

## **An Analytical study of some of the poems of Philip Larkin based on his theme of death**

**Baishakhi Banerjee<sup>1\*</sup> and P. K. Senapoti<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Indira Gandhi National Open University; <sup>2</sup> JK College, Purulia, West Bengal, India  
\*E-mail: mukherjeeb1@gmail.com

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### **Abstract:**

Philip Larkin (1922-1985) is regarded as a British national cultural icon. Larkin creates many volumes of poems. Most of the poems of these volumes are based on the gloomy atmosphere which is related to death. He is a pessimistic poet. In most of his poems, he talks about the hopelessness of life. The gloomy atmosphere of his poems reminds us of sickness, helplessness, and uncertainty of life. His death related poems are very heart-rending and certainly forces us to think about the negative aspects of life. The death of his father moves him a lot and most of his poems are full of the shadow of death. These poems are based on reality and his way of expression such as in *The Ambulances*, *The Building* is very shocking but outstanding. The major publications of Larkin are *the North-Ship*, *The Less Deceived*, *The Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows*.

### **Introduction:**

Philip Arthur Larkin (1922-1985) is a prolific modern writer was born in Coventry, England. His father, Sidney Larkin was the treasurer of the city corporation of Coventry. Though Larkin belongs to a rich and aristocratic family and experiences all the facilities and exposes in his childhood days, yet he describes his childhood as “a forgotten boredom”. He had a tendency to speak in pessimistic terms. He describes his school days as uneventful. Larkin passes his final school examination with distinction in the subjects of history and English. In 1940, he went to Oxford University from where he got the graduate degree in 1943 and got first class. During the Second World War, he tried to get a job in the army, but ultimately he got the job of a librarian at the public library in Wellington. Finally, in 1954, he got an appointment in the same post at the University of Hull and remained there till death. He started writing at the age of fifteen. In most of his poems, a glum atmosphere prevails everywhere. He talks about the negative aspects of life such as loneliness, sickness, and death. Dejection, loss, fatigue, disappointments are the major issues in his poetry. Pessimistic temper and voice of failure are the main characteristics of Larkin though we can't omit the evidence of humor. He starts his career as a novelist but he is famous for his poetry. He successively publishes four volumes: “North-Ship” (1945), “The Less Deceived” (1955), “The Whitsun Weddings” (1965) and “High Windows” (1974). In 1965, he was awarded the Queen's Gold medal, and he receives honorary doctorates from several British Universities. He was offered the Poet Laureateship. Larkin loved privacy and disliked travel. His poems explore modern attitudes to work, pleasure, love, and death. His volumes of poetry also show the conditions of post-war England. The poem “Going” and “Wedding Wind” showed the damage on the traditional religious ceremonies and rituals in Britain (Ali et al., 2017). The poem “At Grass” symbolized Britain's loss of past glory. Poems like “At Grass”, “Wires”, “Myxomatosis” and “Toads” are Larkin's animal fables. His poem Church going expressed the view that the faith n religion may be ended but the spirit of the tradition would never be ended. Larkin had faith in love and sex, but no faith in

marriage. “The Whitsun Weddings” showed the influence of the changing social and cultural climate of England. His poems “Here, Mr. Bleaney” and “Dockery and Sons” clearly showed the motivation impulse searches for an unalienated existence. The poem “Here” moved from night to day and for the industrial scene and motor roads to fields and meadows.

