

## ‘Your Person, Your Place’: Representation of Displaced Identity in Philip Larkin’s Novels

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### Abstract:

The paper throws light on the representation of displacement in the novels of Philip Larkin. Although known as one of the major poets of the ‘Movement’ in the 1950s, Larkin began his literary career with two novels – *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947). The author’s own description of the two books as his ‘soul history’ opens up the possibility of a psycho-biographical study. In the light of changed perspectives in Larkin criticism which was an obvious result of the publication of two books, Andrew Motion’s comprehensive biography, *Philip Larkin : A Writer’s Life* (1993) and *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985* (1992) ed. by Anthony Thwaite, the novels become luminous expressions of Larkin’s disturbed sense of place in the fast-changing socio-cultural milieu of Post-World War – II Britain. Both the novels revolve around displaced individuals and reveal close affinities with the nowhere-ness of their creator who always suffered from an incapability of coping with the changes on social, political and cultural fronts.

### Keywords :

Place, displacement, emplacement, identity.

“No, I have never found  
The place where I could say  
This is my proper ground,  
Here I shall stay.”

[Philip Larkin, *Places, Loved Ones, The Less Deceived*, C.P, P – 46]

Philip Larkin, perhaps the most loved poet in the Post World War-II Britain, seldom lived outside his native country during his life time except for the five years he spent as the sub-librarian at the Queen’s University of Belfast, Northern Ireland. The term, ‘Englishness’ has become almost synonymous to Larkin’s poetry and his poems are mainly sad lyrics of succinct length where he repeatedly appears as a kind of detached observer of Post –World War-II and post imperial Britain its changes and compromises – sometimes participating and sometimes not participating into it. This “Englishness” is marked by its orthodoxy and solidarity and Larkin himself admitted that he was simply incurious about other places. Judged from this perspective, the lines with which I have decided to begin this paper seem somewhat extraneous because a man who takes pride on his national identity is hardly to express a kind of nowhere-ness. But, it is now widely thought that the real Larkin is often subdued by his staunch belief in the British proverb, “An Englishman’s home is his castle” and he himself stated in a rare newspaper interview – “I think it’s very sensible not to let people know what you are like”. The new findings on Larkin have motivated such thoughts. Since his death in 1985, Philip Larkin’s status as a writer has undergone a radical and dramatic change. The publication of three books – *Collected Poems* (1988), *Selected Letters* (1992) and the comprehensive biography, *Philip Larkin : A Writer’s Life* (1993) have contributed mainly to this change. *Collected Poems* edited by Anthony Thwaite added to

Larkin's oeuvre eighty-three more poems, almost doubling the number of poems that had previously represented Larkin's output. The unpublished poems, especially the Early Poems composed between 1938 and 1945 were projected to be published as a volume called *In a Grip of Light*. The poems with tacit hints of socio-political enquiry were, as if, awaiting the publication of Andrew Motion's *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life and Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985* edited by Anthony Thwaite to be tagged with unhealthy psycho-biographical speculations-racist, misogynist, quasi-fascist etc. In the present paper I would like to examine Larkin's two novels in the light of this new trend in Larkin –criticism and try to show the theme of physical and psychological displacement from the biographical and socio-historical context.

The fact that Philip Larkin began his literary career as a novelist is lesser known today. When Larkin published *A Girl in Winter* in 1947, he presented it as a part of a rather loosely interlinked trilogy. His first novel, *Jill* (1946) represented innocence, *A Girl in Winter* epitomized the loss of innocence and the consequences and the third which was never materialized would have marked a return to life or a regeneration. Larkin has described this proposed trilogy as his 'soul history' in a letter to his Oxford-mate Jim Sutton. Today, Larkin's two novels are widely read as Juvenalia which throw light on his poetry, though both of them are worth reading for their own sake.

The last hundred years have been an era of unprecedented displacements : the accelerated drift of rural population to the metropolis, the spread of imperialism and the consequent diaspora have given birth to a separate body of literature dealing with exile and expatriation. Larkin's writings rest upon the theme of displacement heavily. But, while there is no major spatial shift in his life his writings cannot be included in this group. His sense of displacement is rather a kind of crisis of identity integrally related to his psychobiographical dilemmas as a child and a teenager. Both *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter* have displaced individuals at their centres and the writer's description of them as this 'soul history' opens up the possibility of judging them in relation to his biographical context.

