



CHAPTER – II

THEMES IN THE POETRY OF

PHILIP LARKIN

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II

This is the first thing

I have understood

Time is the echo of an axe

Within a wood.

Larkin's themes and his philosophy has emerged from the harsh reality of life. Larkin as a representative of twentieth century reflects his deep concern with life in his poems. His poetry seems to be a product of the great social, political, cultural turmoil that was taking place in the society. The basic needs of man were not fulfilled. The starvation of the basic things have become common with the people. The whole life seems to become barren. People lost their faith and hope. Frustration begins to capture the mind of man. Larkin too became frustrated and dissatisfied.

Antony Thwaite's remark rightly points out the content of Larkin's poetry.

“It is the poetry of Philip
 Larkin that the spirit of
 1950’s find the most
 expressions of English poetry.”¹

Larkin’s observation was minute. He concentrates on different things of life and reflects them in his poetry. He thinks that poetry is the best form to express ideas properly. Further he considers it, as the most effective medium to mirror the society. Larkin handles the medium carefully and expresses his thoughts through it.

There seems to be trend of mid- twentieth century facts in his poetry. Failure, death, loneliness, and emptiness the characteristics of twentieth century persuade Larkin upto the end. Larkin’s themes belong to the great negative order of ideas. The drastic effects of war, the political, scientific, artistic events Larkin mirrors in his poetry.

He shows man as the victim of external forces. He presents nature’s ruthless, unconscious cruelty in the lines :

Living toys are something novel,
 But it soon wears off somehow,
 Fetch the shoebox, fetch the Shovel
 Mam, We're playing funerals now .”

Larkin speaks about the future and about time that it passes behind, proves its promise to have been a bluff. Future becomes present, it becomes past. So he speaks about future in the lines :

“Always too eager for the future, we
 pick up bad habits of expectancy,
 something is always approaching ; everyday
 Till then we say ”

Larkin's pessimistic thoughts lead him to think about death too. His poems like “The building”, “Aubade”, speaks about stoical acceptance of death. His mind always thinks about death.

He believes that work may help to combat the thought of death but he can't avoid the death. So he says :

Give me your arm, old toad :

Help me down cemetery Road.

The most prominent themes of Larkin's poetry are melancholy, incurable pessimism and death. The helplessness of man, the miserable condition of man, Larkin presents in his poems. Man has no choice, no selection, he has no control. What remains is the total surrender to ~~the~~ Time.

Larkin speaks :

Never such innocence

Never before or since

As changed itself, to past

Without the word the men

Leaving the garden tidy

The thousands of marriages

Lasting a little while longer;

Never such innocence again.

Larkin's poetry is an expression of his personal experiences. "The school in August"; Larkin's poem describes the empty cloakroom pegs. He describes the locked classroom doors. The hollow desks where the dust, the sunbeams creep between the chairs. Larkin's description is minute and realistic.

Larkin portrays London in his poems. The roads, the fields, the nature in London become the integral part of Larkin's poems. His poems reveal the songs of the birds, the rivers, the wind and the beauty of the sky.

Larkin in the opening stanza of "Whitsun Wedding" says :

We ran,

Behind Windscreen, smelt the fish dock; thence

The river's level drifting beneath began,

Where sky and incolnshire and

water meet.

He speaks about the experiences of childhood in his poem “I Remember, I Remember”.

The poem speaks about Larkin’s birthplace. He pays a visit to his birthplace. He looks the platforms and watches the men and women. He exclaims, “I was born here”.

The voice of the cock, the flying of the clouds bring him excitement. The deep silence, the deep solitude in the company of night bring a mystery and peace of mind to Larkin. The strange and beautiful in the nature always carry a deep impression. The Spring, the various songs of the bird, the deep bare gardens, the thrush adding beauty in the nature give Larkin delight and pleasure. Larkin catches the best glimpses in his poems.

Donald Davie shows:

“there has been the widest
possible agreement.... That
Philip Larkin is for good or

ill the effective unofficial

Laureate of post 1945 England.”²

The mature poetry of Larkin is a truthful reflection and meditation of his realistic experiences. The war leaves a confusion and a turmoil of social, intellectual thoughts. The life of men became dismal and sad. The deaths of soldiers, the tragedy of men brought Larkin a sense of pessimism.

Larkin also notes the industrial pollution spread in the city Hull. The industrialisation created the horrible diseases and brought deaths.

The modern equipments, the electric things make the people idle. Their life became mechanical and monotonous. They persuaded the new and the fashionable. They remain away from peace and happiness.