In these volumes, we find differences of class and cultures prominently. Another feature of these volumes is the inevitability of death. According to Larkin, all human activities, like, work, play, and player have the shadow of death. In the poem, “Nothing to be said”, the poet said about the life for all classes of society. Larkin is the representative of post-war poets. Reality is an unquestionable fact in his poems but somehow, man did not appear to him as an independent being, or as having the power to mold his circumstances. Here, he gradually resembles Thomas Hardy, though he didn’t put any emphasis on the misery of old age and on the inevitability of death. In many of his poems, he emphasized the gray aspects of human life. A number of poems like, “Next, Please”, “Ambulances”, “Dockery and Sons” etc. came to our mind in this connection. “Aubade” is a poem in which Larkin’s fear of death reaches its climax. Larkin was not a pessimistic poet all the time. Some of his poems have a profoundly moral character which needs to control and organize life. Of course, his response to death was not like W. B. Yeats’ heroic struggle to win time and death but has a similarity with Thomas Hardy’s passive acceptance of an adverse destiny. Larkin had a pessimistic approach towards life. He talks about the hopelessness of life in his poetry. In almost all of his poems, we see a constant reference of darkness, sadness, melancholy and note of death.

#### Questions

1. What is the theme of death?
2. How did the poet implement the theme of death in his poetry?

#### Objectives:

The present study aims to understand, critically analyze and decipher the underlying theme, specifically death theme of the poems of Philip Larkin. The poems of Larkin reveal many modern or postmodern traits of poetic genius which includes imagery, direct language. The melancholic irony is another quality of his poetic talent. He is famous for his skepticism and agnosticism.

#### Methodology

The selection of the competent methodology is the main feature in the collection of data for the research. The analysis of the study is qualitative and descriptive in nature.

Some of Larkin’s poems based on the theme of death are *The old fools*, *Next please*, *The Explosion*, *The Buildings*, *Nothing to be said* etc. In the poem *The old fools* Larkin expressed death as a horrifying reality. This poem said to us about the horror of senility and the atmosphere of the poem is completely bleak. Despair is counterbalanced by its moments of praise for the beauty of life. He used the image of the million of petal of a blooming flower which stands against the forces of age and death. The lust for life was suggested by old peoples, nostalgic thinking of their robust past. Those people who are now old were young ones and they used to dance all night and used to go to their wedding parties. The poem gives us hints about the uglier aspects of being human.

The poem *Next, please* is from the volume of poems entitled “The Less Deceived”. We are very eager to know about our future. On account of this eagerness, we always expect or hope for good things to happen in our lives and also want to achieve that good thing as early as possible. We stand upon the top of a cliff and observe a multitude of ships coming towards us. Actually, we don’t see ships, we see promises of bright and nice things happening to us. The approach of the promises like the ships is very slow and also wastes much time. In reality, they don’t materialize at all and

that's why we feel greatly disappointed and miserable. At a distance, those promises look real and concrete but with the passing of time, all the promises fade away. There is only one promise and one expectation never fail to materialize is death. The theme of this poem is the disillusionment that we experience as a result of the disappointment of all our hopes and experience. Here, death is a black-shelled ship. The poet expresses the gloominess and darkness of life. This poem is basically concentrated with modes of looking at death's destiny and nothingness. The poem "Next, please" can well be read in terms of the existentialist dictum that human life in its entirety is life facing death. The agony of lost opportunity is extended in the fourth stanza which starts with repeating 'f' sound.

This poem *The explosion* is from the volume of the poems entitled "High Windows". The poem tells us about one explosion. On the date of the explosion, the shadow was pointing towards the coal mine. The miners come down the lane in their pit boots talking and smoking. Their talking contains some swear words. Their smoking sometimes makes them cough. Thus they are breaking the silence of the place. One of these miners runs after the rabbits but is unable to catch any. However, he finds out one nest of a lark and places the nest carefully in the hedge. They are the relatives of each other and calling each other by their nicknames. Suddenly there comes a tremor, an explosion takes place in one of the coal mines. The cows stop chewing curd, the sun becomes dim. Several miners lose their lives. There was a rumor that the wives of those miners have momentarily seen their husbands as if they had come back to life. It was a kind of resurrection when they saw their husbands larger than their original size. The poem looks like a narrative one. Actually, it is a description of a tragic incidence and its aftermath. The use of simile and metaphors give this poem a special touch. We also have an example of Larkin's talent for coining compound words and phrases. He uses the minimum possible number of words to convey his ideas. The descriptions are also brief. Finally, the ending of the poem has a certain spiritual quality. Here, in this poem, he adopts a more or less conservative attitude toward belief in God.

