CHAPTER - IV

THE WHITSUN WEDDINGS: READINGS IN "HOMESPUN MELANCHOLIA"
The Whitsun Weddings, published nine years after The Less Deceived, made Larkin win accolades all over the globe. The book went on to win the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1965 and Larkin became the subject of a BBC Monitor film. British and American Reviewers and critics have highly appreciated the collection. Kenneth Allott called Larkin "the most exciting new poetic voice – with the possible exception of Dylan Thomas – since Auden."

*(Philip Larkin, 92)*

The American Magazine *Time* observed – "Larkin is the only British poet who still seems able to compose great poems". *(Philip Larkin, 92)*

The Whitsun Weddings is an exploration of subjects in a broader philosophical perspective in an attempt to rationalize disappointments in order to make life bearable. Larkin upheld the belief that there is an unbridgeable gap between illusion and reality and that a wise attitude of life can make it less impressive. Andrew Motion remarks:

In The Whitsun Weddings his approach is mellow. Here it evokes not bitterness, but sympathy and compassion. This is so because he has by now advanced more in years and the experiences of his life have chastened his vision
which is manifest for instance in the fact that in this collection he is found to have developed a new belief in the philosophy of determinism.

*(Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life, 342)*

Larkin's poem in *The Whitsun Weddings* may be classified under various heads, like - serio-comic poems, advertisement poems, poems of transcendence and poems of negativity. "Naturally The Foundation will Bear Your Expenses" is a comic poem which is labelled as "Human number". The serio-comic effect of the poem arises from the mood of irony -

Crowds, colourless and careworn,

Had made taxi late,

Yet not till I was airborne

Did I recall the date -

That day when Queen and Minister

And Band of Guards and all

Still act their solemn-sinister

Wreath - rubbish in Whitehall

It used to make me throw up,

These mawkish nursery games;

O when will England grow up?

- But I outsoar the Thames,

And dwindle of down Auster
To greet Professor Lal

(He once met Morgan Forster)

My contact and pal

(CP 134)

The speaker’s taxi is delayed by the crowds gathering for the cenotaph Remembrance Day Service and considers these services sheer childishness. He wonders impatiently, “O When will England grow up?”. Ironically, he feels he is much mellow than the solemn-sinister and looks for a sympathetic listener to outpour his irritation. He denies all those qualities and values which are associated with scholarship and associative feel of universal brotherhood. He is, on the other hand, scornful of the conventional mentality of the crowds and in the process smugs intellectual superiority. His annoyance at small inconveniences works him dismiss Armistice Day Remembrance service as “mawkish nursery games”. In doing so he betrays his own nursery standards of learning in wisdom and in propriety. Anyway the poem is certainly an amusement to read.

Stylistically, the poem needs a mention. Through the poem appears to enlist the reader’s sympathy for the speaker against the crowd – the object of ridicule and contempt but ironically it happens the other way round. In “Naturally the Foundation will Bear Your Expenses” presents the crowd with a sense of pathos which as Whalen pertinently observes-

“... includes their identity as victimized ordinary humanity”.
Along with the poem also points at the pertinence of such traditions like the memorial service elaborated which brings into feel the feelings of martyrdom – a biggest gift of humanity for its survival. Apart from this, it also highlights the thought that the soundness of an individual’s mental health is necessity for the common good of humanity.

"Selfs' The Man" is of the same vein as the preceding one. Comprising of eight stanzas, the poem has thematically two neat sections. The first four stanzas present a hilarious portrait of Arnold who has reduced his life to ludicrous level, the human arises out of the poet/speaker’s comic view of marriage and the caricaturised picture of domestic torment –

Oh, no one can deny
That Arnold is less selfish than I,
He married a woman to stop her getting away
Now she’s there all day,
And the money he gets for wasting his life on work
She takes as her perk
To pay for the kiddies’ clobber and the drier
And the electric fire, And when he finishes supper
Planning to have read at the evening paper
Its put a screw in this wall -
He has no time at all,
With the nippers to wheel round the houses
And the hall to paint in his old trousers
And that letter to her mother
Saying won’t you come for the summer.

