Chapter IV: Conclusion
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Conclusion

It was proposed in the introductory chapter that the works of two important poets of the post-imperial Britain would be discussed in the dissertation. It was also suggested that in the context of complicated political and socio-cultural reality of England and the psychological conflict and dilemma of the English people the poetical works of Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes would be examined. While discussing their works in two relevant chapters we have seen how different and complex their responses were to the same existing situation. They looked at the reality from two different angles. Larkin, as we have seen, went into different aspects of Englishness and demonstrated both the richness of the past and depravity of the present. Actually, elision of nature and national themes largely evident in the poetry of the 1920s and 1930s was countered by both Larkin and Hughes – although in different ways.

In his preface (“The New Poetry or Beyond the Gentility Principle”) to The New Poetry (1962), Al Alvarez asserts that Philip Larkin’s poetry is ‘genteel’ in nature. Larkin relies on the English language, “Frenchified and turned humanist by the Norman conquest and the Renaissance” (Heaney 341). Thus, in his “At Grass”, we find Larkin
nostalgically re-creating the Platonic idea of the ‘English’ panorama. Larkin’s horses in the poem are “social creatures of fashionable race meetings and high style” (Alvarez 26; emphasis original). He explored, as we have seen, the lush green England, its countryside, its resorts, and at the same time the cultural habits, sports and games, rites and rituals, customs and conventions, and other activities typical of the English nation. John Bayley sees Larkin’s poems as “the most refined and accurate expression possible of a national as well as universal area of awareness: they are very English in fact” (qtd. in Ingelbien 196; emphasis added). The journey motif that he employs in some of his poems like “The Whitsun Weddings”, “Here” etc. is an interesting artistic strategy for observing the English space, though mainly on the surface, and giving us a cultural map [“I thought of London spread out in the sun,/Its postal districts packed like square of wheat” (Larkin, CP 116)] of what happens in his own world. Larkin is very much rooted in England and Englishness, but when he is on the route (journey), he is not attempting any transnational or transcultural excursion as has been done by T.S Eliot or James Joyce or Ezra Pound in the 1920s or as has been done much later by many diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh or Hanif Kureishi, who speak of transmigration or transplantation. Larkin is very much in his place and in his culture even when moving away from one place to another. He is only surveying the present in order to assess the nature and extent of the loss that England suffers in the post-imperial period. In the process of the assessment, he tours through the regal history of achievement, political infirmities of the present as opposed to the imperial power and grandeur of the past. He looks through the ‘high windows’ to the vast expanse that stretches into the past. He also explores the symptoms of modern dyspepsia,
psychological disorder, loneliness, frustration and ennui, symptoms that are part and parcel of modern psychological landscape. These may not be directly associated with the loss of imperial power, but a sense of powerlessness coupled with lack of any sense of direction and of worthiness of any pursuit is certainly part of the scenario. Gone are those days when a strong leadership at the helm and a strong sense of pursuit characterized the English nation. The vitality of the nation was manifested through various activities, and the flow of life in England went on undisturbed and unpolluted, howsoever violent and bloody the national involvement might be abroad. Larkin's world was therefore a very subtle world, very psychological in its essence. Larkin is "soft, Norman French, concerned, nostalgic" (Ramanan 67; emphasis added). The subtlety and refinement of Larkin's response to his England has been examined in the second chapter of this dissertation.

