

Vol III Issue VII August 2013

Impact Factor : 0.2105

ISSN No : 2230-7850

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Monthly Multidisciplinary  
Research Journal

*Indian Streams  
Research Journal*

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**RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595**

**ISSN No.2230-7850**

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**POST- WAR BRITISH POETRY: AN ANALYSIS****Binda Sah**

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**Abstract:** The poets of the first half of the 20th century (or Eliot's generation) gave an exuberant of literature imbued with vigorous and energetic response to the war besides philosophical questions and spiritual quests following the consequences of the First World War. In comparison to Eliot's generation, the poetry of the second generation (after WW-II) is dormant, inert, and the poets seemed to recoil from the destruction, horror and disorder of the war years. While some of the poets of the 1940s adopted a neo-romantic attitude, the poets of the 50s, reacting against such attitude, made a conscious effort to focus on the real person and event. By choosing the real person and event, the poets of the 50s endeavoured to make poetry less scholarly, sophisticated and show the poet as the man next door communicating with man in the street. Consequently, most of the poets, apparently, failed to explore beyond the surface reality. But delving deep in their poetry, it is found that underneath their mundane form and content lies their deeper concern to reflect the profound and philosophical in easy and commonsensical way. The paper is an analysis of this aspect of the postwar British poetry with reference to the poetry of Phillip Larkin and Ted Hughes.

**Keyword:** The Movement Poets, Phillip Larkin, Ted Hughes.

**INTRODUCTION:**

The entire period of 20th Century in human history can be considered as war century for it has witnessed two major wars and various minor wars. Wars, no doubt, wrecked the psyche of the 20th century man; it also created a new inspiration for almost every poet of the century. While the World War I had brought about a 'Spiritual Idealism' in the mind of mankind, the World War II had given to mankind something higher – 'Spiritual Realism'. Purification of soul, not through imaginative idealism but through concrete realism had been the main aim of the modern poets after the horrible World War II created a terrible and formidable havoc in the well-organized human society. The atom bomb was a terrible weapon of destruction for the military commanders, but to the poets of 30's and 40's was a 'harbinger of peace'. They (the poets) were ethically convinced that the havoc wrought by this deadliest weapon of mass-destruction would serve as a lesson to humanity and convey to man the futility of war. War poets like Wilfred Owen, Rupert Brooke etc. were mostly concerned with the futility of war and loss of human values. Owen's 'Strange Meeting' is a veritable account of the futility of war, the negligence of human emotions and, above all, innumerable dead bodies of young vigorous soldiers. However, the most outstanding contribution work concerning war is T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" which touches the very sterility of modern man, but not without justifying the way of redemption as the last line suggests: "Shantih, Shantih, Shantih".

The poets of the first half of the 20th century (or Eliot's generation), therefore, gave an exuberant of literature imbued with vigorous and energetic response to the war besides philosophical questions and spiritual quests following the consequences of the First World War. In comparison to Eliot's generation, the poetry of the second

generation (after WW-II) is dormant, inert, and the poets seemed to recoil from the destruction, horror and disorder of the war years. While some of the poets of the 1940s adopted a neo-romantic attitude, the poets of the 50s, reacting against such attitude, made a conscious effort to focus on the real person and event. By choosing the real person and event, the poets of the 50s endeavoured to make poetry less scholarly, sophisticated and show the poet as the man next door communicating with man in the street. Consequently, most of the poets failed to explore beyond the surface reality.

**The Movement Poets:**

The Movement and 'New Lines' poets of the mid '50s strived to go beyond the surface reality to give a touch of transcendental philosophy in their works – a tradition set by the senior group of poets. The Movement was a term coined by J. D. Scot, literary editor of *The Spectator* in 1954 to describe a group of poets including Elizabeth Jennings, Kingsley Amis, John Holloway, Phillip Larkin, John Wain, Donald Davie, and Thom Gunn. The Movement was essentially English in nature; poets of Scotland and Wales were not included. The poets of the Movement brought two anthologies: *Poets of the 50s* and *New Lines* in 1950 and 1956 respectively. The poets who contributed to *New Lines* are Kingsley Amis, Robert Conquest, Donald Davie, D. J. Enright, Tom Gunn, Phillip Larkin etc. In 1963 appeared a second *New Lines* anthology in which apart from the existing poets, some new poets like Thomas Blackburn, Edwin Brock, Hillary Corke, John Fuller, Francis Hope, Ted Hughes, Richard Kell, George Macbeth, Jonathan Price, Anthony Thwaite etc. also contributed. The Movement Poets, though adopted the path of the senior poets, were quite different from their guides in terms of poetic exploration.