Andrew Motion has begun his *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* with an interesting discussion on how Philip's title, 'Larkin', gave birth to a sense of displacement in young Larkin. "Larkin" writes Motion, "is general all over Ireland, and at various times of his life- especially during his five years in Belfast (1950-55) – it was widely believed that Philip Larkin the writer came from that country. George Fraser, for instance, possibly remembering James Larkin (1876-1947), the well known Irish nationalist and the leader of the Irish TGWU, featured him in the anthology *Springtime* (1953) as a 'Northern Ireland Regional Poet'." (*Philip Larkin : A Writer's Life*, P-3). Motion also shows how this crisis of identity led Larkin to make a frantic search for his family history. Again, Larkin's father, Sydney, was a dominating man with some radical political views. Throughout his life Larkin ardently tried to hide the fact that his father was a Hitler sympathizer and a staunch supporter of the Nazi cause. These facts made young Larkin a little 'out of place' who described his childhood later in his famous poem *Coming* in terms of metaphors of displacement:

“And I, whose childhood  
Is a forgotten boredom,  
Feel like a child  
Who comes on a scene  
Of adult reconciling,  
And can understand nothing  
But the unusual laughter,  
And starts to be happy. [*Coming, The Less Deceived, Collected Poems*, P-47]

Was Larkin's so-called 'Englishness' was a reaction arising out of the psychological crisis which threatened him to carry towards things non-British or rather anti-British? There are

examples galore in Larkin's letters where he appears to be a radical British Nationalist, apprehensive about the immigration of a large body of workers, both professional and unskilled from the Indian subcontinent, Africa and the West Indies. He complains the 'rising tide of niggers', 'the bloody Paki next door', and fearing all germs brought into the country by immigrants etc. (Letters, 557, 673, 421). The loss of imperial power and the subsequent rise of multiculturalism was a threat to British solidarity and Larkin was never open to changes – socio-cultural transformations in the post-imperial Britain and the inevitable urbanization caused by industrialization and global diaspora. His belief in an uncontaminated British identity formation is often structured by his provincialism.

Although almost forgotten today, Philip Larkin's *Jill* is an important work for more than one reason. First, it is one of the early instances of the genre known as the campus novel, later to be popularized by Kingsley Amis's book, *Lucky Jim* (1961). Second, as James Gordin suggested in *Postwar British Fiction* (1962), it contained the first examples of that characteristic landmark of the British post-war novel, the displaced working class hero. Although Larkin discarded such possibilities in his introduction to first Faber and Faber reprint of the book in 1964 by saying, "in 1940 our impulse was still to minimize social differences rather than exaggerate them", no one can miss the displaced identity of the provincial hero John Kemp, a prototype of the author himself, in the milieu of a big city like Oxford. Larkin wrote the book when he himself was at Oxford in 1943/44, at the age of twenty-one, and so the book can be seen as, to a large extent, autobiographical. Coming from a small town like Coventry, Larkin also felt out of place in his university days. "Oxford terrified me", wrote Larkin, "Public schoolboys terrified me. The dons terrified me. So did the scouts." (Philip Larkin, *Required Writing : Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982, P- 40*). John Kemp is a working class boy from Lancashire who is faced with two contrasting and hostile worlds in war time Oxford. The two worlds are described by Larkin as the world of those who eat carefully and that of those who eat carelessly. The recurring and vivid descriptions of eating in the novel deepen and intensify the difference between social classes. His sense of being out of place from the very beginning of the novel when Kemp throws the egg-sandwich given to him by his mother out through the train-window for he could not make his mind whether it would be a good manner to eat in a full compartment. Comically enough, everyone in the compartment begins to eat just after and an aged lady offered Kemp some food sensing that he is hungry. Within the first few pages of the novel Larkin nicely encapsulates the nervousness and anxiety of being young. Social inexperience of a young provincial boy has been expressed by the author through humour, pathos and very concise prose and Larkin creates situations around Kemp that occur naturally but with which he cannot cope and falls apart. The idea of contrast between the strongly working class Coventry-based Kemp, versus the London-bred Walker and his friends is intrinsic to the novel's tone. The novel offers us an authentic picture of the war-time British society where there was a great gulf between those who stay at home and those who fight. Although *Jill* is not a 'war novel', the backdrop of war contrasts to the privileged few-Walker, Elizabeth – who go about as they like, while Kemp struggles to luxuriate at such an important point in history in which others are experiencing much worse. Larkin has represented this contrast in terms of the displaced identity of Kemp-

"Already he was fearing what would come next : he feared being formally called, he feared breakfast, he feared all that still lay before him, measuring it against the trifle he had already experienced. How much pleasanter it would be to go back, though the past was even by this time unemphatic and twilit" (*Jill*, P-22)

The series of embarrassing events, the career-minded attitude of the working class boy white bread and the patronizing contempt of his roommate Warner. However, John longs to be accepted by Warner "whose rich insouciance arouses awe and envy in him "(Lerner, *Philip*

Larkin, P-7). The rude treatment which John receives from Warner makes him desperate because he knows well that if he is impressed his out of place existence will be grounded. So, Kemp invents a younger sister, Jill, who is at a boarding school called Willow Gables, and, although this catches attention of Warner for a short time John himself becomes obsessed with her- writing her letters, starting to keep her diaries filled with school girl stories etc. Later John discovers a girl just like Jill in a book shop and his heartbreak follows. But, Jill is more than an imagination to impress Warner; it is the object which gives the displaced identity of Kemp the required emplacement.

