CHAPTER - VI

CONCLUSION

Larkin in an Interview with the Observer observes that “there’s not much to say about my work. When you’ve read a poem, that’s it, it’s all quite clear what it means.”¹ Larkin’s poems, on close reading, however, mean something deeper and ambiguous. Everything in his artistic vision is “complex and multistructured.”² His poems are not closed or monologic in the meanings they convey; they are constructed out of the essential contradictoriness in the views or ideas or issues of life they represent, such as childhood, love, sex, marriage, religion, death etc. This basic ambivalence is reflected in the personae of his poems. The construction of personae is a strategy Larkin adopts with a specific purpose. The strategy allows a free play of the divergent views or meanings emerging out of the selves or voices of the personae. Andrew Swarbrick has truly perceived the nature of Larkin’s poems: “Every impulse in Larkin was met and matched by its opposite.”³

Larkin’s poetry may, therefore, be interpreted dialogically or in terms of voices. Bakhtin’s dialogic theory has widened the scope for analysing any work of art from varying points of view taking into consideration the nuances of the contesting voices contained in it. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle have judiciously remarked:

On the one hand – and this has been an important feature of recent
literary theoretical concerns – there is the importance of seeing literature
as a space in which one encounters multiple voices. Literary texts call upon us to think about them in terms of many voices – for instance, in terms of what M. M. Bakhtin calls heteroglossia or of what he, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes and others refer to as polyphony.4

This explains the necessity of looking into the poems by Larkin from a new angle. It will be an oversimplification to read his poems merely from some specific points of view such as boredom of life ("Dockery and Son"), bleakness of death ("Aubade") and frustration in conjugal life ("Self's the Man"). It is not fair to defend absolutely the view that his work is a "simple reflex" of his "personality" as reflected in his letters and autobiography. Again, his poems should not be considered as revealing merely the bitterness of pessimism and parochialism. The dialogic insight demands that there is nothing specific or fixed; instead, there is a constant interaction between the meanings or the views as represented by the conflicting voices. This is what a substantial number of Larkin's poems serve to show. True, "Aubade" reveals the horrors of death: "yet the dread / Of dying, and being dead, / Flashes afresh to hold and horrify." The voice of the persona haunted by the dreariness of death does not stand final; it is offset by another voice giving emphasis on work, an effective tool to counter the horrors of death: "Work has to be done/ Postmen like doctors go from house to house." The juxtaposition of the competing voices is required to accommodate a balanced view on death; the horrors of death and the mechanism to fight it are equally important to prove the truth that contradictions are viewed as a "mode" for "understanding the world."5
The plurality of voices removes the danger of confining knowledge inside or outside text from a particular point of view. Larkin's poetry may be considered as a site where the irreconcilable voices are ceaselessly in dialogue with each other to prove the point that one voice has the potentiality of conditioning the other voice. There is, in his most representative poems – analysed in the preceding pages – no privileging or totalizing of any one voice but relativizing of one vice by another. Any particular voice in Larkin representing a specific view or idea shows "a bifurcation" or "a crack" or two or multiple "contending voices." These are the features that Bakhtin discovers in Dostoevsky's novels. Larkin's poems incorporate into every "phenomenon" or view or idea "multiple ambiguity" or irony.

