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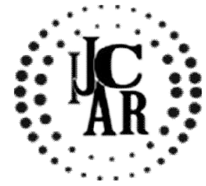

Research Article

THE PORTRAYAL OF SHRUNK ENGLAND IN THE POETRY OF PHILIP LARKIN

Milton Sarkar

Department of English, APC College, Kolkata

A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

After losing the empire England shrank geographically. This spatial shrinkage impacted greatly upon the contemporary English psyche. It has been felt that the loss of empire affected the frame of mind not only of the political personalities of the nation but also its general middle class people who had to bear the brunt of it in their lived experiences. It was a very significant issue no doubt, but in creative and intellectual representations the impact may not always be explicitly affirmed. Mediated through imaginative receptivity, the percolated perceptions were not always provided in political terms. But the mindset regarding the "presence" and "absence" of the imperial power to "perform," "oversee" and "control" is perceptible in various expressions in the literary works of the time. The social antennae of a poet cannot but catch this wave. Larkin reviewed various features of the contemporary England, and the consequent disappointment and irritation at the loss of energy and vigour were expressed in his poems. Apart from the political reality of the loss of empire he was out to probe into the social, cultural and psychological domains where the aftershock of the loss was apparent in a more complex, but less discernible, way. In the 1950s and 1960s Larkin inherited and subsequently represented this England. This article seeks to deal with the narrower range of poetry in the wake of the loss of empire in an otherwise rich poetic oeuvre of Philip Larkin, one of the best representatives of the post-War British poetry.

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INTRODUCTION

After losing the empire England shrank geographically. This spatial shrinkage impacted greatly upon the contemporary English psyche. It has been felt that the loss of empire affected the frame of mind not only of the political personalities of the nation but also its general middle class people who had to bear the brunt of it in their lived experiences. It was a very significant issue no doubt, but in creative and intellectual representations the impact may not always be explicitly affirmed. Mediated through imaginative receptivity, the percolated perceptions were not always provided in political terms. But the mindset regarding the "presence" and "absence" of the imperial power to "perform," "oversee" and "control" is perceptible in various expressions in the literary works of the time. The social antennae of a poet cannot but catch this wave. Larkin reviewed various features of the contemporary England, and the consequent disappointment and irritation at the loss of energy and vigour were expressed in his poems. Apart from the political reality of the loss of empire he was out to probe into the social, cultural and psychological domains where the aftershock of the loss was apparent in a more complex, but less discernible, way.

Corresponding author:* **Milton Sarkar
Department of English, APC College, Kolkata

In the 1950s and 1960s Larkin inherited and subsequently represented this England. This article seeks to deal with the poems portraying a shrunk England, metaphorically of course, in the wake of the loss of empire in an otherwise rich poetic oeuvre of Philip Larkin, one of the best representatives of the post-War British poetry.

Larkin's approach to contemporary England was perhaps more pessimistic than those of the writers of the 1950s, most of whom belonged to "the Movement."

In the introduction to his first novel *Jill* (1946) we find Larkin's observation on the "rationed" English life style:

Life in college was austere. Its pre-war pattern had been dispersed, in some instances permanently. Everyone paid the same fees (in our case, 12s a day) and ate the same meals. Because of Ministry of Food regulations, the town could offer little in the way of luxurious eating and drinking, and college festivities, such as commemoration balls, had been suspended for the duration. Because of petrol rationing, nobody ran a car. Because of clothes rationing, it was difficult to dress stylishly. There was still coal in the bunkers outside our rooms, but fuel rationing was soon to remove it. It became a routine after ordering one's books in Bodley after breakfast to go and look for a cake or cigarette queue. (vii-viii)

Actually no one has presented the post-War Oxford with such reliability to sense and feeling as does Larkin. The picture of

this Oxford-life could be traced in his poem "Dockery and Son." Larkin's poetry exudes a sense of withdrawal from public and political commitment in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Steve Padley contends that formally "conventional, understated in tone and diction, with a note of muted despondency and a pervasive sense of nostalgia, Larkin's works could be seen as emblematic of a crisis of confidence in national identity in a postimperial world" (56). Britain's withdrawal from the role of empire-builder, from the centre stage of attention and activity, was something to which Larkin responded vigorously.

