

High Windows a Rare Collection of a Poet known for his Pessimism**Mohd. Javed Akhtar***Research Scholar*

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*"The way the moon dashes through clouds that blow**Loosely as cannon-smoke...**Is a reminder of the strength and pain?"*

Philip Arthur Larkin was an English poet, novelist, and jazz critic of twentieth century. He was a great technician, craftsman and a strategist. He was associated with the Movement, a term which describes a group of British poets of 1950s who came together to protest against the inflated romanticism of 1930 and 1940. His famous poetic collections are *The North Ship*, *the Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows*. *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter* are his two most famous novels. He remained single through out his 63 years. He is buried at the Cottingham Municipal cemetery near Hull.

Larkin's dominant mood is of melancholy and autumnal regret and a sense of time inexorably passing. He has been regarded as a hopeless, inflexible pessimist according to Andrew Motion. His outlook on life is undoubtedly bleak and gloomy. In his poems, man is represented as a helpless victim of circumstances without any comfort and consolation. In this respect, he can be compared with Thomas Hardy. Larkin focuses on the misery of old age and on the inevitability of death. The majority of poems written by Larkin reflect his disappointment and dismay at the spectacle of the life around him and he saw himself also a pathetic kind of man and not a hero capable of rising above his circumstances and above his fear of old age and death. Philip Larkin lived in a time when former ideals and touchstones were falling apart. The death of God in human consciousness that still functioned as a moral fulcrum in proto-industrial times had been the major catastrophe. The industrial revolution had been fully ensconced, successfully automating the human modes of existence. Capitalism had put an emphasis on individual effort and competition rather than co-operation, thus contributing to a distancing of one human being from the other. The dreariness of the post-industrial Northern European landscape, the extremities of urbanization, represent a concatenation of forces and events that alienate humans in further culturalisation. His inferiority complex, his inherent shyness, his interest in high culture set him apart from his peers. Philip Larkin's apparent misogyny, misanthropism and pessimism are nothing but the expression of pain caused by the inability to meaningfully relate to human beings. Repeated frustration of the normal erotic functions of a human being can lead to an apparent negation of life and embracing of death.

He is often criticized for being a poet of disappointments. His works, no doubt, justify this criticism. This aspect of Larkin's compositions made me curious to know why this great figure

became so nervous in the modern era which is full of optimism and enthusiasm. I tried to explore his famous volume *High Windows* which turned him into a national monument. While sending the manuscript of this collection for publication, Larkin wrote to Monteith that this manuscript “is the text of the best collection I can now muster.”¹

High Windows was published in 1974. It was filled with abundant of foul language. Larkin said to John Betjeman “Whenever I look at my book, I find it is full of four-letter words.” Larkin sees his foul language related to the language of the time, to the generational shifts in talk and behavior that were especially rapid, exciting and unavoidable in the late 60s and early 70s. Sometimes, dirty words can be a means of expressing feelings of anger, hatred, derogation and solitary complaint against all of society as in “Vers de Societe”. The dirty language brings the world of youth into the mind. “This Be The Verse” shows that the poet is negotiating with the feelings, illusions, and speech he attributes to the young. The gap in diction between the beginning and the end of “High Windows” is a generation gap.² Alan Bennett has said, the “real Larkin” of the poems was someone “who feels shut out when he sees fifteen-year old necking at bus stop”.³ Larkin is perhaps questioning whether he himself shared solidarity with the common adolescent. Dirty words are signs of affiliation with other speakers and listeners who have the same “enemies” who want to offend or drive off a given authority- In the poems “High Windows” and “This Be The Verse”-Larkin not only appropriates the way kids talk, but also about his not being like the kids whose speech he has appropriated. From this period, Larkin’s poems take inward, self-critical and self examination turn from his own prejudiced impulses. This present volume shows that Larkin is quite different here from the less attractive man who suffers and swears his way through Andrew Motion’s 1993 biography *A Writer’s Life*. Most of the dirty words like fuck are ambiguous. Larkin’s foul language gives particular importance to his sad, distant, empathetic and resentful relation to the kids whose speech he reflects. It also symbolizes the same self-isolating, sadly rejection of ordinary language and society. “High Windows” ends in wordless, endless and nothingness. No doubt, the poem is about the end of religion (the windows seem to be those of a church) and the agnostic’s fear of death. The pleasures in *High Windows* turn out to mean, and reveal the disrupted negativity, resistance to meaning and relation. The invisible, endless, wordless “Elsewhere” in those windows is a final figure for two kinds of emptiness or regret. We might call them social and private or young and old, or bodily and linguistic etc.