The theme of death is clearly shown in Larkin's "The Building". This poem describes a hospital but gradually the poet lets our mind towards a deep thinking. Initially, he describes the poem as a thing of beauty. He describes a "Lucent comb", which is "higher than the most handsome hotel". In the end, we are offered another image that is the clean cliff. This suggests the correlation between the building and the precipice of death. The language used by Larkin in this poem is very brilliant. He impersonates the person attending the hospital who does not understand what is going on which is our usual condition in a hospital. Thus at the end of the second stanza, a kind of nurse arrives. She picks out somebody from the waiting room at random as death takes us at random without explanation. In the fourth stanza, the innocence about the purpose of the hospital increases as we are invited to know about the grandeur of the hospital, its obvious costliness. The connection between the imagery and the subject of the poem is clear. Starting a journey and traveling is an apt metaphor for the patients' journey away from their day to day lives into illness and towards death as they enter the hospital. There are two separate images for the hospital. The first one is "the lucent comb". It provides the vivid picture of many windows and rows of lighted rooms on the tall building glowing at night. The other images of the shop taking life as currency strengthen our impression that the hospital is impersonal and indifferent. He compares being ill to being sinful; illness is an error that we must confess.

*Nothing to be Said* is taken from the volumes of the poems entitled "The Whitsun Weddings". In this poem, the poet says that the life is slowly dying for nations who are undecided like the weeds which grow at random. Life is also slowly dying for the homeless tribes of people who are dwelling among stones. Life is slowly dying for the tribes who have small statures. Life is also dying for the families which live in the cobbled streets and lanes of the industrial towns. The separate modes of life of these different kinds of people and different groups of people indicate

different ways of slow dying. These different people have different ways of building their homes; they have different criteria for judging affection and money. These people spend their day in hunting pigs and holding a garden party. Their mode of living depends on the class of society to which they belong. The passing of hours provides enough evidence for the view that things are slowly moving towards their death. New births are also supporting that view. The poet says that life brings different colors but every moment it changes its color. This short poem is represented in a highly suggestive manner. It is obviously a pessimistic poem. The stylistic quality of this poem is as conspicuous as its content. The first stanza is remarkable for its imagery of the nations, tribes, and people of all kinds living in the industrial towns. Larkin actually writes this poem to give expression to his gloom.

“Days” and “Ambulances” are another example of the poet’s gloominess of thoughts. Some poems of Larkin carry the picture of death as the end of life. Days are the time in which we live- “where can we live but days?”. This question obviously arouses the thinking in our mind about doctors and priests. Both of them are related to death. We take the help of a doctor to avoid death. The touch of Larkin’s nihilism in “The Whitson Weddings” is marked by another poem “Ambulances”. This poem is full of the horror of death. Larkin describes death as the inescapable destiny of humanity. When an ambulance comes to a locality, all the people get afraid of thinking about the end of this event. In the first stanza, there is a line “All streets in time are visited”. This is a very realistic statement because an ambulance eventually comes to every street as illness, disease, and death never forgive anybody. Whenever we find an ambulance and hear the sound of an ambulance our mind fills up with fear and we start thinking that the person who is lying inside the ambulance may not be found living once again. Ambulance itself is a symbol of grief, lament, sorrow, and death.

#### **A Critics Comments on the Poems**

Philip Larkin lived a life spanning sixty-three years. Both in national and international spheres his time proved remarkably eventful. He witnessed the decline of the British empire, the loss of importance of permissive society in the 1960’s, the gradual change of British society into multi-racial one in the 70’s and above all the unprecedented advance of industries and the change of political economic, cultural and philosophical orientation of the society. His first volume of a major collection of major collections was “The North Ship”. This collection deals with love, time and death. Another volume “The Less Deceived” also deals with the same theme, but this volume brings a number of new things such as basic human weakness, desire for freedom from the delegations etc. His next volume “High Windows” shows a deeper awareness and direct concern with contemporary economic, political and socio-cultural phenomena. the sexual revolution took a wide space in his poetry of this volume. The duty and the cycle of nature play an important role in Larkin’s poetry.