They revolted against obscurity in poetic language, the use of myth and allusions in poetry which deliberately keeps the reader from getting the accurate message of the poem. The Movement Poets, therefore, adopted simplicity of language and strived to highlight the necessary intellectual component in poetry, apart from making people aware of the present reality by basing their poetry on a commonsense standpoint. The rest of the paper succinctly traverses through the poetry of Phillip Larkin and Ted Hughes, two most influential post-war poets belonging to the Movement group.

#### Phillip Larkin:

The first influential poet belonging to the Movement group is Phillip Larkin who is often regarded as a hopeless and inflexible pessimist. Most of his poems are an expression of his pessimism, the loss of coordination among people, and his idiosyncratic attitude to death. However his pessimism is not axiomatic. What makes Larkin uniformly depressed and pessimist is the fact that he has no faith in inherited and reliable absolutes which is further enhanced by the incessantly waning religious enthusiasm of the people. Larkin himself declared that he had 'no belief in tradition or a common myth kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets'. Larkin's "Church Going" is a veritable account of the causes of his pessimism which indicates that his dilemma is not whether to believe in God but what to put in the place of God. He is mostly concerned, in the poem, with 'going to church, not religion'. This is clearly indicated by the title, and the union of the important stages of human life – birth, marriage and death – that going to church represents. In other words, this poem describes a strictly secular faith. The poet's speculations about what churches will become when they fall completely rather than partially out of use lead him to a conclusion in which the fear of death and the loss of religious belief are counteracted by an ineradicable faith in human and individual potential:

A serious house on serious earth it is,  
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,  
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.  
And that much never can be obsolete,  
Since someone will forever be surprising  
A hunger in himself to be more serious,  
.....  
If only that so many dead lie around.

Besides "Church Going", other poems that express Larkin's pessimism and sense of loss are "The Building" and "The Tress". However, when we analyse the final effect of these poems, we will find that under the surface pessimism, there is a profound optimistic concern of the poet which is often undermined by the critics. It is true that Larkin in "Church Going" speaks of the lack of respect for churches and tradition. But why does he speak thus? Certainly to make people aware of their responsibility to tradition, to persuade them to restore the glory of their ancestors and follow them as their guide: "Since someone will forever be surprising / A hunger in himself to be more serious". Similarly, in "The Trees", besides its pessimistic tone, the lines, "Last year is dead, they seem to say, / Begin afresh, afresh, afresh"

indicate a deep optimism. By concentrating on the theme of the going of one thing and coming of another, here Larkin seems to echo the memorable line of Shelley: "If winter comes, can spring be far behind?" All this reveals Larkin's optimistic concern beneath his apparent pessimistic tone.

Larkin's pessimism is also associated with his preoccupation with unrequited love. None of his poems has evidence for the attainment of consummated love and those which have are not well known. "Broadcast", for example, despite all its loving attentiveness, leaves the speaker in dark, 'desperate' and unable to discover the addressee's distinct individuality. Similarly, "Wedding Wind", too, in spite of its excitement and fulfillment, offsets is 'happiness' with a barrage of incredulous questions and an admission that the speaker is 'sad' because other people and animals cannot share her excitement. A similar kind of ambivalence exists in "An Arundel Tomb" which almost breaks Larkin's general rule of disappointment:

The stone fidelity,  
They hardly meant has come to be  
Their final blazon, and to prove  
Our almost – instinct almost true:  
What will survive of us is love.

Love, therefore, offers the ideal solution to Larkin's isolation in a world without reliably comforting absolutes. In most of his poems, he persistently explores the gap between what he expects of love and what it provides.

Larkin's preoccupation with death also contributes to his preoccupation. The image of death, which is the source of most of his poems, for Larkin, is cold and an utterly comfortless blank. The frequency and forcefulness with which he envisages its approach provides a clue as to why he is often regarded as a pessimistic poet. The evidence of "Going", "Nothing To Be Said" and "The Building" makes it hard to think otherwise. They all conform the categorical statement at the close of "Dockery and son":

Life is first boredom, then fear  
Whether or not we use it, it goes,  
And leaves what something hidden from us chose,  
And age, and then the only end of the age.