The common experience of the unattainability of whatever we want, or think we want is one of Larkin’s great subjects. Andrew Swarbrick in his *Out of Reach* argues that even “the most triumphant of Larkin’s poems are about failure and.....ultimately prefer silence to words.”⁴ Some deep groove in his head connects an inability to reach or speak to the young with a sense of sexual unfulfillment and associates both with an almost deconstructive despair at the failure of words to mean or cohere.

In a humanist society, art assumes great importance, and to lose touch with it is parallel to losing one's faith in a religious age. Or, in this particular case, since jazz is the music of the young, it was like losing one's potency.⁵ Larkin's confrontational "fucks", like his gestures to elsewhere and nothing, respond to this loss, to this sense of failure, which is both spiritual and social.

High Windows was published in 1974. There is a close link between the poems in this volume and the social conditions prevalent at that time. Those poems are very provocative and disturbing not only because of their contents but also because of their style and technique. These poems record the author's impressions of the breakdown of the ideas of social unity and coherence in England, and they also provide proof of the fractured linguistic style of the author. Between 1964 and 1967 England passed through an acute economic crisis. Larkin's ironic poem Homage to a Government recognizes the economic crisis but interprets it in terms of the idleness and the greed of the people. The poem Going, Going depicts the environmental deterioration going on in England of the time, and expresses the poet's fear England would become the "first slum of Europe." But here again the real cause of the misfortune is money, with the auctioneer's cry of "going, going" to suggest that the countryside was being sold off. In its anxiety about the environment, this poem makes a cynical approach to the whole modernizing and commercializing ethic of successive post war governments in England. Although Larkin's later poems have been thought to be deeply conservative in their outlook, yet the political tradition to which his poetry clings is that of liberal humanism. Thus the poem Saturday upholds the social value of the annual agricultural show. This poem gathers its momentum by assembling the speaker's various impressions of the events of one whole day. In the poem called Vers de Societe the company at the end, seems to be meditating on "failure and remorse". Growing old makes companionship more desirable and more necessary.

The poems in this volume express a much freer attitude towards sex. Already permissiveness had given way to sexual inhibitions in England; and Larkin acknowledges this fact in the following ironic lines of the poem Annus Mirabilis.

*Sexual intercourse began
In nineteen sixty-three
(Which was rather late for me)-
Between the end of the Chatterley ban
And the Beatles'*

The assertion in the poem that life was never better than In nineteen sixty-three is weakened by the speaker's regret that he himself arrived on the scene too late. The suggestion that "Life became a brilliant breaking of the bank" is just one of many money metaphors represent Larkin's cynical reaction to the economic mismanagement of the time in Britain.

This volume shows an unusual interest in moments of historical change or imagined scenes from the past. Such poems as the Card Players, How Distant, and Livings explore the values and beliefs of contrasting social groups, but also go back in their search for something elemental and lasting in human existence. Anxieties about a culture dominated by money spread in the later poems. His poems are characterized by an intense elegiac lyricism as Dublinesque and the Explosion. These are poems profoundly concerned with social ideals and beliefs. In the ultimate analysis, the values of Larkin's poetry are deeply in opposition to the rigid monetarism and economic individualism which came to dominate the late nineteen-seventies. The remark of an eminent critic deserves to be quoted here, "His three mature collections have developed attitudes and styles of grater imaginative daring; in their prolonged debates with despair, they testify to wide sympathies, contain passages of frequently transcendent beauty, and demonstrate a poetic inclusiveness which is of immense consequence for his literary heirs."