But the representation of the displaced individual is more stringent in his second novel, *A Girl in Winter* and it directly deals with the life of an exile in war-time Britain . The most obvious difference between the two novels can be summed up thus- *Jill* aspires to the conditions of real life, *A Girl in Winter* to allegory. To quote Larkin himself –

‘*A Girl in Winter* deals with less explicit feelings and so I have tried to represent them by indirect reference and allegoric incident’ (Letter to Eva and Sydney Larkin, 11 November, 1946).

The novel is based on implicit and shadowy references to the locale, to the time and to the past of the heroine, Katherine Lind. The reader is never told where she comes from, but during the first third of the novel we learn that she is an exile in England, banished from her home in middle Europe by the ‘apparently meaningless disasters’ (*A Girl in Winter*, P-185) of the World War – II. “Like Kemp her innate awkwardness is exacerbated by wider social upheaval” (Motion, *Philip Larkin : A writer’s Life* pp- 160-61). Carol Rumens in an article in *The Guardian* on 20 December, 2011 tries to ferret out the mystery concerning the setting of the novel and the national/ethnic identity of Lind. The unnamed war-time town, she thinks, can be Coventry, Larkin’s birthplace, relying upon his descriptions of the locale minutely. But the most interesting part of her guess is that Katherine seems to be a German-Jew evicted from her country to live a life in diaspora. “On her first evening with the Fennels”, comments Rumens, “Katherine dresses for dinner in a dark brown uniform including a tie to which is pinned a small Olympic badge. These details evoke Hitler’s Germany. During her conversation with Robin, We learn that he has been studying her language at school (hardly likely to have been Swedish, then). Later, when the two are having a romantic evening on the river, Robin tells, Katherine that in prehistoric times he could have taken her all the way home, since the Thames used to flow into the Rhine. The surname Lind is found in Germany, too. It means “lime”. One of the ways in which he German Jewish population tried to assimilate was by giving themselves neutral names from the ordinary words for animals, fruits, vegetables.” If Katherine is a German – Jewish, the novel and its portrayal of displacement extend the entire range and depth of the novel. It is also thought that Larkin created Katharine after the exiled German artist Berthold Wolpe who designed the cover of the 1965 Faber edition of *A Girl in Winter*. Has Larkin expressed his terror for his father’s being a strong supporter of Hitler by making a German-Jewish girl his heroine?

The novel is clearly divided into three sections. The first and last sections describe a day in the life of Katherine trying her best to balance between lonelines and self sufficiency. The middle and the longest section is a flashback to her pre-war visit to England to stay with the family of her pen friend Robin Fennel three weeks of warm summer weather in which the hoped for intimacy with Robin never happened. The beginning of the novel with its graphic and poetic description of the gloomy winter evokes the separated and lonely existence of Katherine in England. She detests her job as an assistant in a dim provincial library with an unpleasant boss, Mr. Anstey. There is a long chapter on Miss. Green’s visit to a dentist and Katherine’s offering able company to her. Katherine is tough. Her displacement and loneliness has not made her a pathetic figure as it is expected to be. The second half of the novel transports us to the past when Katherine came to spend a summer vacation in England

following an invitation from Robin Fennel, a boy who became her penfriend following a letter writing competition in English in her school. But nothing interesting happens, Robin's parents remain cordial, Robin and Jane, his sister, spends quality times with her but they hardly could come out of their British reserve. The exoticism in the landscape, the gap between two cultures never allowed Katherine to shirk off her sense of being an 'other'. For example she receives a 'shock' in the drawing room –

“When she pulled open one of the drawers to put away a handful of clothes she found it lined with English newspapers, which gave her an unreasonable shock . It was like the money: unfamiliarity where she was not prepared for it.” (*A Girl in Winter*, p, 82)

This unfamiliarity marks the awkward kissing between Robin and Katherine which is more disturbing than loving. Again, towards the end when they meet again there is no sign of an amicable bonding between them. Perhaps Katherine agrees to make love with Robin to familiarize the burden of defamiliarization heavy upon her exiled life.

Again, not only Katherine, Robin is to some extent displaced too . He shares some orthodox provincial family-values which are not open to the modern changes and compromises. Mr. Fennel says,

“But it's the same all over England-good arable land being turned into pasture, pasture turning into housing estates. It'll be the ruin of us... suppose there's another war? What are we going to live on? Christmas crackers and ball bearings?” (*AGIW*, p-79)

The loss of provincial England as a result of large scale urbanization and industrialization is a theme in many of Larkin's poem like *Here* and *Show Saturday*.

So, *Jill* and *A Girl in Winter* are stories about dislocation and they epitomize the disturbed sense of place of Larkin himself . No one can deny the fact that these two novels are crucial for an understanding of the psycho-biographical crisis and dilemmas of young Larkin.

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