In “The North Ship” the poet is obsessed with himself and writes about self-pity and sentimentality. In this volume the poet’s attitude regarding life is gloomy. He gives attention towards other peoples’ lives and shows his desire to face the truth and reality face to face. In this volume, we have an aesthetic diction full of the feelings of the world. There is a touch of artificiality also in this volume. The emotion, philosophy, and thoughts of the poet get no such scope to express them. The images used in this volume are at times evoking vogue moods and melancholy. It has a lack of critical awareness. There is a shortage of intellectual expression in this volume.

From a structural point of view, the poems of “the Whitson Weddings” mark a clear development of Larkin upon those of less deceived. Here we find the poet’s observation on contemporary mundane realities. There are many poems in this volume, which are known as

advertisement poems. These poems are “Essential Beauty”, “Sunny Prestatyn”, “Send No Money” etc. In the 1960’s, there was a drastic change in the commercial field of the advertising world. Larkin takes interest in this and writes poems. he responds to the socio-cultural realities of contemporary society. In the poem “Send No Money”, Larkin gives a humorous description of a collage of images posted on huge billboards. Actually, Larkin wants to point out the exaggerated expression of the advertisement, its superficiality and its impact on common people.

#### **A close link between Larkin and common women:**

Larkin has a cordial and keen relationship with the common women. He has a deep compassion for the other people and it is clearly shown in his poem “Afternoon”. Here the poet gives us the description of the victims suffering from the blow of time. Here the victims are aging housewives. Once their lives were full of romance, enjoyments but now their ages are increased and living a monotonous life. In his “Faith Healing”, Larkin speaks about the working class women. They are ugly, tired and believes in faith healing activity. The narrator shows his sympathy for them.

#### **The fatalistic sentiment in Larkin’s poem:**

Larkin’s view gets a clear expression in “Reference Back” and “Dockery and Son”. In the former one, Larkin tells us about the relationship with his mother Eva Larkin. In the poem “Dockery and Son” we have the description of Larkin’s journey to home. He went to his old college at Oxford. In his college, he met the Dean. He told him that there is a student in their college who is the son of Larkin’s junior contemporary named ‘Dockery’. He went to his own house where he used to live. The door of the house is closed and locked. The lawn adjacent to their home which was once very familiar to him is now “dazzlingly wide”. He heard the old bell chime. He started thinking about Dockery. He remembered how old Dockery was when he became a father. The poem ends with the speaker’s generalized fatalistic reflection. The speaker’s argument is that the life of Dockery and him started equally, it went on quite in the same line, but then also their lives ultimately become totally different. According to Larkin, this happened due to the difference in their ways of thinking about their lives.

#### **Some love poems of Larkin:**

Larkin’s love poems are a perfect and acute example of love. “An Arundel Tomb” is a fine instance of that. This poem deals with perennial human emotions and sentiments. Larkin visits a cathedral and there he sees a statue of the earl of Arundel and his wife. Two figures are lying side by side. The earl is holding the hand of his wife. The poet says that the statue keeps the evidence from the rigid medieval age to the industrial, modern world. This poem ends with the note that love is eternal. “Broad Cast” is also a beautiful love poem. The poet sits in Pearson Park, listening to the radio concert when his ladylove was attending that concert in Hull. As the music gains momentum, the speaker’s mind becomes full of the thought of his beloved. When the music intensifies his emotion also intensifies and when it reaches its climax he becomes excited to hold her. No doubt, the speaker’s effort becomes fruitless but he succeeds to retain a romantic impulse in his mind.

