of consolidation in the seventies. There is also an effort to ascertain which of the different phases was comparatively more significant. Thus, the thirties, forties and the fifties, had to be given special emphasis. Of these thirties needed to be discussed in greater detail in order to explore the depth of his work. This apart, influences of individual writers with their respective poetic assumptions, as well as, the different schools of poetry with specific ideologies also needed attention. Thus, Auden, Yeats, Hardy, Eliot, Dylan Thomas, Louis MacNeice, Vernon Watkins and Hopkin were the poets speaking loud and they could neither be ignored nor did the poet wish to do so; in fact, Larkin both accepts and also overcomes their influence. Next, there were theories and movements in poetry, like modernism, symbolism, romanticism and neo-
romanticism which Larkin professedly resisted. However, he seems to have yielded to them off and on too, though not very pronouncedly. Further, the social and political upheaval that extensively affected current European culture had to be taken into account, so that the contemporaneity of Larkin's work, and, the extent to which the intellectual milieu underwent change, could be sufficiently determined. What chapter is intended to find out is how this totally transformed the social and cultural scenario; how it prevailed upon poetic taste, as well as, human relationships generally, and, in Larkin particularly; and how was relationship between 'self' and 'other' on the one hand, and, between 'society' and 'isolation' on the other affected. Infact, under these circumstances the very material of poetry was altered at the grass roots. Thus, the language of ordinary expression acquired a new accent and significance: infact, it was transmitted to a poetic idiom itself.

The chapter also explores how modern technology had its effect on approach and attitudes in general, and, Larkin's poetic thought in particular. In an inquiry about the nature and stages of Larkin's poetic development, 'the Movement' occupies a significant position. When the poet-members of this group emerged in the 1950s, Larkin was all set to claim due acclamation as a promising poet. Chapter I, therefore, deliberates on the characteristic features of the group. The possibilities of Larkin's indebtedness to these bearings are also discussed despite his denial about association or commitment to schools or theories of poetry. Some historicist critics think that transitional effects in the sphere of society and poli-
tics also became important. Thus, the concept of Welfare State that emerged after the Second World War, and, its failure to achieve the desired goal, also had its consequences that seriously shook the intellectuals of the day. Larkin's creation of a persona, and, his strategy of a ventriloquist mask, and, the trend of restrictiveness are part of the general post-war mood. What is explored, therefore, is whether these moorings in deviousness lie in Larkin's own 'emotional scarring', or did they represent a general contemporary trend?

Thus, Larkin's personae might also attitudinise his own ambivalence in human relationships. The chapter also attempts to trace the development of Larkin as a poet in the four collections of his work, as, in some other unpublished poems. This thesis tries to give to Larkin's early work, its due place in his poetry very particularly *The North Ship*, which has rarely been given close attention. Critics have usually begun with *The Less Deceived* when quite a considerable part of the real Larkin gets revealed in his early poetic efforts also.

Next, putting his poetic effort in perspective, three major themes were marked for specific study and allotted a chapter each for the purpose. The major themes were those of Death, Alienation and Choice. However, it was felt that some other themes still remained and these were treated separately in chapter V.

Death seems to be very significant in Larkin's poetry. His poems very often conclude at the thought of mortality in very different material as their subject. Of course, death is a universally felt mysterious phenomenon, and,
a traditional subject for poetry. Yet, it appears to receive a peculiarly unconventional treatment, not only at the level of technique, but also as a concept in Larkin’s work. Dismissing all transcendental and theological interpretations, he is always busy concretizing the abstract notion of death with startling conclusions. His concern is for the experience of the event, and this, along with the treatment his technique gives to the experience, was felt a potential to be explored. Therefore, beginning with Going Chapter II analyzes as many as eight poems which articulate Larkin’s gradual progress in the understanding of the live experience of death. To enumerate: there is the experience of approaching death; of the attendant fear; of its inevitability; and, of its very occurrence, all of which are communicated through vivid imagery. Often his poems have a direct confrontation with the gradual approach of death crystalized through visual images. It’s trauma is also dramatised as a collective experience that strikes at the very psyche of man. The approach of death is personified with manifest live images which may be felt profoundly like ‘a standing chill.’