Larkin's vision of death echoes the vision of Hardy: both the poets are obsessed with the destructive passage of time and tend to divide past, present and future into distinct and discrete units. But for Larkin, they are mutually exclusive and not mutually oblivious. The present in which Larkin's personae lives and speaks is continually thwarted by the past – his present is full of missed opportunities and often intimidated by the future for all its promise is again overshadowed by the memory of past disappointments.

Moreover, although Larkin admits that he cannot alter time's intransigence, he strives to escape the fact of mortality and his poems are not the mere records of passive suffering. His response is neither Yeats' heroic struggle to rise above time nor Hardy's 'shoulder-shrugging-acceptance' of fate. It is only in the poem "Wants": 'Beneath it all desire of oblivion runs', Larkin expresses anything like a romantic

death wish. Otherwise, normally as in “Aubade”, he recoils in horror from the prospect of dying. In other words his poems have a stern moral character which controls and manipulates life and does not submit to destiny. Here Larkin's emphasis is on the necessity of choice. Thus, Larkin's poem explores the gulf between deception and clear-sightedness, illusion and reality, solitude and sociability along with making an active choice regarding what to adopt.

#### **Ted Hughes:**

Another renowned poet of the movement is Ted Hughes whose poetry is marked by great variety and vitality. His subjects range from animals, landscapes, war, the problem posed by the inner world of modern man, to the philosophical and metaphysical questions regarding the status of man in the universe. Nature plays a significant role in making Hughes poetry profound, but Hughes' nature is neither Wordsworthian – 'a nurse, a guide and a guardian', nor Tennysonian – 'red in tooth and Claw' (In Memoriam Canto, 56), but the combination of both. In poems like “October Down”, “The Horses” and “The Winter”, Hughes views nature in the Wordsworthian tradition while in the poems like “Hawk Roosting”, “The Pick” and “Crow” he recognizes the power, vitality, violence, and predatoriness of Nature without any mistake.

That we find much of the streak of violence and animality in Hughes' poetry goes to the credit of two devastating wars. The complete intellectual numbness and loss of human values caused by World War –I, further aggravated by World – II, changed man's attitude towards life. Animality and cruelty was gaining ground at the cost of rationality and human values. Hughes, having been brought up in such a world, is deeply influenced by the present condition of the human world. Consequently, as a writer, he is at a loss regarding the poetic treatment of the soothing aspects of life. For him what pervades the world is not rationality but animality, not light but dark, not urge for love but for power, and above all, not God but the devil. It is thanks to this, Hughes treats animality (or animal) as Muses to inspire his poetic mood. In the poem “Thoughts Fox”, Hughes is not concerned with the animal, but with the poetic energy and inspiration that comes out of darkness and from the image of fox which leaves is 'footprints' on the page. However, most significantly, “Thought Fox” embodies an abstraction, a thought coming to life on printed page, like a wild beast invading the speaker's mind. The process is described in exquisite gradations –

I imagine this midnight moments forest:  
Something else is alive  
Beside the clock's loneliness  
But this blank page where my fingers move.

#### **After an interval, the living metaphor moves into the poem:**

Cold delicately as the dark snow,  
A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;  
Two eyes serve a movement . . .

#### **And the movement is complete in the last stanza:**

. . . it enters the dark hole of the head.  
The wind is starless still, the clock ticks,  
The page is printed.

The same effect, as in this poem, of physical realization of a meaning, quick with its own rank presence, occurs in all the best works of Hughes. The poem “Wind” is more representative of Hughes in the sense that it presents literal reality rather than an abstraction made tangible. Nevertheless, it takes a symbolic meaning through the very nicety and intensity of its literal presentation as it is illustrated by the opening stanza:

This house has been far out at sea all night,  
The wood crashing through darkness, the blooming hills.  
Winds stampeding the fields under the window  
Foundering black stride and blinding wet . . .

What makes Hughes's animal poetry more striking is the symbolic connotation that his animals carry; the symbolism which reveals the very pathetic reality of his time. His hawk in “Hawk Roosting” is taken as a symbol of fascism. However, Hughes explained what he thought of hawk in the following sentence –

Actually what I had in mind was that in this hawk Nature is thinking. Simply Nature, may be because Nature is no longer so simple. I intended some Creator like Jehova in Job but more feminine, when Christianity kicked the devil out of Job what they actually kicked out was Nature . . . and Nature became the devil. He does not sound like Isis, mother of gods, which he is. He sounds like Hitler's familiar spirit. There is a line in the poem almost verbatim from Job.