Under the Anglo-Egyptian Agreement of 1954 the British bowed to US pressure to evacuate, within two years, the Suez Canal Zone. Harold Wilson, the then Prime Minister of Britain, decided to remove troops from the British Colonial Base in Aden. The last British troops left in March 1956. There were in fact "two Suez wars in November 1956. The first was fought by British, French, Israeli and Egyptian forces in the Sinai peninsula, Port Said and along the banks of the Suez Canal. The second was fought in the Commons chamber, newspaper columns and everywhere where people gathered in Britain, and concerned whether or not the British government had acted wisely and honestly" (Lawrence 582). In reality, this move was prompted by the Labour Government's strategy of saving money for people at home. Larkin satirizes this step of the government in his poem "Homage to a Government" as it is seen as a symbol of British withdrawal from a world role:

Next year we are to bring the soldiers home
For lack of money, and it is all right.
Places they guarded, or kept orderly,
Must guard themselves, and keep themselves orderly.
(*Collected Poems* 171; henceforth referred to as *CP*)

The sentinel image ("Places they guarded") and emphasis on the maintenance of the "civilized" norms of "orderliness" in far-off places reiterate the discourse of the "white man's burden" in a subtle way, while there seems to be a sense of anxiety for leaving the "forsaken" people and places to themselves. Larkin satirizes contemporary Britain's indifference to moral responsibilities and their sole concern for material expediency: "We want the money for ourselves at home/Instead of working. And this is all right"(*CP* 171). Rhetorical use of "and it is all right" (l.11) or "And this is all right" (l.15) suggests that all is not right, that the British abrogation of its "rightful" place in world politics for the sake of selfish interest in the domestic material condition smacks of a sacrifice of its imperial duty. He laments the fact that though the statues of national heroes and military leaders will still be there in the parks as relics of English honour, England itself will be different since happiness has been replaced by miseries:

Next year we shall be living in a country
That brought its soldiers home for lack of money.
The statues will be standing in the same
Tree-muffled squares, and look nearly the same.
Our children will not know it's a different country.
All we can hope to leave them now is money.
(*CP* 171)

The money thus saved will be there for use, but thechildren of post-imperial England will never know the grandeur of its majestic past. Larkin himself asserts, "I don't mind troops being brought home if we'd decided this was the best thing all around, but to bring them home simply because we couldn't afford to keep them there seemed a dreadful humiliation" (*Required* 56). The phrase "a dreadful humiliation" projects the scar in Larkin's psyche. The very idea of Britain's financial inability to support its overseas locations (troops being brought home from various parts of the world) and its desertion of the heroic ideals of the imperial past frustrate Larkin.

Larkin's poem "At Grass," written in 1950, is, unlike the poem discussed earlier, obliquely political as it evokes, by contrast, days of the empire. The poem presents the life of two "retired" racehorses that had once enjoyed glamorous days but now lead a cloistered life, perturbed only by wind and flies. "The eye can hardly pick them out" as they live secluded from the outside world in "cold shade." The poem transpires to be a post-imperialone, mourning nostalgically the loss of England's bygone imperial grandeur. Tom Paulin observes that there is a "fusion of sunshine, empireand Edwardian nostalgia" (163) in the poem. The following lines bear witness to the above observation:

Silks at the start: against the sky
Numbers and parasols: outside,
Squadrons of empty cars, and heat,
And littered grass: then the long cry
Hanging unhushed till it subside
To stop-press columns on the street.
(*CP* 29)

