

**POETRY OF CRITICAL OBSERVATION AND PRAGMATIC PESSIMISM:  
A STUDY OF PHILIP LARKIN'S THE NORTH SHIP (1945)**

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**Abstract:** Philip Larkin is a poet of cautious pessimism. His continued significance is based on his modest, ironic and realist mode of connectivity with the historical situation. 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 life in the Post-Second World War scene of England. 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).

**Key Words:** Pessimism, Pragmatic, Persona and British culture.

Philip Larkin (1922-1985) is primarily known for a poetic tone accustomed to darker side of reality. The first collection of his poems *The North Ship* (1945), had to confront this life long temperamental and thematic problematic of pessimism. Without depending upon any personal or cultural mythology, Larkin adopts a poetic strategy of ironic exploration of the surroundings. The issue has several dimensions – subjective as well as historical. In order to decode the real character and foundation of his pessimism as projected with the publication of *The North Ship*, it is necessary to foreground the complex dynamics of Larkin's poetic voice and the persona behind it. The poetic persona is apparently a passive onlooker. But his perceptive observations in the poem extend the meaning: 'I saw three ships go sailing by/Over the sea, the lifting sea' (44). The first ship turned towards the West. The ship starts at the beginning of the day. The wind also seems to be helping the ship's going and movement. Interestingly, this poem is absolutely silent about the people of ship. The poetic persona talks about three ships, two of them know their respective directions. The second ship moves towards the East and is fully aware of its route. The atmosphere is cool and calm for the first ship and the wind also seems to be cooperating with the waves of sea. But for the second ship atmosphere becomes more and more threatening. In its cruel mood, the wind is against the human world. Then the poetic persona talks about the hardships of the third ship. It knows no destination. It sails towards North and hence is known as North ship. Elements of Nature are really cruel to this ship. However, it does not destroy the ship but only attack it. The North ship is compared with a journey of life which never comes back to the point from where it starts. It departs with

its birth. It goes on at its own speed no matter what the circumstances are. Despite hostile conditions, the poetic persona thinks that the North ship is all set for long Journey though it does not know any destination. It has a long, lonely journey ahead of it. Its course is difficult too. The sea and wind are unforgiving to the North ship. The North ship moves towards colder and still colder regions in the Northern Hemisphere. Literally, the North ship moves from 65 degree N to 70 degree N to 75 degree N and finally to above 80 degree N. The ship of life moves into these regions and makes life unlivable. If one has to live in these conditions, it can only be termed as a bare survival. The North ship in this sense becomes symbol of existential expedition. The East and the West ships come back. The West ship comes back happily and the East ship comes back unhappily after completing journey.

"East and West the ships came back  
Happily or Unhappily". (44)

The next part with the title 'Song 65 degree N' is about the dream of the poet who envisions emptiness with the atmosphere hostile. There is nothing favorable in it and the dream is like a cold curtain separating life from death. The Poetic persona in '70 degree N' is in a way forewarned that a dark mysterious girl will kiss him, though quite gently. Dark Mysterious girl is here taken as death: 'And a dark girl will kiss you/As softly as the breast' (46). She will not allow him to protest, as she will seal his lips. In these lines Larkin is not presenting a negative picture of women but evoking the coldness of death through the metaphor of a girl. The poet continues:

"As one who long since died  
Under a different name".(46)

The poetic persona further brings out the deadening

repetitiveness of human affairs. In '75 degree N Blizzard' the snowflakes hit the earth like the tangled hair of the girl falling down. The simile is triggered in an amazing style. In the last stanza of the poem, the persona says that 'A Girl is standing there' which means death is nearing to entangle him in the fatal fold of her hair.

"A woman has ten claws

Sang the drunken boatswain". (47)

In the last part of the poem, "Above 80 degree N", the boatswain sings out that the woman has the claws. Her claws are sharp and will get to him. At one level, it may appear that Larkin's attitude towards women is cynical. Like Shakespeare's witches, they are being portrayed as loveless demons and predator that catch and spoil human beings. Larkin's overall attitude as obsessed with death and intermingling of these feelings with women is essentially limiting in its metaphorical overtones. Though without apparent anchors of optimism, Philip Larkin treats the cultural reality around with a focussed penetration. He often uses an undercurrent of irony to uncover complex sides of human experience. His poem 'Dawn' is a remarkable example of irony. The symbolic and cultural role of the dawn time is at the centre of the workings of the poetic imagination. The poem goes further:

"To wake, and hear a cock  
Out of the distance crying,  
To put the curtains back  
And see the clouds flying" (15)

