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An existentialist bent in Philip Larkin's poetry

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Abstract---Philip Larkin reveals in his poetry the post-war mood and feeling that was predominant in lives of contemporary British people. Their existence was overshadowed by threat of mighty nuclear war that the world never saw before. Larkin himself experienced existential predicament of his countrymen as a representative of his time. He candidly reflected what he noticed and felt. The varied existentialist issues incorporated by Larkin lend his poetry a philosophical dimension. The present research paper focuses on anxiety, alienation, death from the perspective of two noted existentialist thinkers, Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre.

Keywords---Alienation, Anxiety, Death, Existence.

Introduction

Philip Larkin (1922-88), a post-war Movement poet, explores different existentialist issues in his poetry. Although Larkin never claimed himself an existentialist poet. But it is undeniable Larkin was affected by the existentialist movement in the 1940s and 1950s given the fact that his oeuvre flourished at a time when existentialism was in its heyday. Larkin's second mature collection of poetry, *The Whitsun Weddings*, was published in 1964 which coincided the noted existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre's declining the Nobel Prize. Following the Second World War, and England's loss of colonial powers over the countries in Asia and Africa British thought and feeling underwent tremendous changes in the mid-20th century. Moreover, the disintegration of families, degradation of religious beliefs threatened the very foundations of individual human existence. English nationals suffered from the existential anxiety, alienation and above all the threat of death. Larkin could well, as no other post-war British poet did, examine in his poetry the 'existential questions of identity, choice, isolation and communality' (Swarbrick, 1995, p. 1). Following are the poems, from Larkin's three mature collections, analysing various facets of existentialist notions.

'Wants'

The defeatism and rootlessness that Larkin's characters suffer from result in existential anxiety. In 'Wants', a poem appeared in Larkin's first mature collection *The Less Deceived* (1955), the existential anxiety is accompanied by the thought of death. Confronting anxiety the Larkin persona understands the nothingness of his existence as being-towards-death. Larkin here seems echoing the existential thinker Martin Heidegger who, in his existentialist text *Being and Time* (1927), writes, 'Thrownness into death reveals itself to Dasein [human being as a conscious existent] in a more primordial and impressive manner in that state-of-mind . . . called "anxiety"' (295). Whatever activities we follow, underneath them follows the desire of aloneness. This short poem divided into two stanzas of five lines each beautifully captures the consciousness of death running in parallel with our existence. In spite of our being involved in social engagements, indulged in sexual life, photographed under the flagpole for perpetuating the memory of family relationship – beneath all there lies the desire to be alone.

Beyond all this, the wish to be alone:
 However the sky grows dark with invitation-cards
 However we follow the printed directions of sex
 However the family is photographed under the flagstaff –
 Beyond all this, the wish to be alone.' (Larkin, 2012, p.32)

Beyond all kinds of obligations the human desire of aloneness finds its extreme way in the 'desire of oblivion', as the second stanza demonstrates. Our social engagements, life insurance as a protection against death, the wish to carry on the family line by begetting children, turning away from the thought of death – nothing can conceal our deep-seated longing for non-existence, 'a wish not to exist', as Roger Day observes (1987, p. 35). What makes the Larkin speaker anxious is his very existence. As Heidegger (1927) writes, 'Anxiety arises out of Being-in-the-world as thrown Being-towards-death' (p. 395). In his feeling of existential anxiety the speaker realises that death strips away the illusion that we have a stable social identity,

'Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs:
 Despite the artful tensions of the calendar,
 The life insurance, the tabled fertility rites,
 The costly aversion of the eyes from death –
 Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs.' (Larkin, 2012, p. 32)

Here the Larkin speaker confronts anxiety in the face of 'nothing and nowhere within-the-world', to borrow words from Heidegger (231). As Swarbrick (1995) observes, 'Here the speaker looks through identity to nothingness' (60).

'Absences'

Larkin's preoccupation with the feeling of alienation is evident in 'Absences', a poem published in the same volume. Larkin chose this poem to include in the American anthology, *Poet's Choice*, making a comment, 'I am always thrilled to by the thought of what places look like when I am not there' (Engle and Langland,

1962, p. 202). But here the speaker, though present physically in a stormy seascape, is oblivious of his presence. Swarbrick comments, "Absences' goes beyond the desire of oblivion in 'Wants'" (1995, p. 68) Dissociating himself from the temporal reality of the physical environment the speaker is able to feel the negation of his self. The speaker's desire of oblivion entails from his feeling of alienation which, as defined in *Man Alone: Alienation in Modern Society*, is 'an individual feeling or state of dissociation from self, from others, and from the world at large' (E. Josephson and M Josephson, 1962, p. 13). The speaker's alienation is intensified against the backdrop of elemental presences – water, sky, light and wind -- transforming themselves continuously. Neither ships nor coasts are visible except a horizon and a sky 'yet more shoreless day, / Riddled by wind, trails lit-up galleries: / They shift to giant ribbing, sift away' (Larkin, 2012, p. 42). In a marked contrast the speaker remains detached from participating in nature. His complete annihilation of self is caught in the final single line stanza, 'Such attics cleared of me! Such absences!' (Larkin, 2012, p. 42). Lolette Kuby (1974) cogently remarks, 'Beginning with a six line stanza, diminishing to a three line stanza, the poem ends with one line, as though the poem itself were fading into the oblivion it speaks of' (p. 146).

