

Abstract

It is profoundly surprising to find a poet's reputation undergo a dramatic transformation in only a decade following his death. Philip Arthur Larkin (1922-85), whose reputation as a major poet was already established at the time of his death, has provoked adverse criticism to such an extent that the very basis of his claim to eminence is often questioned. This we owe almost entirely to two sources of external evidence: his *Selected Letters* published in 1992 and the authorized biography *Philip Larkin: A writer's Life* in 1993.

The publication of Larkin's first major anthology of poetry titled, *The Less Deceived* in 1955 was the occasion for the commencement of serious critical engagement with his work. The 'Lit-Crit' industry, as the poet habitually dubbed critics, chose to read his poetry in terms of a national character and his burgeoning popularity was interpreted as an outcome of his sentimental Englishness. The 'Movement' was taken as a focal point to understand the poetry of Larkin, along with other poets of the 1950s; and though most of the poets rejected the very existence of the so called 'Movement', it somehow formed the basis around which critical consensus revolved. The 1970s saw the appropriation of newer critical practices clubbed together under the umbrella term 'literary theory' and the idea of a transcendental element as well as a symbolist one began to be aligned with the poetry of Philip Larkin. There is no doubt that this change was occasioned by the changing expectations among readers of Larkin's poetry, but the effect was a spiralling one. The trajectory of Larkin criticism began to peregrinate along the familiar spaces of thematic studies.

Nevertheless, everything changed with the publication of the letters and the authorized biography. Epistolary evidence was foregrounded to project Larkin the man as racist, sexist, parochial etc, with the unhappy result that the potential of Larkin the poet got somewhat

overshadowed. The Eliotic credo which had so effectively separated the life of a poet from the life of poetry was forgotten by the then reigning critics who were actually resorting to vituperative criticism of the poet by way of safeguarding the morality of the reader from degenerate poetry. However, when literary criticism stoops to the level of verbal abuse, the desire for a change begins to gather momentum. It is in this context that the title of the dissertation **Larkin Lost, Larkin Found: Towards a New Poetics of Reading** assumes significance.

In recent times, serious engagement has begun with the poetry of Philip Larkin. Stephen Regan, arguably the most prolific and discerning among the avant garde commentators on the poet, has catalogued not only the prevailing preoccupation of Larkin criticism but has also sketched the possible epistemic territories that such criticisms need to appropriate. Strangely though, Regan's predilection for viable methodologies exposes a serious lacuna within the gamut of Larkin criticism. His prescriptive methodologies fail to address the exigencies of Larkin's poetry.

Larkin is a poet of indeterminacies and the vacuousness that afflicts human life. In fact, even a cursory reading of his poetry, confronts a sensitive reader with a poetic psyche overridden by the problem of choice, anxiety, privation of death and also a dissipated sense of the self. Under such circumstances, it would only have been too natural to expect an existential study of Larkin's poetry. But that is possibly one area which has conveniently remained outside the scrutinizing gaze of literary criticism. Whether that is a lapse, or an issue related to politics of representation therefore needs to be sufficiently ascertained.

The primary intent of this project is to expand the horizon of Larkin criticism by reading his poetry from the conceptual framework of Sartrean existentialist philosophy. Nevertheless this proposition entails a caveat. Poetry, like every other discourse, is socially structured and

therefore steeped in the specifics of history. It is this historicity that simultaneously demands a Camusean absurdist reading and, by incorporating the same, this work does not violate the conventional ethics of uniform research methodology. Despite the fact that the critical habitations of Sartre and Camus are fundamentally different, there is a common thread that binds them together. Both thinkers start from the basic premise that human existence is absurd; but while Sartre stops at its mere recognition, it is Albert Camus who goes on to devise an ethics of existence.

The introductory chapter is divided into two sections. The first is devised to catalogue the predominant tendencies of Larkin criticism, while the second questions the dominant strands of the critical canon on the basis of their ideological moorings, so that the gaps and silences may be sufficiently recovered. Since the central problem that concerns us is the quest for a new poetics of reading, such gaps and silences shall probably yield fresh insights into the existing corpus of Larkin criticism.

The second chapter examines the question of 'self' in Larkin's poetry. Dismantling the spate of biographical criticism that saw Larkin's poetic work as the direct offshoot of his lived experience, this chapter initially engages in a brief assessment of the reigning approaches to the notion of the self, before looking at the poetry of Larkin from the vantage point of Sartrean philosophy.

The third chapter of this dissertation is titled, 'Larkin and the Problem of Choice, Negation and Anguish'. The reason for aligning these three existential concepts is that they are intrinsically related to each other. Any exercise of choice brings in its wake the phenomenon of negation, while at the same time it is riddled with anxiety. Since the operation of choice presupposes a man-world relationship, I have deliberately cushioned the problem of choice in Larkin's poetry within the historical specificity of post war England.

Larkin's perpetual torment, both as a man and as a poet, by what he understood to be the meaninglessness of life is in essence the seat of the absurd which in fact is a direct corollary of the same man-world relationship alluded to earlier. In the fourth chapter, I therefore engage with a cross-section of Larkin's poems from a Camusean perspective, to show Larkin's appropriation of the same, as well as to locate any scope of agency that might lie embedded within them. The concluding chapter is in fact a brief expose`, whereby I attempt to re-locate Larkin beyond the lurking critical canon. Quite in keeping with the general spirit of research, this dissertation also demarcates probable areas through which the proliferation of the existential and absurdist discourse on Larkin's poetry may be successfully articulated.