At the literal level, dawn represents morning time and hence, optimism and happiness. But Larkin is conscious of a larger reality of his times. Despite all odds it is not easy to be loveless. It is difficult to hear the crying of the cock : 'How strange it is/For the heart to be loveless, and as cold as these (14). These lines answer questions on the poet's attitude towards women. His trust that 'lovelessness' is not an easily acceptable situation is self-evident in its ideological meanings. The loss of human sensitivity is a recurrent theme in Larkin's poetry. The Poem; 'Waiting for breakfast, while She brushed her Hair' clearly deals with a situation out of everyday life. With his imaginative powers, Larkin converts a few minutes of waiting into a poetic experience. This Poem is in the form of a monologue, spoken by a man in a hotel room and goes on to reveal the mechanical attitude of both the lovers. The Persona reflects upon past and also on a number of other issues and things. He almost forgets the presence of a woman in the room. Though he kisses his companion but the kiss is devoid of any love and emotional attachment. He wonders if joys are jealous of his partner as if joys and companionship are mutually exclusive. If one comes then the other automatically has to go away. The

question of choice becomes a disturbing agenda to be settled.

"Are you Jealous of her?

Will you refuse to come till I have sent?

Her terribly away, importantly live

Part invalid, part baby, and part saint". (48)

These lines confirm how Larkin is above all a poet with pragmatic view on the depressing as well as liberating aspects of life. Here love becomes emblematic of the whole mindset of a generation. It exposes the hollowness of British culture. The poem on love and companionship are significant in their treatment of the subject. The poetic persona is asking if joy visits one's life only when no enthusiasm is left in him or when one gets saintly qualities, the real charm will be lost. Larkin seems to say that at such a stage there will be no need, as the very use or meaning of joys is eroded. The persona is in search of joyful state of mind. No doubt, the companion is there but joys are not there. This state of relationship bespeaks of a larger malady in British culture the poet is able to locate and address. Another poem 'I see a girl dragged by his wrist' also deals with a girl dragged by her wrist on a field of snow. The poet expresses his faint tender desire to live life with full enthusiasm or courage. He looks within him and finds that he is not willing to help. He stands there for an hour for something to happen to the inferior landscape and watches the spectacle with his two weak eyes. He keeps looking at her struggle and hears her laughter too. The girl is full of wild passions and also seems to be full of life. In her characteristic behaviour, enthusiasm and vitality are revealed. But the persona remains passive betraying his emotional and spiritual barrenness. Devoid of slightest emotions, he is a passive onlooker who eventually accepts this degrading passivity.

"Once it would not be so

Once I should choke with powerless jealousies;

Not now I seem devoid of subtlety,

As simple as the things I see, being no more, no less,  
weak eyes". (32)

The persona wants to expose that modern man in post war scenario living with a dead spirit. He presents his own dead spirit knowing well that the death of spirit is irreversible. He cannot bring it back to life again.

"As she laughs and struggles, and pretends to fight;

And still I have no regret;

Nothing so wild, nothing as glad as she

Rears up in me,

And would note though I watched an hour yet". (32)  
But the persona shows no regrets about his failure to respond. This also shows an indifference that is personal as well as collective. There prevails a reciprocal difference between the individual and the

social. The poem continues with this idea:

“What poor mortar and bricks

I have to build with, knowing that I can

Never in seventy years be more a man

Than now - a sack of meal upon two sticks”. (32)

Now the persona identifies him with the old ragged men digging snow with shovels and spades. He exhibits their routine monotonous tasks which they do everyday with great efforts. They pile the snow into the cart and get breathless and perform the same duty. Seeing them grapple with snow, the poet realizes that all human actions carry nowhere and achieve nothing in the end. Even human beings like Sisyphus have to get engaged in acts which are monotonous and fruitless. These images of two old men bring to the poet's mind the final reality of life that is death. The persona knows that he can not become enthusiastic like a girl. He is moving towards old age and ultimately towards death : ‘Damn all explanatory rhymes!/To be that girl! - But that impossible’ (33). Philip Larkin's main complaint against the contemporary culture is its failure to understand the difference between long term values and immediate satisfaction of physical desires. He points out only those human beings who spend their life in doing these boring routines. They are leading a purposeless life. This emphasis on the lack of energy and enthusiasm in contemporary life in England cements the absurdity of existence. In ‘Winter’ the cold and bleak vision through winter season is suggested. He realistically presents the outer and inner winter in post war scenario in England. The poet observes that its chilling cold is here to stay. This poem ‘Winter’ becomes a metaphor of both outer and inner winter. In this world of frozen and futile emotions, there is no hope for human beings as well. Living is purposeless and directionless life as the poem goes: ‘While a wind blows over/A waste of thistles/Crowded like men’(19). It exhibits the depressing picture of British Society. Men are as lifeless and fruitless as the thistles crowding together with no individuality of their own. No enthusiasm can ever enter there lives simply because all emotions, passions and hopes lie frozen. No efforts can make them move. There passions have no desire to be revived. In such a state of affairs, individuals can do nothing but accept there fate in an unexceptionally resigned manner. Even the so-called miracles fail to do any thing. ‘And shriving men stand/Crowding like thistles/to one fruitless place (19). However, this poem seems to have a deeper message. Larkin presents the coldness in the hearts of human beings or and winter landscape. Another poem ‘If hands could free you, heart’ comprises a question answer session. Firstly the poetic persona questions him where the heart would like to go if it

gets freedom. He thinks he will go to pit-valleys, fields, catch butterflies and will fry to catch beautiful moments: ‘If hands could free you, heart/Where would you fly’ (36). But the poetic persona answers in absolutely dead sure tone that he would not even lift the latch of the door. He answers in consoling way that death is the ultimate reality. And every one has to face it. Nobody can escape from it. Running over the fields, valleys takes him nowhere.