(CP. 117)

Larkin’s protagonists protest against the frustration which they experience caught between desire and social condition. In denouncing marriage, the poet creates a satirical portrait of a husband surrounded by wife and children. In the speaker’s view, Arnold has become the property of his family and even the pursuit of social fulfillment becomes reversed. The cumbersome domestic duties which the bachelor envisions smothering a married person are heaped on Arnold with relish. The hopeless husband appears dutifully engaged. The bachelor speaker is thereby happy with his state of living –

To compare his life and mine
Makes me feel a swine;
Oh, no one can deny
That Arnold is less selfish than I.
But wait, not so fast
Is there such a contrast?
He was out for his own ends
Not just pleasing his friends;

*CP. 117*

The main force of satire, however, works against the speaker himself. What annoys him later is his feeling of inferiority to Arnold as husband and father but the poet/speaker does not defend himself by saying that he requires solitude for creating art, or that the individual identity which he possesses apart from marriage is more important. The poet seems determined to convince himself and others that he should avoid such entrapment and pleads imminent death as an excuse for not marrying. In short, the poem dramatises the difficulties in working out sexual relations for a man and seeks to make plain the sheer horror of marriage. To add more, the poem vilifies women and costs them as foreign and other.

"Send No Money" is a serious dealing with the hollowness of "time" and "Truth". The speaker as a young man asked time to reveal to him the truth underlying the experiences of life where "Time" patted his head and advised him to –

Sit here, and watch the hail
Of occurrence clobber life out
To a shape no one sees –
Dare you look at that straight?

*CP. 146*

The speaker decides to wait and watch life despite caution of time regarding its unpredictable feature. The poet realizes the futility of spending time in search of truth. Truth and time elude
him and towards the last stanza he notices the ravage of time which is undeniable truth. He took into the mirror and to his surprise, notices how brutally shaped he has become. The poem ends on a note of self-contempt for having wasted the prime of his life in tracing truth which is shallow and trite –

What does it prove? Sod all.

In this way I spent youth,

Tracing the trite untransferable

Truss –advertisement, truth

(\textit{CP, 146})

‘Truss –advertisement’ is a highly suggestive compound with layers of suggestiveness. It implies that the truth the speaker has obtained is tawdry, secondly it hints at artificial support – a false assurance.

“Send No Money” generates level by caricaturing time as a grotesque, overweight gentleman. Time also appears as a loud, head masterly figure with a head heavy of wisdom and is a moving baggage of philosophy. The speaker is overwhelmed with gratitude at his acquaintance with time so much so that he looks like a cheeky schoolboy. Embarrassed humour takes up the light vein in the deception of the speaker looking into a mirror and finding his face meaningless of life and feeling. Truss –advertisement generates melancholic humour for it implies misshapen feature. Geoffrey Harvey names it as Ferocious Humour While others have named it as sardonic humour.
“A Study of Reading Habits” reveals how the general public is affected by the realization of the disjunction between reality and illusion. The speaker – a disillusioned ex-reader of fiction, remembers how as an ordinary boy he identified himself with hero figures and how the identification gave him a recognizable status. Through reading fiction, he empowered himself with verbal propensity and this proved the worth of his reading habit. As he grew up, his loyalty shifted to villains because it fed him with sexual fantasies. But now he realises his stupidity as –

Don’t read much now; the dude
Who lets the girl down before
The hero arrives, the chap
Who’s yellow and keeps the store,
Seem far too familiar. Get stewed:
Books are a load of crap.

(CP, 131)

The poet/speaker denounces reading as a painful experience and prefer getting drunk to reading books. Fiction presents a horde of abject personalities like failures, cowards, uncourageous dude unromantic workers, brutal sexuals etc. are reminders of false reality. To quote Swarbrick “they present either unrealistic fantasies of sexual success or grim reminders of discreditable reality. (Out of Reach: The Poetry of Philip Larkin, 107-08)

The theme of “A study of Reading Habits” is a serious one as it questions the nature and function of literature in society. A
serious matter has been given a jocular colour whereby Larkin has presented our “Anarchic humour”. It treats the common reader a victim of illusion and fantasies but with pleasing amusement. The comic theme is also corroborated with a biographical fact. During the time the poem was written, Larkin was helping Maeve Brennan prepare for her Library Association exams.