Some of his poems present certain views as articulated by the speakers or the poetic personae. Unhappiness and frustration with reference to human relationships figure in poems like "Reasons for Attendance", "Dry-Point", "Self's the Man", "Talking on Bed", and "Dockery and Son". The elderly artist in "Reasons for Attendance" feels that mere physical closeness cannot be the basis of an ideally happy relationship: " - sheer / Inaccuracy, as far as I'm concerned". The poetic persona in "Dry-Point", the second poem of the "Two Portraits of Sex", symbolically suggests that the excess of sexual desire in man cannot achieve the purity of love. "Self's the Man" shows how the drudgery of daily routine makes the conjugal life mechanical and frustrating. "Talking in Bed" is a classic example of irony in terms of tangled relationship between a man and a woman in the context of modern life. A couple, when they are in bed, are expected to be free, fair and frank; but they fail to achieve unity and harmony in relationship: "Nothing shows why / At this unique distance
from isolation / It becomes still more difficult to find / Words at once true and kind, / Or not untrue and not unkind.” The poetic persona in “Dockery and Son” tends to challenge the traditional concept that happiness lies in family life. The speaker, a lonely bachelor by choice, finds no basic difference with Dockery, married and “added to” by a son. Both the speaker and Dockery are doomed to experience the same bleakness of life in general: “Life is first boredom, then fear. / Whether or not we use it, it goes, / And leaves what something hidden from us chose, / And age, and then the only end of age.”

The voices in the poems discussed briefly discern the same reality that the human relationships particularly with reference to love and marriage are governed by failure, dissatisfaction and loneliness. There are, however, other poems where some positive values of love and marriage or conjugal life have been explored by the voices there. “Broadcast” may be cited as a poem where the violence of sex fails to leave its imprint; instead, a lyrical flow of emotion serves to register a mellow dedication to love: “On me your voice falls as they say love should, / Like an enormous yes.” “Wedding-Wind” celebrates with emotional intensity the joy attained by the consummation of sexual desire in marriage. The bachelor speaker in “The Whitsun Weddings” differs basically from his counterparts in “Dockery and Son” and “Self’s the Man” in his attitude to marriage. The speaker who appears to be indifferent initially to the newly-married couples, at last welcomes the ritual of marriage which ensures the uninterrupted flow of new generations of people through the process of male potency and female fecundity. “An Arundel Tomb” achieves a distinction of evolving a balanced view of love in conjugal life.
The limitations of existence as represented by ugliness, bleakness, isolation, sufferings and helplessness are exposed by the narrators or speakers or the poetic personae in poems like "Mr. Bleaney," "Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses" and "Livings" (the first poem). The ugliness of existence is pinpointed in "Mr. Bleaney"; the room or the "one hired box" where Mr. Bleaney spends him life "becomes the metaphoric coffin." The grain-merchant in the first poem of the trilogy entitled "Livings" is a prisoner of an unimaginative life. The boredom of loneliness in him is induced by his jaundiced view of life.

The ugliness, miseries and boredom in the empirically observed world are counter-balanced in other poems. The personae in poems like "Absences", "Here" "Water" "High Windows" and "Dublinesque" strive to attain release from the down-to-earth realities so that they may taste the joyous freedom in a world where existence is "unfenced" and "out of reach" and dissolved into the endlessness of imagination or state of transcendence, The concluding line of "Absences" ("Such attics cleared of me! Such absences!") indicates symbolically the speaker's desired release from the closely observed mundane world into the boundless joy of the imagination. The use of water in the poem "Water" has connotations beyond the dreariness of existence and the limitations of the traditionally accepted religions. It is the magic touch of imagination by the speaker that water is elevated to an endless spring of secular and liberal knowledge and sympathy. These are the components required essentially for the construction of an ideal world free from all kinds of narrowness. "And I should raise in the East / A glass of water/ Where any-angled light/ Would congregate endlessly."
True, some poems by Larkin represent the sameness, a unitary wholeness of view on any specific issue. So, here there are no voices. But Larkin’s poems, on the whole, are multivocal. The voices articulating the identical views in some poems on a specific issue like human relationships are countered or contained by the voices in other poems on the same theme. The poems of Larkin are pointer to the fact that profound ambiguity or complex irony dominates inconclusively every phenomenon of existence; this enables man to interpret whatever comes within his domain of knowledge or understanding from dialogic point of view. Lack of finality becomes a condition of existence.

Larkin’s poems, judged separately, are double-voiced or multivocal. The poems, whether considered in a cluster or individually, tend to dispel effectively the notion that novel, according to Bakhtin, is a paradigmatic example of dialogicity. Browning’s dramatic monologues, Eliot’s The Waste Land and a large number of poems by Larkin are constructed in dialogic mode; they show the tendencies towards novelization. Verse-novels of Pushkin and Byron are classic examples.

