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PHILIP LARKIN AS A POET OF DIMINISHING SELF ESTEEM OF ENGLISH CULTURE : A STUDY OF SELECTED POEMS IN *THE NORTH SHIP* (1945)

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ABSTRACT

Philip Larkin, a twentieth century British poet begins writing in a historical phase when England lost its imperial crown. This change had deep repercussions for the mindset and the way of life in English society. His poetry depicts the changing self-esteem, especially the pessimistic turn in English culture. His focus on dynamics of urban culture and community place him in the tradition of poetry deliberately away from literary modernism. His poetry is often read as a pessimistic representation of his cultural context. But this aspect of Larkin actually emanates from the loss of empire as well as the demise of poetic idiom of hope. This question of mood is structural to the working of Larkin's imagination. It is mandatory to note how the poetic persona in his poetry is rooted in the context of consumer culture. Unlike several of his contemporaries, Larkin is a poet of the understatement and irony. His vision is that of a realist who rejects 'mythy-kitty' as the style of content of poetry.



KEY WORDS: Pessimism, Imperialism, Culture, Imagination, Urban .

INTRODUCTION

Philip Larkin (1922-1985) is a major poetic voice of post-colonial England. His continued significance is based on his modest, ironic and realist mode of connectivity with the new historical situation of his homeland. His poetry is often read as pessimistic representation of his cultural context. But it is necessary to unearth the factors that led this form of depiction of English culture. His poetic journey begins and spans in the period when England lost its imperial crown and succumbed to the status and role of second rate world power. This historical fact had deep repercussions for the mindset and way of life in English society. Philip Larkin is primarily a poet of this changing self esteem which was a collective phenomenon widely experienced and documented in different spheres of knowledge. Larkin's poetic enterprise is a critique of hyperbolic imagination and its forms of cultural politics. The phase of history when he wrote poetry was the Post-Second World War experience of England. Initially he endeavored to focus on writing fiction and came out with two novels in the 1940s. His first poetry collection *The North Ship* (1945) was seen as an outcome of the overpowering influence of W.B. Yeats and Thomas Hardy. He is rightly identified as a detached and tender observer of urban of life in the Post-Second World War scene of England. The characteristic features of his poetic idiom along with a plainness and scepticism became the central trait of the Movement, the identity of a new trend that emerged with the post-war generation of poets represented in the *New Lines* (1956).

Philip Larkin is of immense interest to the urban-contemporary reader due to the very character of his subject matter. He is one of the rare poets in the last phase of twentieth century who refused to attract popularity and readership by compromising on what he perceived his own imagined layer of truth. His civility and democratic presence through the workings of the poetic personae is the foundation that sustains a wide readership around his poetry. At long intervals, Larkin continued writing poetry, *The Whitsun Weddings* (1965) and *High Windows* (1974). Before coming to a discussion of poems of *The North Ship*, the first collection of poetry by Philip Larkin, it is essential to place him in the tradition of English poetry. Hugh Underhill in *Problem of Consciousness in Modern Poetry* (1992) puts the issue in a most appropriate perspective :

The notion of the modern city as a fit subject for poem was a longtime taking a hold among poets writing in English, though the Americans were quicker at it than the British. In England, James Thompson's *The City of Dreadful Night* (1874) is an early but abortive attempt, and I have referred to others, but always that seductive rural myth lures the poet, making it hard for him to accept the city as a poetic habitat. Even Eliot's poetry, for all the urbanness of his sensibility, draws much of its force from being at odds with the modern urban experience. It is not till the thirties that certain young poets come to terms with it. In doing so, they tentatively point to possibilities for moderating the more extreme kinds of modern subjectivity, for writing a more 'public' poetry, founded in historical time and place. In the cases of Baudelaire and Eliot this had failed, because while they found in the streets, in Eliot's words. Their 'centre of intensity' the city was for them, as G.M. Hyde, quoting Baudelaire, points out, the place where multitude is solitude... Like Baudelaire and Eliot, Philip Larkin always gives in his poetry an impression of 'the town-dweller...by bondage of temperament and habit', but his wanting 'to get back to humankind again', his interest in 'humanity and human emotion'... implies a kind of objective attention to the lives of others, to the life of a community, not a wholly obsessive concern with one's own subjective reality. And Larkin seems to me a direct and significant success or of those thirties poets, carrying on, in certain respects, where they left off. (Underhill 215-216)

Instead of reading *The North Ship* only in terms of the influences working in its poems, it is important to place Larkin in the tradition of poetry of urban landscape. Equipped with subtle and penetrating insights about the contemporary British society, Larkin's poetic practice is rooted in the experience and language of modern urban life. *The North Ship* is distinct in its poetic material, ethical insights and linguistic scope of the idiom employed. There was no immediate publicity from this collection, as Larkin's other contemporary Ted Hughes shot into fame with his first collection *The Hawk in the Rain* in 1957. Initially, this volume of poetry was seen as an very ordinary work – even to the extent that *The North Ship* was labelled as a 'pastiche work' and the poet was rather termed as an uncreative borrower of earlier poets and his originality was underrated. Thus Larkin begins his poetic career with charges of an extremely compromised poetic style. In an interview to Robert Philips, Larkin explains how these early critical perceptions discouraged him :

Yes, I was afraid you'd ask about writing. Anything I say about writing poems is bound to be retrospective, because in fact I've written very little since moving into this house, or since *High Windows*, or since 1974, whichever way you like to put it. But when I did write them, well, it was in the evenings, after work, after washing up (I'm sorry: you would call this 'doing the dishes'). It was a routine like any other. And really it worked very well: I don't think you can write a poem for more than two hours. After that you're going round in circles, and it's much better to leave it for twenty-four hours, by which time your subconscious or whatever has solved the block ...The best writing conditions I ever had were in Belfast, when I was working at the University there. Another top-floor flat, by the way. I wrote between eight and ten in the evenings, then went to the University bar till eleven, then played cards or talked with friends till one or two. (<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3153/the-art-of-poetry-no-30-philip-larkin> dated October 13, 2013).