“I would not lift the latch;

For I could run

Through fields, pit-valleys catch

All -beauty under the sun”. (36)

The poetic persona shows his restlessness. Nothing can give him comfort and he has to face the realities of his wider surroundings. In Larkin's poetry there is no escape from the tough realities of life. Nothing can give comfort except a stoic attitude. His poetic persona like the modern man has to face loneliness, sorrowness and isolation: “I should find no bent arm, no bed/to rest my head”. (36). Lolette Kuby observes about the personae of Larkin in general,

“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).

The North Ship, as our discussion of the poems displays, originates from the cultural reality of England. It is a response to its internal dynamics. The limitations of the first collection are essentially there in its fixation with a given thematic territory. But the way, larkin was initially portrayed as one with very weak poetic talent and promise had to do more with the attitude and orientation of the academic circles. Larkin in his important interview with Robert Philips says, ‘The academic world has worked all right for me, but then, I'm not a teacher. I couldn't be. I should think that chewing over other people's work, writing I mean, must be terribly stultifying. Quite sickens you with the whole business of literature. But then, I haven't got that kind of mind, conceptual or ratiocinative or whatever it is. It would be death to me to have to think about literature as such, to say why one poem was ‘better’ than another, and so on’. And in the same interview, he further says, ‘I don't like plays. They happen in public, which, as I said, I don't like, and by now I have grown rather deaf, which means I can't hear what's going on. Then again, they are rather like poetry readings: they have to get an instant response, which tends to vulgarize. And of course the intrusion of personality - the actor, the producer - or do you call him the director - is distracting (<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews...>). To understand his poems it is necessary to examine all the cultural, social and political circumstances related

to its production. Cultural changes put pressure on individual consciousness. Defining the cultural dimension of Larkin's poetry, eminent critic Stephen Regan says: 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. There is a complex and distinctive relationship between the linguistic structure of the poems and the changing social structure of the post war years, and this is clearly evident in the extent to which the poems modify traditional lyric forms by incorporating the vocabulary and phrasing of contemporary English speech. The interest and appeal of the poetry for many readers is a consequence of its significant and decisive revamping of English poetic diction (Philip Larkin (1992):100). But it has to be noticed that Larkin ventured his creative journey along with a number of writers. He was an integral part of The Movement and strived to use poetry as a cautious intervention in contemporary reality. Explicating the overall mood and temper of Larkin and his fellow poets, 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). Finally Marcus Herold is appropriate in assessing the overall impact of Larkin's poetry on the reader, 'Insofar as in Larkin's verse a certain disposition or mood is captured and expressed with an urgency unmatched before or after, it is genuinely original. But the fact that Larkin's poetry is not only widely discussed in academic scholarship, but also, despite its obvious debunkery, immensely popular with the general reading public as well indicates that, although the poems are anything but trendy, they must in some sense have 'hit the nerve of time'. Obviously, the uneasiness and discomfort expressed through them are something a great number of readers can identify with - a fact that lends general relevance to Larkin's situation. It seems that up to a certain degree his predicament is exemplary of the situation of many people in contemporary society' (<http://www.uni-koeln.de/phil-fak/englisch/larkin.html>). With the

end of the Second World War, the status of England at the international level comes to an all time low in modern times. It created an environment of pessimism in the British Society. It was an experience arising out of the fragmentation and demise of the Empire. Larkin is a part of the widespread mood. England had lost its past glory, prestige and its unparalleled supremacy in the world politics. So emptiness prevails everywhere in the political and social arenas. Larkin's poetry manifests this emptiness not as a subjective mood. Unlike those poets who were advocating an escape from this new reality through Romantic and nostalgic longings, Philip Larkin, in all his mildness, submissive, tentative and unsettled tone is basically offering a pragmatic encounter with the emergence of historical pessimism in Britain. 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... 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' (Underhill 215-216). 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 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). At long intervals, Larkin continued writing poetry, *The Whitsun Weddings* (1965) and *High Windows* (1974). Yet it would be erratic to conclude that Philip Larkin is a depressing poet or thoroughly pessimist. His mode of uncovering contemporary cultural attitudes inheres a pragmatic recognition of the frustrating as well as minimally affirmative aspects of reality.

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