The arguments and counterarguments in “I Remember, I Remember” for and against romanticizing childhood are registered through the contesting voices represented by the speaker and his friend in course of a train journey. The voice in the speaker declining to attach any special importance to childhood shows a “crack” or a “bifurcation,” when he does not react sharply to his friend’s sarcastic charge: “You look as if you wished the place in Hell.” The speaker, on the contrary, gets softened in his attempt to make his friend accept his point of view on the “unspent” childhood at Coventry by using the persuasive phrases like “Oh well” and “I suppose.” The tonal
change in the speaker reveals his contrary conceptions of childhood. He rejects the so-called romantic glorification of childhood; nevertheless, he seems to uphold implicitly the sentimentally nostalgic attitude to childhood as voiced by Thomas Hood in his poem “Past and Present.” The polyphonic voices in “The Whitsun Weddings” serve to highlight the speaker’s different attitudes to marriage. Right at the outset of the poem the speaker remains indifferent to or detached from the newly married couples. He is keenly observant, and nonchalant and ironic, while he scans the mode of fashion—“grinning and pomaded girls / In parodies of fashion, heels and veils.” The speaker, however, feels for his co-passengers who share the train-journey with him. A voice of involvement or attachment gradually emerges out of the bachelor-persona who metaphorically welcomes marriage as a fertility cult essential to people the world. The voice of the speaker revealing joyous approval at the commencement of the new chapter in life by the couples through marriage, however, shows a “crack”; another voice in the speaker is apprehensive of the uncertain future of the couples as suggested by the phrase “out of sight”; “And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled/ A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower/ Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.” Ambiguity in “Annus Mirabilis” proves that the consequences of the sexual revolution in the swinging sixties are controversial and debatable, not an unmixed blessing. In the poem voices welcoming freedom in pre-marital sexual relation and growing sceptical about such freedom meet, clash or interact inconclusively. The excitement of free sex is approved admiringly by the voice in the speaker: “Sexual intercourse began / In nineteen sixty-three.” This is a reductive version of man-woman relationship. The voice in the middle-aged bachelor celebrating the revolutionary freedom in sex is subverted ironically by another voice in him questioning its effect on him as the revolution is “just too late” for him. The
voices in the persona may be located “here” and “nowhere” in the poem “Here.” The voice endorsing the material comforts in the industrialized society at the cost of beauty in nature and the creative imagination is contradicted by the voice wishing to be lost into “unfenced existence: / Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.” The romantically conceived world beyond the reach of the down-to-earth life is attainable not in reality but in imagination. The contradictory voices of stern reality and profound imagination coexist in “Here” in a balanced way to disclose the truth that the importance of one voice is highlighted only with reference to another.

Larkin’s poetry may be considered as a site where “any-angled light / Would congregate endlessly.” The concluding lines of “Water” metaphorically define the essence of the dialogic theory which ensures freedom and equal importance to all the contending voices as represented in the utterances, views and ideas etc. Larkin’s poems are continuously in pursuit of abiding contradictions in man and the world. The nature of his work is determined by the “fundamental collision”. The voices of the speaker in “Vers de Société” show oscillation between the two extremes in terms of choice – solitariness and sociability. The voices in “Sunny Prestatyn” is simultaneously romantic and ironic; the erotic idealism in the poem is subverted or undercut by stark realism. One remembers Bakhtin’s comment that in Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment “everything is prepared, as it were, to pass over into its opposite.” The observation has its wonderful relevance to Larkin’s poetry. The first four lines of “‘The daily things we do’” (1979), a shorter poem by Larkin, reconfirm brilliantly the dialogic nature of Larkin’s poetry. The lines in the poem are constructed out of the opposites (“disappear” and “live on”):
The daily things we do
For money or for fun
Can disappear like dew
Or harden and live on.

(CP, 213)