Larkin speaks:

Electric mixers, toaster, washers, driers –

A cut price crowd, urban yet simple dwelling

Where only salesman and relation come

Within a terminate and fishy smelling

pastorals of ships up streets, the slave musuem,

Tatoo ships, consulates; grim head

Scarfed Wives.

The progress in science brings a prosperity but the villages become isolated. The material prosperity brings unhappiness. Men and women become the slaves of machine. Life is nothing but uncertainty, despair and disillusion.

Larkin says:

“at an age when self importance

would have been normal, events

cut us ruthlessly down to size.”³

Larkin observes the twentieth century and realises that It was not colourful. It was not dreamy. The people were suffering from problems like poverty, starvation and unemployment.

Q. Spector and Christopher Ricks say :

Larkin is committed to

Portraying life in the language

of people, presenting the ordinary in an

unusual way. They have a

Wordsworthian subject, the ordinary sorrow

of man's life.⁴

Larkin realises the sorrow of ordinary men. He looks the common men and their wives working for the children. He realises that their horrible end was death. The truth of modern life was the death. The poor were not born for luxurious things. The comforts and gaudy things were not for them. For them the life was a mere shadow, a dark replica of death. Life never brings them happiness, solitude and peace. They have to listen the noise of the railway and

harsh sound of porters. The station was a home and the long, cool platforms were the companions. They have to endure the grinning smiles, the torned clothes, the smoke of the cigar, the shouting of the men and women.

Larkin concentrates his attention on rich as well as poor and describes their dress and the customs. He also presents the contemporary picture of men and women, their jewellery and their fashions. He describes their dialogues, the various events in the life of the people. He also writes on the physical appearance of men and women.

Larkin mirrors the railway station, the arrival of men and women, the porters and their ways of living life. He also speaks about the children and the girls. He describes the fat women wearing nylon gloves and jewellery.

He says:

One man walking a deserted platform

Down coming and rain
Driving across a darkening autumn
One man restlessly waiting a train
While round the streets the wind
runs wild.

Larkin describes the silent streets in the poem "Ambulances". He gives a list of things, the cheap clothes, knitwear and summer casuals which were there in the "Large Cool Store ." He minutely notes the other things like heap of shirts and trousers, blouses, Lemon, supphire, moss green, roses. Larkin tells how the people living the terraced houses come and purchase the things.

Larkin recalls his college days, the wide dazzling lawn and the voice of the bell. He also reminds the canal and the clouds and colleagues. Even the minor character like Dockery he keeps in his memory.

He used to meditate on life seriously. For him life was a boredom and a sort of fear. The ultimate end of life he believes is death. He courageously tells the truth in his poems.

Larkin says:

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 only end of age.

Larkin feels that the twentieth century was a break of man from nature. The life was full of crisis. The common men have to struggle the whole life, and have to wait for death. Larkin questions what are days for ? Whether they bring comforts or not ? If life is an endless strife, how to escape from it ? For Larkin, the problem is critical and he decides to solve it by calling a priest and a doctor. One who could solve the soul and the other who could save the body.

Larkin's poems bring his subjective impression of life. The melancholic thoughts of Larkin were based on the contemporary realistic situations and on his personal experiences. The serious and grave life and the fear of death were the subjects of Larkin's poetry. He considers destiny as an unavoidable thing in the life of man. The man has to wear the robes of destiny and has to complete the course of life.

Larkin says:

A serious house on serious earth it is,

In whose blent our all compulsions meet. ?

Larkin has a sympathy for the downtrodden and for the orphans. They live life in the slums and without complaints. The whole day they work, and in the evening return back to the same dark, dusty, shabby slums. In the evening the slums become mad. The grave fear of death, disturbs them.

Larkin expresses his thoughts by telling that the young should know the universal truth, the death. The young boys who spend the

time in other things should take the grave's part and listen the
bone's truth. They should try to reveal what is death, what is
suffering and what is the eternal truth.

Lolette Kuby remarks :

Larkin's poems assimilate both

social ills theoretically are

curable and "woes, woes

immedicable".⁵

Larkin finds life full of pains. It was a chain of unending
restlessness and bitterness. He could not find any remedy. He could
hear only the banging voice, which brings him the suggestion of
death. The things in the nature by their movements tell him the
arrival of death. The philosophy of death seems to be an outcome of
Larkin's personal experiences.

Larkin believes in the element of Time which plays a vital
role in the life of a man. Most of his poems deal with the theme of
Time. Larkin considers that the life of a man is in a thrall of Time.

Time stands between the two plains, hopes and sorrows, pleasure and disappointment.