Larkin's range is wide enough to explore the various aspects of man's experience in a world devoid of hope. His later poems collected in the volume, the High Windows which turned him into a national monument and other poems are tormented by the feelings of anger and agnosticism. These poems record the author's impressions of the breakdown of the ideas of social unity and coherence in England etc. Anxieties about a culture apparently dominated, later poems like "Homage to a Government and 'Going Going'" etc. The poems like 'Dublinesque and the Explosion' are characterized by an intensive elegiac lyricism. This detail study of the later poems before the final assessment will help in establishing Larkin as a great and an original pessimistic poet.

Larkin was fifty-two when High Windows was published and it is dominated by a sense of lost youth, time passing and the imminence of death. Even in the poems where these themes are not clearly exhibited, they are often implied. 'Sympathy in White Major' is mainly about self-image and the disappointments of public life, yet in it, it is suggested as if the poet is writing his own obituary. 'Posterity' also hints at how Larkin might be remembered after his death. Even in the poem named 'The Card-Players' death is present in old Prijck's "Skull face" (7) though not in an obvious way. In 'Going, Going,' Larkin talks about the disappearance of England even before he himself has died. In other poems, the concerns of youth, age and mortality are far more clearly, exactly, openly and directly described. Although some of the poems focus on youth, some on aging, and some on death yet they can be included into the single fact of mortality.

Even when he writes about nature, it is often in terms of the transitory. "Cut Grass" seemingly bemoans the mowing of the grass, but this is really a metaphor for human life, as weak and brief as the grass. The cutting down of grass in early summer reminds of First World War. In the poem The Trees, trees appear to offer consolation despite our inevitable aging, yet 'their greenness is a kind of grief' (4) and their apparent annual renewal is only a 'trick of looking new' (7): beneath their renewed greenery the trees are actually aging. In 'The Card-

Players', on the other hand, the 'century-wide trees' (10) provide a temporal contrast with the short lived of the drinkers. The poem 'Solar' makes a comparison between the constancy of the sun and the changing nature of human needs.

A number of poems refer to the passing of time which is, undoubtedly, an aspect of mortality. Sometimes this is historical, as in 'Livings 1', which ends with the statement 'It's time for change, in which the starting point of sexual intercourse is precisely dated. At other times, as in 'Livings 111', 'Friday Night in the Royal Station Hotel' and 'The Building', we are given a sense of the hours passing. In 'Vers de Societe', the poet expresses his anger at the wasting of time in the context of his aging: 'The time is shorter now for company' (32).

Several poems refer explicitly to the youth which Larkin feels is far behind him. In the final stanza of 'Sad Steps' Larkin seems to long for his lost youth though he realizes that 'being young' involves pain, and he takes some consolation in the fact that youth is 'for others undiminished somewhere' (18). However, in 'High Windows' itself Youth is seen as holding out false promise. The sexual freedom enjoyed by modern youth is only ironically referred to as 'paradise/ Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives' (4-5). Other poems focus on old age. This can be seen in 'To The Sea' where the middle-aged push the old in wheelchairs so that they can enjoy a last summer before death. Larkin's most attractive dealing of old age is in 'the Old Fools'. Here, the poet contemplates the worst of old age very strongly. It talks about the disgrace of drooling, incontinence, loss of mental powers and inability to remain in touch with the present. The old people's 'thin, continuous dreaming' (10) is half way to death. The worst of old age is that they now live with 'the power/ of choosing gone' (21-2). For Larkin, living life fully involves the freedom to make choices. The young have it, as in 'How Distant', but the 'old fools' have lost it altogether.