When juxtaposed with Larkin, Ted Hughes's oeuvre presents different facets of poetic response. As we have seen Hughes, a poet-laureate, was very much concerned with themes of royalty. We have examined some such poems that in a way establish the royalty as an institution, a source of power and perennial sustenance. Indeed we have noted in the Introduction of this dissertation that monarchy, along with other fixities like Protestantism, Parliament, Liberty and Englishman's birthright, had been one of the ideas around which evolved the ideology of Englishness. Hughes had his trust in this institution. Therefore, while Larkin was angrily reacting against the political infirmities and lack of sustaining values, Hughes was more focused on the resuscitation of the energy and the tradition. His animal poems unwaveringly point out to the necessity of establishing a high ground, a strategic position of elevation. The poems call
for re-instalment of the voice; the renewal of the aggression to re-instil life and energy in the anaemic power structure of the nation. Ted Hughes, unlike Larkin, is “tough, Anglo-Saxon, assertive, imposing” (Ramanan 67; emphasis added). This dissertation has tried to show that while Larkin represents British ‘gentility’, Hughes represents British ‘masculinity.’ Ted Hughes was all for self-assertion as nostalgia or self-pity was bane of his life. Thus, Hughes’s horses are different (in his poem “A Dream of Horses”) from those of Larkin’s. Unlike Larkin’s, Hughes’s horses emerge quite violent in nature and inhabit a savage world. Ted Hughes wants his fellow citizens to assert themselves as they did in the golden days of empire: “No indolent procrastinations and no yawning stares / No sighs or head-scratchings. Nothing but bounce and stab / And a ravening second” (Hughes, CP 82). Hughes’s proper playground is the pagan Anglo-Saxon and Norse elements, the northern deposits, and an associated assemblage of primeval myths wherefrom he draws his oomph. He gets the life force of his language from the virility of Anglo-Saxon that sustained the Middle English alliterative tradition and eventually the folk-poetry and ballads (Heaney 341). Unlike Larkin, Hughes gets guided by instinct and does possess the pagan sensibility in the true sense of the term.

Interestingly, Ted Hughes was appointed the Poet Laureate in succession to Betjeman in Margaret Thatcher’s England. And this may be taken as further proof of Hughes’s authoritarian nature which was quite in keeping with the bullying aggression of Thatcher’s England – be it the increasing loss of public freedom in the domestic level, or the fierce Falklands campaign at the international level. Violence, for Hughes, was the pure expression of spirit, an assertion of identity that he was so eager to clinch for England. Actually as far as Englishness was concerned, both Philip Larkin and Ted
Hughes were Janus-faced, with one of their faces always at the glory and glamour of the imperial England. This accounted for their fondness for the English countryside since they deemed the rural England – unlike her urban counterpart – to be ‘English’ still. Ted Hughes badly needed the virility, verve and violent energy to establish an identity for England. Together, Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes represented the Norman-French and Anglo-Saxon bases of England (Ramanan 67). Both responded to the post-imperial void – one by insularity and the other through aggression. For Hughes archetypal myths, and legends were the storehouse of power; he drew from it to lend extraordinary dimension to the animals of power and birds of prey. He went back to the Bible, to the pagan legends, Anglo-Saxon myths, Germanic traditions, in short varieties of sources, which could provide unstinted supply of energy and power. What is at the centre of the poems is the issue of transformation – political, social, and cultural.

Everything, he believed, must be imbibed with life. This is a commentary on the deficiency of will power and lack of character. This accounts for Hughes’s interest in ‘shamanism’ and his role of a ‘healer’ (discussed in the third chapter of the dissertation).

By going through these aspects of the two poets, we have tried to show how different the natures of their perceptions of Englishness are from the paradigms of the earlier age. In the earlier version of Englishness, we find dominance, superiority, adventurism etc. as the main component parts. As evident from the raw materials of their poems and their approach to their themes, it is evident that their Englishness is far more problematic than those of earlier writers like Daniel Defoe, Thomas Hardy and so on. The simple version of Englishness and the sense of power involved in it are evident
in James Thomson's ode "Rule, Britannia!" (1740). The aggressive nationalism of the poem is the condition to which much English poetry on public themes written in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries aspires. "Rule, Britannia!" functioned virtually as the "anthem of British nationalism and imperialism" (Kaul 1). The very first stanza of the poem claims divine sanction for the vision of a powerful Britain, an island raised from the ocean in order to 'rule' its surface:

When Britain first, at Heaven's command,
Arose from out the azure main,
This was the charter of the land,
And guardian angels sung this strain –
"Rule, Britannia, rule the waves;
Britons never will be slaves." (qtd. in Kaul 2)