But this anger and frustration faced at the beginning was to prove short lived and fallacious. The poetic talent of Larkin continued to flourish with its sharp ironic flavour. However, Blake Morrison in *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s* (1980) says, 'They do not go to university to acquire

culture, but to get a job, and when they have got one, scamp it. They have no manners, and are woefully unable to deal with any social predicament. Their idea of a celebration is to go to a public house and drink six beers. They are mean, malicious, and envious' (58-59).

The implicit tones of mild and subdued nationalism in *The North Ship* exhorts the twenty first century reader of English poetry to review the complex history of nationalism as it emerged over the wide spectrum of British Colonialism and nationalities subjugated. The pessimist aspects of Larkin's text is basically a 'hybrid mood' – emanating from the loss of Empire as well as the demise of a poetic idiom of hope. Anti-romantic nature of Larkin is confirmed through his poem 'Love, we must part now: do not let it be'. The word 'love' here is addressed to his beloved. The parting of lovers in the poem is de-romanticized. The poetic persona tells his partner that all attempts at giving a romantic shelter to their parting should come to an end. It is high time and they must part now. The very first line of the poem takes the reader into a dramatic situation: 'Love, We must part now: do not let it be/to kick down worlds/lash forests; you and I/ No longer hold them (*The North Ship* 37). Philip Larkin, in this poem, captures the pressing moments of parting at a stage of finality. The poetic persona remains focussed and does not indulge in any mystification of the feelings. He accepts separation and wants to ensure that the moment of parting should be graceful. He delicately avoids any recourse to emotional outburst or sentimentality. The poetic persona takes courage to face parting and acknowledges the fact that this parting will be a release for both of them. As lovers, the persona thinks that a release from vastness of feelings and emotions will be achieved. The time has come when their hearts were eager to be free. The poetic persona is expressing a strong desire to unknot themselves off their relationship. That is why, he then compares their relationship with husk: 'We are husks that see/The grain going forward to a different use (37). This is a deliberately pessimistic statement. Commenting upon the first impressions of pessimism that a reading of Larkin's poetry produces, Marcus Herold says:

Reading Larkin for the first time, one is struck by the characteristically glum atmosphere that pervades most of his poems. The vast majority of his verse is devoted to what is generally taken to be negative aspects of life, such as loneliness and dejection, disappointments, loss, and the terrifying prospect of impending death. Evidently, there are uplifting and humorous sides to his work as well, but for certain reasons Larkin almost invariably is identified with a downhearted, pessimistic temper and tone of voice. This is due to two facts. Firstly, assertive or funny statements in Larkin simply occur too sparsely to effect the overall impression and make up for all the pessimistic comments in his work. The second reason is somewhat more complex and has to do with the fact that, a few exceptions granted, Larkin's writing is characterized by a strikingly high degree of uniformity across individual poems, both with respect to the general mood they convey and the particular attitudes expressed. (<http://www.uni-koeln.de/phil-fak/englisch/larkin.html> dated October 25, 2013)

This question of mood is structural to the working of Larkin's imagination. It is mandatory to note how the poetic persona in the poems of Philip Larkin is solidly located in the context of consumer culture. What Lolette Kuby observes about a particular persona of Larkin's poem is valid at the larger level also, 'The speaker drives toward hoped for solitude away from the machines, the technology, the noise the confusion and materialism of the modern city too' (*An Uncommon Poet for the Common man* : 132). Close to the poet's own self, he often struggles to understand and make the reader realize how human ties are drastically reduced in emotional and spiritual fervour. The title of the first anthology of Larkin's poetry is provided by the poem 'The North Ship'. This long poem comprises parts entitled 'Legend, Songs 65degree N', '75degree N Fortunetelling', '75degree N Blizzard' and 'Above 80 degree N'. As the title indicates, the poem is about a journey of a ship. The journey by ship is compared with the journey of life which goes on and never ends. It knows no destination over the sea. This poem is a strange mixture of personal and impersonal views. L.A. Grove observes about the poem: 'In this poem, Philip Larkin appeals to the reader's sense of sound and rhythm to craft an illustration of time that is simple, elegant, and chilling... However, the beats also beautifully illustrate the echo of the axe so the reader can actually experience each blow. These qualities culminate in a vision of innocence being steadily, violently hacked to death. Now let's all thank Larkin for

time well spent' (<http://www.californiapoetics.org/po-chops/3885/philip-larkin>). The endeavor of the poet is to evolve an idiom that can negotiate the disheartening realism of Post-second World War England. The poems in this collection express the impact of social, economic and political decline of England on the common life. The openness of Larkin's poetry in treating apparently looking conventional themes accommodates the sensibility of twenty first century reader. Even his scepticism towards the changing attitude on religious affirmations, natural landscapes, consumerist tendencies and the spirit of love and mutuality - all help in engaging the contemporary reader. As Stephen Regan observes, 'The cultural value of Larkin's early poetry is that it engages in a variety of poetic forms with the beliefs and attitudes that accompanied a new and different social formation after the upheaval of the Second World War' (*Philip Larkin*, 1992:100).

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