And I think this is right since as the hawk speaks of his centrality, what he means is the centrality of Nature; otherwise a hawk is as mortal as any other creature and his description of himself as the centre of the creation would be an example of misguided, inflated ego:

I took the whole of Creation  
To produce my foot, my each feather:  
Now I hold creation in my foot  
. . .  
My eye has permitted no change  
I am going to keep things like this.

It is this ferocity of Nature, the Darwinian Nature: 'red in tooth and claw' that elicits Hughes' praise. However, apart from these poems, there are certain poems of Hughes on animals that contain mystery, particularly when the mystery is associated with the object of description. The poem “Bull Moss” comes under this category which moves from eternal reality about the bull to the mystery surrounding his meekness and submissiveness:

Each dusk the farmer led him  
Down to the pond to drink and smell the air,  
And he took no pace but the farmer  
Led him to take it, as if he knew nothing

Of the ages and continents of his fathers,  
Shut, while he wombed, to a dark shed  
And steps between his door and the duckpond.

A similar case is found in the poem "An Otter" where the very process of arriving at the definition of his amphibian is a problem. However the mystery behind these poems remains ever unsolved. According to Roberts and Gifford, the method that Hughes used in these poems enabled him to move from physical detail to general idea, from a specific moment to universal process.

Apart from nature and animals, the philosophy of death and love is also a crucial part of Hughes' poetic content. Here regarding these themes, we find a close affinity between Larkin and Hughes. Hughes expresses the sense of loss and poignancy that death brings. But he deliberately avoids sentimentality and morbidity by positing death in an ironical context. In "That Moment" from *Crow*, Hughes describes a death in a catalogue of subordinate phrases, which fill the first twelve lines, and then gives the main clause in the thirteenth: "Crow had to start searching for something to eat". And this last line provides an altogether ironic perspective by emphasizing the hunger of the crow. In another poem "The Stone", Hughes emphasizes the very central experience of loss:

Because she will never move now  
Till it is not worn out  
She will not move now  
Till everything is worn out.

In some of his later poems like "Moor town" and "Cave Birds", Hughes conceives of death as culmination of the reality of life. For Hughes begins to see connection between physical extinction and the religious experience, that is of shaman. To put it in a nutshell, in such poems, Hughes shows his ability to understand and negotiate poetically with death. Most of his later poetry reveals his attempt to write about a world where people do really die; to write with a subtle touch of realism and less sentimentality and pathos. Here Hughes resembles Wallace Stevens (American poet) who equally accentuates death as the culmination of life.

Hughes' love poetry, like Larkin, also proposes his failure in the world of love and romance. His collection of eighty-eight poems entitled *Birth day Letters* depicts Hughes's love for his wife Sylvia Plath since their first meeting and in the years after her suicide. The poem "St. Botolph's" is an account of Hughes' first meeting with Plath in the Cambridge University in 1956. This poem begins with a sad and melancholic tone which seems to be overwhelmed by an unfathomable pain and sorrows, and moves with a subtle description of the beloved's physical beauty, and again culminates in a melancholic tone:

First sight. First snapshot isolated  
Unalterable, stilled in the camera's glare  
Taller than you ever were again.  
...  
And the face – a tight ball of joy

...  
As if I saw you that once,

#### **Then never again.**

In fact, this poem reveals for the first time Hughes' account of one of the century's most tragic literary love stories. This is a poem written by someone obsessed, stricken and deeply loving. According to Andrew Motion, *Birth day Letters* is Hughes' greatest book, as magnetic as Robert Browning's poem for Elizabeth Berret. Motion further declares that there is no sense of setting scores or self justification in the poems. The poems truly depict heart of darkness, a black hole of grief and regret. Above all, in these poems, Hughes brings his own pain and sorrows to light.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

To conclude, it can be safely said that the postwar British poets dealt mostly with the contemporary socio-political milieu. Even their subjective works have a close bearing on the contemporary happenings. However, they felt that the changing poetic environment necessitated experiments with 'form'. The Apocalypse, the projectivist, the concretist, and other poetic movements inspired poets to add variety to the poetic expression. But all these movements fizzled out, mainly, for the lack of sustaining philosophy. However, they have been trying to assert their independence from the great poetic tradition of the early 20th Century. It is true that the impact of Eliot and Yeats on Larkin and Hughes is great, the originality in poetic and linguistic exploration that their poetry indicates make them stand in the rung of their master and other great poets of previous era.

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