Larkin’s next major preoccupation in poetry was found in its many expressions of alienation. Larkin appears quite disgruntled, disjuncted, and is thoroughly wary of his surroundings. His hankering is for an anonymity to be achieved in all possible ways. For this, his device of ‘persona’ or ‘mask’ renders his poems both dialectical and dialogic, so much so, that the poems become almost performative pieces. It is the persona or mask that helps him achieve his goal of anonymity. With a dispassionate look at existence his poetry seems poised to counter illusions of all kinds. This ulti-
mately results in helping him arrive at the attitude of indifference or neutrality towards emotional moorings also. Bereft of social and political commitment, he draws away even from the culturally transformed world around him. A staunch iconoclast and non-conformist, Larkin writes poetry of shattered absolutes, broken symbols and images, and, debunked dogmas and rituals of a despiritualized man, who is himself homeless wanderer. Chapter III, therefore, concentrates in ‘Alienation’, and, selects poems which appear instances of marked estrangement, a theme which almost blankets the bulk of Larkin’s poetry. Illustrating the illusion of faith integral to human personality Larkin explores the instinctive inward withdrawal into the psyche of the post-war homeless wanderer. The mooring of the church is gone but some sort of psychological prop is felt urgently needed in this group of poems.

A lonely individual in absolute disjunction with his moorings, split into several personae is represented by a speaker, each one desperately looks for shelter. They are explicit in their dialectical and dialogic stance towards all social relationships. His poems seem justifying alienation in favour of art, but, at the same time emphasising the importance of personal preferences and individual compulsions in matter of life and art. Larkin likes to attack all that is conventional and yearns for an existence unfenced, which could be found into the region of ‘nowhere’, a state which symbolically remains unachieved. The thesis explores the possible extent the alienated soul of the poet succeeds in remaining estranged from all established conventions, and under the circumstances, what is it that the poet strives
The next major theme that Larkin's poetry appears to work at is Choice. This too is a core-issue. Chapter IV takes up the theme of Choice, an analysis of Larkin's poems in this context reveal existentialist bearings. His approach may not always conform to the philosophy of existentialism, still, a penchant for it may not be ruled out. By reinforcing the futility of choice through either predeterministic fate, or, a circumstantial chain of events Larkin emphasises awareness and interest in existence related queries. Issues like marriage, love, faith, art, work, sociability are worked out in terms of human relationships. These poems nullify the idea of freedom in choice and assert that circumstances, coerce a choice. Some representative poems analysed in chapter IV emphasize the point that failures in life possibly prompted passivity and wryness in Larkin's attitude to choice. Multivocal personae purposefully communicate multifarious versions of the Self, to annihilate identity and achieve 'negative sublimity' as the primary concern of Larkin's poetry.

Chapter V considers some persistent secondary themes. Though categorized secondary, they are often at the centre of Larkin's poems. These themes are Agnosticism, Time and Old Age, and the phenomenon of inconclusiveness. Chapter V deals with these subjects along with the imagery which helps to convey them. The chapter analyses poems to gauge the extent of agnosticism in his poetry. Specific attention was required to assess whether it is the general post-war sceptical attitude, or, Larkin's own disillusioned psyche that leaves him wavering between faith and faithlessness.
Though very close to existentialist ideology, his poetry does not appear purely irreligious. In fact, he appears to want to secularize the system of religion itself. The imagery which contributes to give a picture of this theme is also sorted out.

Also, there is in Larkin's work a persistent anxiety about Time and Old Age, a theme which could be discussed together with the theme of Death in Chapter I, had death not been so exhaustive a subject of his poetry as to need an entire chapter. The sense of Time grew so strong in his declining years that it almost overwhelmed the idea of decency. Vehemence and harshness seem to mark the poems about Time and Old Age.

Inconclusiveness, evidently a technique, also, seems to emerge as a theme in Larkin. And this idea of incompleteness is not confined to any specific issue; rather, it often encapsulates all other themes in his poetry. Therefore, a comprehensive view of his poetry taken under this theme, repeats poems which were already dealt with in earlier chapters.

There are many more poems which could be discussed under the broad canvas of these themes, and, also, the poems analysed in this thesis had various shades other than they have been considered for. But a line had to be drawn. For this reason only Larkin's poetic technique has not been dealt with in depth.

This then is a brief introduction to the material this thesis takes within its purview. Of course, the thesis itself shall evidence how this is done and with what success.

References to all the five chapters are given at the end of chapter V.