Some of the poems relentlessly deal with death itself. 'Dublinesque' is clearly about death in that it narrates a funeral procession in which its mourners celebrate the life of the deceased, and even dance a few steps. Their shared grief brings them together in 'great friendliness' (13) and the memory of the deceased evoke both love and beauty. 'The Old Fools' also looks at death itself as the inevitable conclusion of old age. Larkin sees no hope here for an afterlife:

*At death, you break up: the bits that were you
Start speeding away from each other for ever
With no one to see. (13-15)*

The 'old fools' are unknown to the fearful arrival of death, 'Extinction's alp' (41), because they are too close to see it. The final poem of the collection, 'The Explosion', explores a very different kind of death, a sudden one. The miners are cut off their prime, like the grass in 'Cut Grass', but at least they avoid the depressing decline of the 'old fools'. The poem which focuses on death

most frighteningly is 'The Building'. Those who wait in the hall, perhaps to have X-rays or tests, sit 'tamely' (9), and passive like a priest's congregation. Most are 'at that vague age that claims/The end of choice' (20-1). When someone is carried away, the rest 'cough, or glance below/ seats' (16-17) in an awkward attempt to distract themselves from reality, and they only look at each other to guess ailments, not to communicate (stz 5). The approach of death is a series of rooms 'each one further off/And harder to return from' (35-6). Those waiting 'know they are going to die' (57). The hospital can 'transcend/the thought of dying' but not death itself. Nor can death be placated by the 'wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers' brought by visitors to the sick and dying in the last line. Larkin, then, is very much concerned with the transitory in all its aspects. He regrets the passing of his own youth and contemplates old age, the inevitability of death, and human fear of death, with honesty and detailed self-examination.

The theme of religion and ritual occurs in High Windows in different ways. Larkin makes it clear that he is an atheist. Sometimes, he refers to religion directly for example in 'Vers de Societe' in which he says:

*No one now
Believes the hermit with his gown and dish
Talking to God (who's gone too) (19-21)*

In 'The Explosion', he quotes a biblical verse as if believing in its message himself:

*The dead go on believing in its message himself:
The dead go on before us, they
Are sitting in God's house in comfort,
We shall see them face to face – (16-18)*

Although Larkin seems moved by the death of the miners, and by the vision which apparently occurred to their wives and loved ones, he does not really believe in the truth of the vision. We also know from his other writings that he was an atheist. In the poem, 'High Windows', religion is seen as something which was a source of guilt and restriction to the older generation, and which is now better left behind. In 'The old Fools', he shows his fear when he refers to death as 'Extinction's alp' (941), but it is expressed in 'The Building' more clearly. Here, the hospital is presented as a modern cathedral, our only hope in the face of death. It is 'a struggle to transcend/ the thought of dying' (60-1). The locked church in stanza 6 symbolizes the death of God. The flowers brought by the relatives of the terminally ill are powerless to please a God who no longer exists, nor death itself.

In several poems, Larkin suggests that all we can grasp at now in place of religion is social ritual. 'To the Sea' presents that the family has value in itself. 'Verse de Societe' recalls social events, including trying to be nice to others in the hope that they will be nice to you,"

Playing at goodness, like going to church'(25) yet Larkin also seems to feel that perhaps observing the social rituals can somehow make us better people. He is undecided about this.

In the poem 'Dublinesque' Larkin gives positive outlook to religious social ritual and a funeral procession. Here, death has brought people together producing friendliness as well as sadness. In 'Show Saturday', the poet makes a religion of social ritual. He has compared leeks to church candles (stanza 4) showing the same.

Nature also plays a vital role in his poetry. Nature is not a religion for him as it was for Wordsworth. Nor he wishes to explore new essence like Ted Hughes. Rather, Nature takes the place of religion. It gives a feeling of continuity overcoming the threat of morality. In 'The Trees' leaf coming into trees show a sign of hope. At the end of 'Forget What Did', the natural and celestial occurrences offer comfort in the face of personal suffering.

Larkin also moves to a spiritual sense. In 'The Old Fools', he celebrates life as a 'million-petal led flower' (18) at the end of 'High Windows' itself, he adopts the deep blue air of the sky as a symbol of something which 'Shows/ Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless' (20).

The above evaluation shows that Larkin's pessimism is linked with his inherent sense of deprivation and desolation. The majority of his poems are written on subjective experiences and filled with his desire of solitude. The generally dominating mood of the poems of High Windows is anger, fury, rancor and disappointment which justify the statement that Larkin is "The saddest heart in the post-war supermarket."

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