“Essential Beauty” is an advertisement poem showing cultural reality. It begins with glamorous description of a collage of images pasted on huge billboards. Such images exaggerate, glamorise and fantasies superficial reality. Alongwith coercive consumerism is the strategical aim at glaring picturizations –

They dominate outdoors. Rather, they rise
Serenely to proclaim pure crust, pure foam,
Pure coldness to our live imperfect eyes
That stare beyond the world, where nothing’s made
As new or washed quite clean, seeking the home
All such inhabit.

(\textit{CP. 144})

Advertisement transports us to a world of ideal which is beyond anyone’s reach hence is a sure product—frustration. The world of glamour is a nowhere world for the commoners. The boy in the “Pub lavatory” will never enjoy the company of the smart people in their tennis clothes likewise the pensioner who tries the new brand of tea will only get the taste of “old age” and the dying
smokers will never feel what the billboard conjures as a ravishing but mysterious beauty. –

There dark raftered pubs
Are filled with white-clothed ones from tennis – clubs,
And the boy puking his out in the Gents
Just missed them, as the pensioner paid
A half –penny more for Granny Graveclothes’ Tea
To taste old age, and dying smokers sense
Walking towards them through some dappled park
As if on water that unfocu.sed she
No match lit up, nor drag ever brought near,
Who now stands newly clear,
Smiling and recognising, and going dark.

(CP, 145)

Advertisements are exploitative as they obscure the grim realities by camouflaging the sordidness of urban life. These glaring pictures are seductive also by stimulating us to dream of life of perfection. It also exploits man’s urge to reach out to the beautiful and the best both materialistically and philosophically. This genuine urge is cruelly cheated by advertisements by preying on the weakness of the ordinary people. The billboards are
entrapments for tremendous commercial success and is vulgar projection of the “essential beauty of life”. Whalen believes that the poem “includes a compassion for the ordinary humanity. Which is victimized by the dream pictures of life, enslaved by the sentimental idealism which permeates the streetscapes and the mindscape of the contemporary world (Philip Larkin and English Poetry, 46)

“Sunny Prestatyn” is another advertisement poem that depicts a bikini-clad girl suggesting the pleasures of a beach resort. She welcomes the viewers to the hotel in a glamorous mode –

Come to Sunny Prestatyn
Laughed the girl on the poster,
Kneeling up on the sand
In tautened white satin
Behind her, a hunk of coast, a
Hotel with palms
Seemed to expand from her thighs and
Spread breast-lifting arms.

(CP. 149)

Soon the girl on the poster is despoiled by graffiti. Larkin remarks on the poem as- “some people think it was intended to be funny, some people think it was intended to be horrific, I think it was intended to be both, (Larkin, 58). Here humour is generated by
the pornographic scrawls which are outrageously obscene and tantalisingly unattainable. The girl on the poster promises much more than is otherwise possible. Her invitation is prostituting sexual advances and her “Kneeling up” suggests her willing submission. The poster makes the girl no more than a glossy commodity to cater to male fantasy of sexual pleasure.

The girl represents the erotic bliss on a beach holiday with its sun, easy sex and an access to a glossy artificial world. The paradise promised is an impossibility and the girl is no more than a delusion even though she tantalises libidinous instincts. This poster is desecrated by the “Fight Cancer” which Swarbrick feels is negative and argues that “... holds out a promise as fraudulent as the first, for we can satisfy neither our desires for erotic bliss nor for immortality”. (Out of Reach: The Poetry of Philip Larkin, 118) The poem, in short, advocates that life is beset with evils and the word ‘fight’ asserts the need to combat such things.