Here the two horses are heroic emblems. And if we see the images of "squadrons," "heat," "littered grass," "stop-press columns," "classic Junes" and hear the "long cry" of victory, a scene of battlefield is unmistakably evoked, suggesting imperial accomplishment. "The horses,"

Writes Paulin, are "heroic ancestors – famous generals, perhaps, who can now "stand at ease" but who are also vulnerable, anonymous and largely neglected" (163). Now stripped of most of her former colonies, England has also become vulnerable and largely neglected with very few to attend her, just as the horses have only the groom and his boy to look after them. Expressions like "cold shade," "distresses," "almanac ked," "memories" allude to the same imperial loss. They have "slipped their names" and there by have become "anonymous." The former England also sank into anonymity after the loss of its colonies. Blake Morrison, in his epoch-making book *The Movement,* opines that by "allowing the horses to symbolize the loss of power, Larkin manages to tap nostalgia for a past 'glory that was England': it is a poem of post-imperial tristesse" (82–3). During the heydays of empire the English lion used to rear its royal head to its full height. One can take, for example, the following lines from Larkin's poem "Long lion days":

Long lion days
Start with white haze.
By midday you meet
A hammer of heat –
(*CP* 219)

But gone are those days – the "midday" of the empire is well past and that is why it is not possible at this time to feel the "hammer of heat" – and inthe following lines (from Larkin's "Ignorance") one can trace a "Britishnational weakness" (Williamson 6):

Strange to know nothing, never to be sure
Of what is true or right or real,
But forced to qualify *or so I feel,*
Or *Well, it does seem so:*
Someone must know.
(*CP* 107; emphasis original)

This hesitation (“never to be sure/of what is true or right or real”) in all probability is the outcome of the loss of power and perception. What remains is the nostalgic mourning – we can glimpse Larkin’s love for the unchanging in his poem “In times when nothing stood”:

In times when nothing stood
but worsened, or grew strange,
there was one constant good:
she did not change.
(*CP* 210)

Actually, it was Larkin’s contribution to the Queen’s Jubilee, to beinscribed in stone outside the Faber and Faber offices in Queen Square, London. These are the lines with which Larkin “honours the Crown” (Hibbett 112).

The downfall of England’s national, social and cultural prestige at the end of the age of imperialism is mourned touchingly in the 1951 poem “The March Past.” The military band brings back to the persona the imperial splendour of England. The march past on the street of the city suddenly brought everything to a halt: “[c]ars stopped dead, childrenbegan to run.” It was a spectacle of discipline personified. It had all the paraphernalia of a well-trained, well orchestrated procession of soldiers that pushed the “credulous, prettily-coloured crowd” to the sidewalk. The “stamp and dash of surface sound” emanating from the procession rendered their “[m]emory, intention, thought” momentarily inactive and evoked a “sudden flock of visions” of the imperial past: “[h]oneycombs of heroic separations,/Pure marchings, pure apparitions.” But as the music fades out, nothing remains for the persona except the lament on the English decline in status:

… And what came back to mind
Was not its previous habit, but a blind
Astonishing *remorse* for *things now ended*
(*CP* 55; emphasis added)

In his illuminating essay “Into the Heart of Englishness” Tom Paulinreads the beginning of Larkin’s poem “Afternoons” from the post-imperial point of view:

Summer is fading:
The leaves fall in ones and twos
From trees bordering
The new recreation ground.
(*CP* 121)

Paulin intriguingly compares the autumnal fall of the leaves with that of the colonies (from the empire). By the end of the poem, the young mothers find that their “beauty has thickened” and something is “pushing” them to the “side of their own lives.” Paulin takes this as a metaphor for a “sense of diminished purpose and fading imperial power” (161) and declares English “national decline” (160) to be the crux of this 1959 poem.

The poems discussed so far thus clearly demonstrate Philip Larkin’s concern and remorse for the loss of the “lion” days of England and his disappointment with the present that has been rendered infertile.

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