The vision here is one of uncomplicated dominance of the English nation and unquestioning subservience of other nations to the 'lofty ideals' and directions of the Empire. In the scope of the poem no doubts have been left; no ideological complications, no foresights to guess the future have been left open. Such versions, though not naïve to the same extent, can also be found in other works by other writers. Daniel Defoe, for example, in his poem "The True-Born Englishman" (1701), is out to show that "from a Mixture of all kinds began,/ That Het'rogeneous Thing, An Englishman" (ll 334-35), and he does it by listing the many "races" – Romans, Gauls, Greeks, Lombards, Saxons, Danes, Scots, Picts, Irish, Welsh, Normans, Dutch – who
have intermingled to produce "your True-Born Englishmen" (l. 244) Actually, Defoe's "The True-Born Englishman" is representative of poems that meditate upon, or offer models of, the difficult making of Britain as a commercial power or empire. Imperialism rested on, indeed was sustained by, assumptions of superiority, where "one white person was thought to be worth literally any number of blacks and browns" (Judd 16). The English can manage anything, anywhere – such was the notion. The shipwrecked Crusoe (in Daniel Defoe's romance Robinson Crusoe, 1719) can well make himself a tolerable existence in his solitude and more importantly he does master successfully the indigenous native whom he later names Friday. Crusoe's grit and his enterprising behaviour are seen as expressions of the "mercantilist mentality of the expanding British Empire" (Ousby 790). The marooned Crusoe manufacturing his clothes and educating Man Friday becomes emblematic of the superiority of English people. More such examples can be found in imitations of Robinson Crusoe, known generically as 'Robinsonades.'

Creative writers' (noticeable mainly in novels and dramatic works) response to the Englishness during the post-imperial period began to be complicated later when the empire was lost or was in the process of being lost. After the Suez crisis in 1956, it was quite clear that the loss of Britain's imperial role was a key contributing factor in the discernible crisis of national identity and self-confidence characterizing the decade. John Osborne's Look Back in Anger, first performed in the same year as the Suez crisis, was one of the first plays to question overtly the values that had informed the imperialist project for centuries. The British Empire was one of the many targets of attack of the protagonist of the play, Jimmy Porter. John Arden's play Sergeant
Musgrave's Dance (1959) launched an even more explicit attack on imperialist values explaining the enduring potency of the ideas that underpinned British actions abroad. Actually, the real and threatened violence of the play is a veiled attack on the British soldiers’ killing of a number of Cypriot nationalists (in 1958) in reprisal for the murder of a British military wife. Alan Sillitoe’s novels also made passing reference to Britain’s post-imperial decline. But for the most part loss of empire was, up until the 1970s, more of a subtext in a literary work than a central theme. In 1950s, even though the Empire was mostly lost by that time, both the audiences and critics were apparently unwilling to accept the anti-imperialistic, anti-war rhetoric of literary works. By the middle of the 1960s, these kinds of works started growing in popularity to a generation more critical of the political and imperialist values of the past. Arden’s Sergeant Musgrave’s Dance, for example, was poorly received at first in the 1950s; but 1965 onwards the play went from strength to strength so much so that even in 1981, long after its appearance, the National Theatre with a highly positive reception revived it. The changing reception of the literary works criticizing imperialist values is indicative of the way attitudes towards British imperialism and Englishness shifted. Even inside Britain, as we have discussed in the Introduction, ‘Englishness’ has always been contested. Christopher Bryant, for example, has recently distinguished between four constructions of England:

Englishness are elided. Little England is the England that attempts to ignore overseas developments: this originated in left-wing resistance to colonialism, but is now located more commonly in right-wing responses to the European Union. English England is the attempt, as in Hughes’s work, to define that which is quintessentially English. Cosmopolitan England, unlike Larkin’s, is more open to cultural diversity and European developments than any of the preceding categories. (Bryant 393-412)