#### **The Journey Poems:**

Larkin’s journey poems are “Here” and the title poem i. e. “The Whitsun Weddings” of this volume. In the poem here there is a journey through England towards Hull by train. He tells us large industrial area. He gives the description of gradually increasing solitude. After the widening reverse slope presence, we suddenly come to a large town. The poet describes the landscape observed at speed. The speaker notices the commercial activities of the town. The sky and the sea give the

speaker a spiritual liberation. "Here" shows us the mystery of existence. Thus the poem ends with a mystical note of peace. Here the poet finds out the infinite reality beyond the finite. The longest poem of the volume is "The Whitsun Weddings".

Crowds colorless and careworn,  
Had my taxi late,  
Yet not till I was airborne  
Did I recall the date-

In this poem also, there is a train journey. Here the poet's voyage is from the close self-centeredness to an open. In the beginning, the poet depicts himself as an uninterested and tired passenger boarding a train from the Northern provincial city of Hull. At first, we see canals, hedges, grasses, cattle and the agricultural field. In the third stanza, the poet introduces the weddings. Initially, he was reluctant and reading a book but gradually he understood that the noise surrounding him is created by the marriage parties. In the next four stanzas, he gives the description of their dress and attitude. All the members of the wedding parties gathered at each station to see off the newly married on the eve of their honeymoon journeys. This poem shows the unity of the changing landscape of post-war England and the lives of people who live there. The main occasion of this poem is Whitsun, which is described in "New Testament". The Whitsun symbolizes 'unity' and it has a wide religious significance.

#### **Larkin's Sympathy for Small Creatures:**

The poem "The Mower" is the reminiscence of myxomatosis. The widest prairies have electric fences,

For though old cattle know they must not stray  
Young steers are always scenting purer water  
Not here but anywhere. Beyond the wires  
Leads them to blunder up against the wires  
Whose muscle- shredding violence gives no quarter.  
Young steers become old cattle from that day,

Electric limits to their widest senses. (CP, p. 48) It shows the sympathy for a small creature. This poem tells us about the death of a hedgehog. The creature was on the lawn and the poet unknowingly runs over the hedgehog while mowing the lawn. The creature dies when it jumps up against the blades of the mower. The poet's grief for the little creature was genuine and deep. Monica Jones says "when it happened he came in from the garden howling". He was very upset. At the end of the poem, the poet says that we should be careful about each other. Thus the poem ends with the immense value of mutual compassion and kindness.

#### **A free attitude towards sex:**

Larkin attracts the attention of the readers towards the sexual liberation in two of his poems named "Annus Mirabilis" and "High Windows". The former poem starts with a startling manner:

"Sexual intercourse began  
In 1963.  
(Which is rather late for me)  
Between the end of the Chatterley ban  
And the Beatles' first LP. "

Free sexual relationship and the pre-marital relationship are acceptable to the society of that time. In the first two stanzas, the poet compares the sexual freedom of the present and past. He expresses marriage as a wrangle for a ring. In the past old days, marriage was essential for access of

sexual relationship and sex outside marriage was a matter for remorse for lifelong. In those days sex was restricted and the people used to maintain the social ethics. But ultimately the rigidity takes the form of frequent sex making.

#### **Conclusion:**

When Larkin moves to Hull, he writes and publishes “The Northship” and a pamphlet “XX Poems (1951)”. In this volume, the influence of W. H. Auden and W. B. Yeats is clearly visible but later on, his voice becomes more mature. In his next work, the poet expresses his life long need to expose false ideas and illusions. His next creation is “The Whitsun Weddings”. This volume of work is full of the expression of post-war Britain. “The Whitsun Weddings” contains evidence of a changed culture. The next volume, “The High Windows” shows a deeper awareness and direct concern with contemporary economic, political and socio-cultural phenomenon. The sexual revolution took a wide space in this poetry of this volume.

After this volume, the poet writes no such volume of poetry except for the famous poem “Aubade”. Larkin is regarded as the highly esteemed and reputed poet. He received a number of awards as the poet. His famous prose collections are “A Girl in Winter (1947)”, “Jill (1964)”, “Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-82 (1984)” and “All What Jazz: A Record Dial 1961-68 (1970).

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