The Whitsun Weddings also incorporates poems which are sketches of lives like that of Mr. Bleaney in “Mr. Bleaney”, ageing housewives in “Afternoons” and lacerated psyche of working class women in “Faith Healing”. The speaker/poet moves into the house recently vacated by Mr. Bleaney. Mr. Bleaney worked in a company which manufactures car bodies and his life is as ugly as the ugliness caused by repair. His life is marked with loneliness, meagreness, dinginess, dullness and shoddiness. P.R. King considers the poem to be an “... evocation of a dull, dispirited bachelor life”. (Nine Contemporary Poets: A Critical Introduction, 18)
Bleaney’s life may be despicable but the speaker/poet does not despise it. The details of Bleaney’s life etches out an uncomplaining life and never deviates from his life’s set pattern. Along with the shoddiness of Bleaney’s life, map of Bleaney’s mind is painted in the last two stanzas:

But if he stood and watched the frigid wind
Tousling the clouds, lay on the fusty bed
Telling himself that this was home, and grinned,
And shivered, without speaking off the dread
That how we live measures our own nature,
And at his age having no more to show
Than one hired box should make him pretty sure
He warranted no better, I don’t know.

(CP. 102-03)

Bleaney’s very name combines the notions ‘bleak’ and ‘mean’ and ends in the diminutive ‘-ey’. The new tenant replacing Bleaney is like his predecessor in many respects and seems to be doing just that Mr. Bleaney must have done – ‘I lie/where Bleaney lay, and stucks my fags/on the same saucer – souvenir’. The difference between the two men is that the speaker is intellectual, and Bleaney was not.

Bleaney is completely passive so much so that his life is death – in-life. He does not move even though he is asked to vacate and the landlady had to coax him to quit the “lined box” – a phrase
used by the new tenant. But in fact, Bleaney is less passive than the speaker, at least Bleaney made himself comfortable and did a bit of gardening: “Mr. Bleaney took/my bit of garden properly in hand”

The concluding lines express the speaker's poet's incapacity to gauge the inner contour of Bleaney's life and his failure in identifying himself as a better version of the previous tenant.

“Afternoons” articulates the pangs ageing housewives who suffer as the victims of time. The lives of the young suburban mothers decline until they are little more than the sum of their routine tasks. The poem is set in that time of year when summer changes to autumn – the time of the life of the mothers themselves. The leaves are being pushed into drifts of the wind, the mothers too have little control over their lives as the leaves over their movement:

Their beauty has thickened

Something is pushing them

To the side of their own lives.

(The Whitsun Weddings, 44)

The fading of the year is set against the ageing mothers to suggest decay in human life which is beyond prevention. It is a natural process and one generation succeeds the other.

The mothers release their children on to “the recreation ground”, where the mothers had their courting places and the children are creating new ones. Larkin capitalises on the word ‘recreation’ to reinforce the continuity of life. The children are
released not to play only but also to take up the new cycle of marriage and child birth, which the mothers, like the mothers of *The Whitsun Weddings* have passed. The poem is striking for its pathetic tone – a deep sense of compassion for the helpless mothers who notice their beauty gradually fading, their inescapable domestic boredom and their loss of vibrancy of youthful living. It also evokes a silence that resembles the gloom of mourning that has been stifled. Further the plural in the title with the predominance of the simple present tense evokes universalisation of the sense of pity underlying human impotence.

“Dockery and Son” is the reminiscence of the poet or his journey home, having visited his old college. Here he meets the Dean who informs, him that Dockery, one of his junior contemporaries now has a son studying here. When he tries the door of where he used to live he finds it ‘locked’ and the lawn appears “dazzlingly wide’ he broods on old Dockery when he became a father and in the process drifts off to sleep. On waking up, the thought of Dockery’s settled life is the cause of his anguish –

... To have no son, no wife,

No house, or land still seemed quite natural

Only a numbness registered the shock

Of finding out how much had gone of life.

How widely from the others

*(CP, 152)*
In the process to defend himself he decides that in having children Dockery acted on the false premise that “adding meant increase” whereas it was no better than “dilution”.