'Ambulances'

Larkin's 'awareness of death pervades *The Whitsun Weddings* as the nullity which threatens to render everything purposeless' (Swarbrick, 1995, p. 120). Larkin's obsession with the thought of death finds expression in 'Ambulances', a frightening reminder of unavoidable certainty of death. The arrival of ambulances in the locality evokes the nothingness of our existence,

'Closed like confessionals, they thread
Loud noons of cities, giving back
None of the glances they absorb.
Light glossy grey, arms on a plaque,
They come to rest at any kerb:
All streets in time are visited. (Larkin, 2012, p. 63)

Everybody is stuck in their own mortality that for a moment life seems to stand still. In the third stanza Larkin reverberates the existentialist notion that by the thought of death we become conscious of the uncertainty of our existence which hangs over whatever we do. The possibility of non-existence is an absolute possibility at every moment of an individual's existence,

'And sense the solving emptiness
That lies just under all we do,
And for a second get it whole,
So permanent and blank and true. (Larkin, 2012, p. 63)

Reflecting on death enables an individual to consider that he/she is an existing, mortal individual. Heidegger writes, 'Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein. Thus death reveals itself as that *possibility which is one's ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped*. As such, death is something distinctively impending' (1927, p. 294). For Heidegger, death is

one's own and no one can die for him. The women in Larkin's poem similarly become conscious, after seeing the patients being carried to the hospitals, of their own mortality, 'Poor soul, / They whisper at their own distress' (Larkin, 2012, p. 63). For the departing patients being confronted with mortality all the worldly possibilities will come to an end, as the onlookers realise. Death will terminate whatever existence he has reached, 'And what cohered in it across / The years, the unique random blend / Of families and fashions, there // At last begin to loosen' (Larkin, 2012, p. 63). With death his life becomes fixed, taking away all his possibilities. So the 'wild face' is now 'Far / From the exchange of love to lie / Unreachable inside a room' (Larkin, 2012, p. 63-4). Sartre writes, in his monumental existentialist text *Being and Nothingness* (1943), 'Death is never that which gives life its meaning; it is, on the contrary, that which on principle removes all meaning from life' (p. 539). But the patients in the ambulances cannot experience their own death. Because at his death he is supposed to lose his senses. It is the women or the onlookers who witness the departing patients carried in the ambulance are haunted by the thought of the death. Sartre further writes, 'The very existence of death alienates us wholly in our own life to the advantage of the Other' (1943, p. 543). The sight of an ambulance carrying patients possibly to their death brings us to the inescapable reality of our own death, 'The traffic parts to let go by / Brings closer what is left to come, / And dulls to distance all we are' (Larkin, 2012, p. 64). What is left to come us is nothing but our death.

Conclusion

Larkin's poetry incorporates many more existentialist themes like time, choice and bad faith. For the Larkin speaker in 'Triple Time' the present brings into focus his dreary existence, marked by 'This empty street, this sky to blandness scoured, / This air, a little indistinct with autumn / Like a reflection,' and 'A time traditionally soured, / A time unrecommended by event' (Larkin, 2012, p. 40). This transitional present is caught between the past and the future. The blank present was once 'the furthest childhood saw / Between long houses, under travelling skies, / Heard in contending bells - / An air lambent with adult enterprise' (Larkin, 2012, p. 40). As the future becomes the present we are brought closer to the reality of our unfulfilled dreams, leaving us frustrated. This present 'And on another day will be the past, / A valley cropped by fat neglected chances / That we insensately forbore to fleece' (Larkin, 2012, p. 40). Neither his past nor his future is able to give meaning to his dismal existence in the present. In 'Dockery and Son' the Larkin persona asserts his identity through his choice. Human beings have no predetermined essence or purpose, but their identity is determined by their choice. According to Sartre, '... for human reality, to be is to choose oneself' (1943, p. 440). Both the married Dockery and the bachelor Larkin persona determine their respective identity by their differing choices: 'For Dockery a son, for me nothing, / Nothing with all a son's harsh patronage. / 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 age' (Larkin, 2012, p. 66-7). By Larkin's own admission, '... the different innate assumptions of our lives brought Dockery a son and me nothing' (Motion, 1993, p. 334). But the existential choice entails with it the experience of anxiety. Choosing an option needs to reject the other. The Larkin speaker experiences

anxiety on the threshold of making his choice of bachelorhood over fatherhood, noting: 'To have no son, no wife, / No house or land still seemed quite natural. / Only a numbness registered the shock / of finding out how much had gone of life, / How widely from the others' (Larkin, 2012, p. 66). Sartrean 'bad faith' (French *mauvaise foi*) or self-deception is displayed by the Larkin speaker in 'Toads', identifying himself with toads (identical to his quotidian sedentary grind in office) and pretending the lack of freedom to make a choice. In the words of P. R. King, '. . . the numerous self-deceptions that man practices on himself to avoid the uncomfortable reality . . .' (1979, p. 41). Larkin's treatment of these and other existentialist issues, namely nothingness, despair and dread reveal the typical problems of existence of an individual's life in the contemporary British society, lending his poetry an existentialist bent.

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