Larkin says:

“Truly, though our element is time,

We are not suited to the long

perspectives,

Open at each instant of our lives

They link us to our losses”.

Larkin believes that time plays a double cruelty in a life of man. It shows emphatically to man what he might get in the future and again turns and tells what he would get at present. It brings disappointment and disillusion.

Something is always approaching and it is death. He expresses it with an image of a ship.

Larkin says:

Only one ship seek up, a black
 sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back
 a huge and birdless silence. I her wake
No water breed or break.

Nature too completes the circle of birth and death. The flowers, the branches, the buds, the meadows fade and face the transitoriness. The morning and the evening, the sunrise and the sunset, the spring and the summer, the happiness and the sorrow come to an end. The death through the wind, through dust and dirt, through the storm sends the preomens of his arrival and carries all things reluctantly. The thing that is born has an end.

Man is also a puppet and his life too is controlled by Time. The man has no selection. He has to remain dumb and has to see what happens before his eyes.

The theme of love Larkin handles in most of his poems. Larkin speaks that love's promise is also an empty promise. Love has a power to cure suffering, but for Larkin, love has not such an

effect. It brings only a tragic illusion. Love is gifted by God and sometimes love encourages people to enjoy life happily. But sometimes the same love brings tragedy, a despair and a frustration. The selfish love, the dishonest love brings a destruction. Sometimes love demands a departure, sometimes a deliberate withdrawn. The relationships between men and women come to an end.

Larkin speaks about the fickle nature of love. The lovers stand as strangers, they stand dishonest. They cheat themselves and the nest of real love gets ruined. Larkin emphasises that the nest of love must be erected on the strong foundation of faith. The lack of faith in love brings an unexpected tragic end. The lovers have to accept the death.

Larkin speaks:

The glare of that much mentioned, love

brilliance, love,

Broke out, to show

Its bright incipence sailing above,

And set unchangeable in order. So
To pile them back, to cry,
was hard, without lamely admitting how
It had not done so then and
could not now.

Larkin realises that the stony monument of the lovers, the symbol of undying love never remains permanent in the world. Love is transitory, love is incomplete. It is always short and gets destroyed in the passage of Time.

Larkin visualises Nature as a symbol of happiness. It is an unending fountain of happiness and beauty. Larkin conceives nature as a bliss. He believes that nature is the friend, and guide of man. Nature is a paragon of freshness, liveliness and happiness. The trees, the leaves, the buds and the flowers shower a rain of happiness and pleasure. Nature brings joy and kindness.

Larkin says:

Yet still the unresting castles thresh

Is full grown thickness every may,

Last year is dead, them seem to say,

Being afresh, afresh, afresh.

Larkin confesses that there is some mysterious power that rules a man and that is fate. The power is subtle and is enigmatic. Man surrenders the power and endures everything that happens in his life.

The malignant power is busy in arranging a plan. The strings are in the hands of the Almighty and man according to the strings behave in the world. The Fate makes a trap and at a fixed time and at fixed place catches a man and smashes him into pieces. ?

Larkin also states that the men and women, the rich and the poor, the kings and the queens, the young and the old all are equal. Fate presents its power in various tools and the life of a man comes to an end. The thread of human life is cut accidentally. The cities and the villages, are ruined and remained on the earth, is ash and ash.

Larkin describes:

What sad scapes we can not

turn from then :

What ashen hills, what salted

shrunken lakes,

How ridden the ring looks,

Birmingham magic all

discredited.

Andrew Motion in "Philip Larkin" says :

"Larkin was beginning to see himself in the
context of the real world." ⁶

Reality was the best material for Larkin. His personal experiences provide him a great deal of material and Larkin selects some of the experiences and characters. He meditates on them and presents them to the readers. The twentieth century landscape stands as a canvas. Train, travelling, jetplanes, television, industrial forth perms, nylon gloves, mixers all are included in his poems. The

things are not issues, but things as are seen, as are thought, as are interpreted.

The date Larkin picked to designate the time when the twentieth century became the reality of everyday, is 1914 the day and date was monumental. The political, social, scientific, intellectual and artistic turmoil of the society is reflected in Larkin's poetry. The modern world is reflected completely in the poetry of Larkin. The modern equipments television sets, ambulances, Larkin refers in his poems. Larkin presents the conflict, the consciousness of the ideal and the knowledge of reality. His poems range from marriage to house parties, economic inequities to departmental stores. His characters are never removed from reality but are close to reality. He expresses his sympathy for the poor and comments on the cold attitude of the rich to look at the poor.

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