The poem is certainly dramatic. Docker y has had a son, where the poet has had nothing, but the difference between the two men is not owing to Docker y’s youthful decisiveness, but to each man’s innate disposition to act in a certain way. At Sheffield, the speaker/poet changed trains –

And ate an awful pie, and walked along

The platform to its end to see the ranged

Joining and parting lines reflect a strong

Unhindered moon. (CP, 157)

The railway lines, joining and parting make a diagram of the respective careers of Docker y and the poet. After having joined at the university for a particular period they have diverged to distinctive zones. The poem this ends with the speaker’s generalized fatalistic reflection on life –

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.

(CP, 153)

The poem projects life through two lives – the poet’s and two lives – the poet’s and Dockery’s and as Larkin explained “… the
different innate assumption of our lives brought Dockery a son and me nothing” (A Writer’s Life, 334). Nevertheless, in both the cases circumstances triumph and not the individual will. Lives that are used like the Dockery and live which are unused like the speaker’s finally end in nothingness. What we shall be does not depend on what we want to be but upon the forces that unavoidably shape us. The bleak end of the poem is in contrast to the mildly humorous at the start. With the dramatization of the speaker’s thought – process, the poem varies from anecdotal to contemplative. As far as the language is concerned, it is conversational and in day-to-day speech. The poem exemplifies Larkin’s ability to change ordinary language with extraordinary suggestiveness.

The poem is equally noticeable in its spread of imagery which is highly concrete but in meaning is loaded with philosophy, hence abstract. The “locked door”, the joining and parting of “Railway tracks, the ‘unhindered moon’ suggest predetermined courses of life, whereas the sand-clouds imply insurmountable barriers.

Larkin once said the experience makes literature look insignificant beside life as indeed life does beside death. The arrival of ambulance is an eruption of the unexpected and inexplicable in life. Larkin’s ambulances are grey and mysterious like a man wearing dark glasses. The arrival of the ambulance distresses one who sees and one who is unwell. Seeing the patient put into an ambulance the watchers –

... sense the solving emptiness

That lies just under all we do,

And for a second get it whole
So permanent and blank and true.
The fastened doors recede. Poor soul,
They whisper at their own distress;

(The Whitsun Weddings, 33)

Like ‘Ambulances’, “Nothing To Be Said” harps on the same theme. The poem projects life as a movement towards death, lamenting “Life is slow dying”. If ‘Ambulances’ is to preserve love for life, “An Arundel Tomb” reaffirms the value of love. The poem was occasioned by Larkin’s visit to Chichester Cathedral where he saw a monument to the earl of Arundel and his wife as two figures lying side by side. The first two stanzas detail the carving whereas the third muses on the historical significance of hand holding – a graceful adornment added by the sculptor who was commissioned to please the couple’s close friends. The succeeding three stanzas reconstruct the couple’s journey through time ending in the eternal validity of love –

Time has transfigured them into
Untruth. The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon, and to prove
Our almost instinct almost true
What will survive of us is love

(CP, 111)
John Saunders points out that "the tomb may not really mean what it seems to be mean, that what we would like to take a beautiful comforting 'truth' about love is in fact deception (Beauty and Truth in three poems from The Whitsun Weddings, 47). The couple’s identity has been washed out and what remains of them is "only an attitude". The couple’s faithfulness is only "Stone fidelity". But through the process of time it has been honoured. Larkin shows this capacity of experiencing mystic beauty in life in two other absorbing poems, which may be termed as "Journey Poems". The first is "Here" and the other is the title poem.

"Here" records a journey by train up through England towards Hull. The Poem moves through gradually increasing solitude as one scene dissolves into the other and the camera sweeps over the "widening river’s slow presence" towards the surprise of a large town. The second and the third stanzas record the commercial activities of the "Cut-price crowd" in a busy town. The journey proceeds beyond the town’s "mortgaged half built" edges to the outskirt where wheat fields run as hedges. The final lines take us farther still to a beach and beyond –

And past the poppies bluish neutral distance

End the land suddenly beyond a beach

Of shapes and shingle. Here is unfenced existence

Facing the sun, untalkative out of reach.