The above extract tries to map the different versions of Englishness, but such categorizations are always fraught with problems because some categories may intersect and overlap. Nevertheless, they help us exploring the nuances of the different versions of Englishness. It is evident that both Larkin and Hughes were not very open to the implications of the fourth category (‘Cosmopolitan England’) which radically revised the old concept of Englishness. The ‘Cosmopolitan England’ is a very inclusive England, which does not exclude the non-white elements. This is clearly evident in the case of Larkin who was in favour of a ‘quintessential’ England which lives more in the countryside than in its metropolis. Landscape has always been central to the definitions of Englishness for centuries. It has been the site where English visions of the past, present and future have met in debates over issues of national identity. Antony Rowland observes that Larkin’s work can be interpreted as both a “post-imperial lament for the loss of the colonies, and a postcolonial reclamation of the provincial as a progressive sign of national identity” (90). Although Ted Hughes married Sylvia Plath, an
‘outsider’, and lived outside the country, in the USA, he was more in favour of living in
the pristine beauty and peace in some part of England that is forever England. In our
chapter on Ted Hughes, we have tried to show how he was happy to live in Devon for a
period of his life. As for Philip Larkin, he said in an interview (with the Observer): “I
hate being abroad” (Required 55). Even foreign languages were not spared from his
invectives. In another interview (with Paris Review) Larkin said: “[b]ut deep down I
think foreign languages irrelevant” (Required 69). In a way, they belonged to ‘Anglo-
British’ England, which relied on the image of the Empire as a reality. However, they
were aware that this imperial England had passed into history and therefore needed to
be remembered and museumized, as in the case of Larkin, and revived and revitalized,
as in the case of Hughes. It is however transparent that they were trying to portray a
‘quintessential’ England (‘English England’) through representations of various aspects
like the landscape, rites and rituals, games and leisure, myths and legends, flora and
fauna specific to England. Seamus Heaney in his “Englands of the Mind” emphasizes
this point when he discusses three poets – Ted Hughes, Geoffrey Hill and Philip Larkin.
He argues that “all of them return to an origin and bring something back, all three live
off the hump of the English poetic achievement, all three, here and now, in England,
imply a continuity with another England, there and then” (340). It is simply a retrieval
of the old England, as we have tried to demonstrate in our chapters on Larkin and
Hughes. Heaney continues to argue that the three are “hoarders and shorers of what
they take to be the real England” (340). They now possess a “defensive love of their
territory” and are very much conscious of “their Englishness as deposits in the
descending storeys of the literary and historical past” (341).
Domestically, the shifting status of England within Britain in recent years in the light of the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland (1998), Devolution in Scotland (1998) and the establishment of the Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru/National Assembly for Wales (1999) has questioned the marginalization of other British nations as a Celtic 'fringe' and further affected the consistency of Britain's political and economic relationship with Europe as new transnational economic and political relationships are formed by British countries outside of England. Indeed, the common slippage between Englishness and Britishness seems increasingly unsafe at the turn of a new century. Ian Chambers has observed that there are two versions of 'Britishness.' The first is "Anglo-centric, frequently conservative, backward-looking, and increasingly located in a frozen and largely stereotyped idea of the national, that is English, culture. The other is ex-centric, open-ended, and multi-ethnic" (27). In Chambers' formulation, Englishness has conventionally been definitive of a common culture while remaining aloof from historical or demographic divergences and differences, as well as the influence of the other British nations. In the introduction to his book Postcolonial Poetry in English, Rajeev S. Patke shows how Seamus Heaney, an Irish by birth, reacted with An Open Letter, when the English editors of The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry (1982) included him in their notion of 'British':

As empire rings its curtain down

This 'British' word

Sticks deep in native and colon

Like Arthur's sword. (22)
For Angela Carter, writing in the 1980s about the construction of the Union Jack from the flags of England, Scotland and Wales, these relationships could be described with the following equation: "Great Britain = Greater England" (Uglow 185-9). The "greedy flag [of St. George] swallowed up its constituent parts and became a sign, not of a nation but of a state of mind" (Carter 186). England "ruled Britannia, indeed was Britannia, both economically and as the source of an artistic Anglocentric tradition which reflected very little of the social lives and cultural heterogeneity of English" (Rogers and McLeod 4). Actually, migration from former imperial territories is slowly transforming Britain into a multicultural society. In the circumstances, it is not surprising that there is now a considerable public debate about what it means to be English. For example, the negotiations that produced the new national curriculum, issued in 2000, revealed a sharp divide between those who wished to base the history syllabus on restored sense of national identity and those who wished to educate a ‘generation of cosmopolitans’ [Nicholas Tate, Chief Advisor on the National Curriculum, Sunday Times, 27 August 2000]. In a post-colonial age, it is now as difficult to ‘glory in the name of Briton’, as it is to speak with the poets, from Shakespeare to Eliot, of the qualities of the English (Cain and Hopkins 678). True, inside Great Britain the English as the majority have always tried to dominate the other components like the Scots, the Welsh, etc. But at the turn of the century the “great symbols of Britishness, headed by the monarchy, have lost influence and status” [Nicholas Tate, Chief Advisor on the National Curriculum, Sunday Times, 27 August 2000]. Regional claims have been conceded, notably to Scotland.
The opposition between Englishness and immigrants represented the nation through reference to the small-scale and familiar – hearths, homes, families, streets, neighbourhoods and so forth. Englishness was increasingly invoked as an intimate, personal, exclusive, identity that was white. The English spent much of their time indoors, and their major preoccupation was keeping them to themselves. This domesticated version of Englishness, emphasizing hearth, home, and herbaceous border, was developed between the wars. This version of Englishness not only highlighted the female sphere of domesticity, but also the quiet, pipe-smoking Englishman, tending his garden. It was extended during the Second World War, in a celebration of a ‘common people’ characterized by quiet courage, and “a sporting little country batting away against the Great Dictators” (Webster 9). In her *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*, Alison Light views these developments as a move away from ‘formerly heroic and officially masculine public rhetorics of national destiny and from a dynamic and missionary view of the Victorian and Edwardian middle classes in “Great Britain” to an Englishness at once less imperial and more inward-looking, more domestic and more private – and in terms of pre-war standards, more “feminine”’ (Light 8). It may safely be said that this kind of Englishness was in sharp contrast with the former imperialistic expansion which could be said “masculine.” Imperialism developed racial imagery that demonstrated British power, authority, and superiority, where ‘others’ in empire were primitive, childlike, savage, irrational and sometimes effeminate against British civilization and modernity. Wendy Webster thus talks about a “feminization of national life” (Webster 184) as opposed to the heroic versions of masculinity associated with the empire.
Larkin and Hughes projected the problems in poetry in a consistent and vigorous way, something that has not been done by any other poet earlier. This dissertation is a humble attempt to assess the two poets' concepts of Englishness as it was being transformed by socio-cultural and political pressures from all sides in the post-imperial period.

Notes

1. Some examples of 'Robinsonades' are: *The Adventures of Philip Quarll*, a derivative of *Robinson Crusoe*, describing Quarll's 50 years of seclusion and suffering on a South Sea island (originally published as *The Hermit*, 1727 by 'Edward Dorrington', but generally attributed to Peter Longueville, though some ascribe it to Alexander Bicknell) (Drabble 785); *The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins* (1751), a romance by Robert Paltock, in the manner of *Robinson Crusoe* (Drabble 783); *The Swiss Family Robinson*, the romance of a family wrecked on a desert island, written in German by Johann David Wyss. It was published in two parts in 1812-13 and the first English translation came out a year later (Drabble 987).

2. Featherstone severely criticises such revivalist project, although his focus in the given context was not exactly poetry, whether of Larkin or Hughes or anybody else. The target of his attack was the "conservative ruralist strategies of nationhood" in the social, cultural and political discourses. He criticizes the post-
devolution English revivalism of the Far Right, apologists of Anglo-Saxonism, conservative British Nationalist Party (BNP) who want to discover the old quintessential England in its countryside and in its traditions. He concludes that they are “trapped in the contradictory model of neo-liberal economics and a rhetoric of ‘traditional’ conservative values rooted in the southern shires” (14). He underlines the impracticability of such projects by saying: “Celebrating ‘folkways’ is about as practical as learning to speak Anglo-Saxon for redefining contemporary English nationhood.” The idea that the rural society can still provide the ‘core experience’ of England is fraught with self-deception. It can be “established only by acts of mimicry and masquerade” (Featherstone 13).

The projection of “a persisting, though constantly endangered, premodern rural England involves an act of impersonation and denial that has been an integral part of theorizing of England over the last century” (13).

Larkin and Hughes were, however, not political strategists; they were artists whose imaginative treatment of their lived experience allowed them to use the past as a kind of refuge. They were fully aware of the nature of contemporary reality. That is why Larkin uses irony as a very potent poetic strategy to undercut any possibility of satisfaction. His past evokes mourning which suggests the impossibility of the retrieval of the past. Hughes’s aggression also underscores the necessity of adopting a more urgent policy to counteract the impotent present.
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