(CP. 136-37)

Here one notices a pastoral paradise, free from congestion, commercialism and the pressures of urban life. "Here" clarifies the
sense of existence beyond the phenomenal immediate. The land ends in the “Bluish neutral distance” beyond a beach of “shapes and shingles”. The speaker perceives an “unfenced existence/Facing the sun untalkative out of reach”. The sun is a benevolent image suggesting dignity and hope in life. The closure of the poem is therefore more abstract than the earlier stanzas for it explores the mystery of being. In short, “Here” reveals a visionary realization of the mystic grandeur in this ungraspable universe.

‘MCMXIV’ explores “Perspective” suggesting a monument to those killed in the Great War. The poem describes England as it must have been before fighting – in a state of ‘innocence’ unaware of the bloody mess that the “War to end Wars” was to become. Larkin describes the physical details those of us too young to know from the jerky old newsreel –

Those long uneven lines
Standing as patiently
As if they were stretched outside
The oval or villa park,
The crowns of hats, the sun
On moustached archaic faces
Grinning as if it were all
An August Bank Holiday lark;

(The Whitsun Weddings, 28)

The man would soon lose their ‘innocence’ and would be obsessed by the tension between what is said and what is left
unsaid. The knowledge of the millions of dead which MCMXIV recalls is the sway from reality to false ideals.

The title poem “The Whitsun Weddings” describes the train journey – the train in the opposite direction from the countryside into the city. It begins with an uninteresting passenger boarding a train from Hull where Larkin was working as a Librarian to London on a Saturday. Like ‘Here’ the physical landscape is painted, farms and cattle’s being succeeded by polluted canals and then by hedges and grass. The whitsuntide heat, the holiday mood, the sights and smells of a hot afternoon journey are all captured in a moving train. The theme of the poem is introduced in the third stanza when the speaker’s attention is attracted to the noise made by the wedding parties which at first he mistook for “porters larking with the mails”. At first he ignored the sight and kept on reading. But soon he began to notice and got absorbed in observing all that was happening on the platform of each station the train stopped at. In the next four stanzas the poet/speaker describes the dresses demeanours, attitudes and feelings of all the members of the wedding parties that gather at each platform to see off the newly wedded couples on the eve of honeymoon journeys. In the next stanza, the train is seen approaching London –

- An Odeon went past, a cooling tower,

And someone running up to bowl and none

Thought of the others they would never meet

Or how their lives would contain this hour

I thought of London spread out in the sun,
Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat:

\((CP. 116)\)

Some critics feel that the wedding parties have been treated with much distaste. Støn Smith remarks that the speaker expresses contempt for society "Where mass tastes and values prevail, and the charming yokels of an earlier pastoral have turned into menacingly actual travelling companions, claiming equal rights with the egregious and refined spectator of their shoddy ordinariness."

\((Inviolable Voice: History and Twentieth-century poetry, 176)\)

It is true that initially the lonely observer detachedly portrays the wedding parties but soon he enters into the thoughts and feelings of the wedding guests as well as of the wedded couples. Each wedding brings out the children, father and women in their own unique kind of involvement. His attitude to the wedding parties transforms from satire to reverence. The journey by the train ends but the journey of life begins. The poem ends, thus, on a positive note – suggesting that something new will grow out of these weddings and that people will be changed, the value of the poem lies in its success in transforming an outsider into an insider and ends in joyous shout - “We are all in this life together”.

\((An Uncommon Poet for the Common Man, 121)\)

Technically "The Whitsun Weddings" is a masterpiece – a splendid specimen of what John Powell Word calls "Poetry of the Unpoetic". The poem illustrates dexterity and picturesque creativity with enchanting verbal embroidery. In this, the collection excels \(High Windows\). A joyful end is the joyous quality and the young
couples will bring life to London as rain-falling on the squares of wheat –

We lowed again,

And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled

A sense of falling, like an arrow –shower

Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

(The Whitsun Weddings, 23)
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