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Alienation in Larkin's "Mr. Bleaney": A Critique

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Abstract

Alienation is admittedly the most prominent theme of the postwar British poetry and as such Philip Larkin's poems are also dense with the theme of alienation. As one of the chief architects of the Movement Poetry, he exposes the condition of the common man suffering from alienation against the backdrop of the spiritual barrenness of the postwar Britain. His poems are characterized by simplicity of diction, lucidity of thought and clarity in the portrayal of real life conditions. He examines the common men's lives from a common man's point of view and presents it to his readers to enlighten them on how they misunderstand their own condition. Frequently seen as the 'uncommon poet of the common man' by his readers and critics, Larkin stands out as the tallest figure among the Movement poets. The present essay is an attempt to situate/ contextualize alienation in his poetry through a close study of his poem "Mr. Bleaney". It also tries to relate the intellectual and political movements of the postwar years with the poetry of Philip Larkin.

Key words: Alienation, Postwar, Movement, Spiritual barrenness.

Postwar[1] British literature is imbued with the theme of alienation for various reasons. The memory of the detonation of the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the emergence of new nations in the world political map, widespread acceptance of Darwin's theory of evolution, the growing threat of cold war, etc. have all converged together to redefine the postwar life in Europe. Added to these circumstances is the challenge to the authority of the state and the church. Left with the physical and emotional destructions caused by the Second World War, individuals frequently find themselves displaced in their own country:

> The church was in decline with congregation numbers falling fast: You could no longer imagine a community cemented by faith. However, [postwar] twentieth century intellectuals who rejected religion had to confront a newly empty universe. They sense the potential futility of life: reason offered no substitute for religion. (Marsh 2)

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This experience has been the central theme of most English poems written in the postwar years and Philip Larkin is one of those poets. His poems are dense with characters who are victims of alienation and they always have a sense of the world conspiring against them. This paper is an attempt to contextualize this sense of alienation through a close study of one of his celebrated poems, "Mr. Bleaney".[2]

Alienation has become a characterizing feature of life across the world today. Though the idea of alienation came to the academic space in the nineteenth century with people like Karl Marx discussing it extensively in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscript of 1844*, its literary use became conspicuous only in the twentieth century with people like Louis Althusser critically discussing it in his essay "Marxism and Humanism"(1964). Stanley Moore in his work *The Critique of Capitalist Democracy* defines it as'the characteristics of individual consciousness and social structure typical in societies whose members are controlled by, instead of controlling, the consequences of their collective activity'(125). It gives way to the individuals to accept the social/ political status quo via ideological common sense already existing before the individuals. The result is that those individuals thus trapped under such ideological common sense experience a life characterized by powerlessness, friendlessness associated with an idea that the world has an evil design against them.

Of the many autobiographical poems Larkin wrote, "Mr. Bleaney" is one which represents not only the poet himself but also the English people against the backdrop of the postwar English society. The poem narrates the whole drama of a common man and his nature described in terms of how one lives within a society where he is conditioned. It also delineates the link between one's psychological world and the physical world outside it.

The poem begins in the form of a dramatic monologue with the speaker describing Mr. Bleaney's life in terms of the condition of the room he (Bleaney) once lived in. He lived in the room and was later forced to leave: 'They move him.' It means that there is certain disagreement between Bleaney and the owner of the house. The description of the room shows that it is not a spacious and comfortable room. 'Flowered curtains' which are short decorate the window above 'five inches of the sill.' There is a 'bed' and an 'upright chair.' There is 'no hook/behind the door' and 'no room for books and bags.' Yet, he has accepted to stay there— 'I'll take it.' It shows that Mr. Bleaney is threatened by both poverty and alienation:

> In the eyes of the speaker, everything in Bleaney's life points to failure. He had no wife, no house, no money. He seems to have been degradingly dependent upon the hospitality of others. Throughout most of the poem, the speaker's contemptuous

> tone of voice is his method of drawing a distinction between himself and the dead man. (Kuby 98)

Larkin makes one assumption here that he is different from Bleaney. He thinks he is better than Bleaney.

Though the poet is contemptuous of Bleaney's habit, his final point— '...I don't know'— is suggestive of the similarities between them. Here is an interesting point. Like Bleaney, Larkin spent his life after 1943 in a place far from his original home. The condition of the room where Bleaney was lodged has something to do with what Larkin complained of Holtby Hall where he was lodged on his arrival at Hull. On 24 March 1955, two months before writing "Mr. Bleaney," Larkin, complaining over the state of affairs at Holtby Hall, wrote to Judy Egerton:

> As you see, I have arrived, and have been at it four days. Verdict? Well, the above address is *not* [emphasis Larkin's] suitable: small, barefloored and noisy: I feel as if I were lying in some penurious doss house at night, with hobos snoring and quarrelling all round me. There is a negro in the next room who wd [sic] benefit enormously from a pair of bedroom slippers. (Larkin 237)

Later in the same year on 26 April 1955 after he had moved from Holtby House, Cottingham to 11 Qutlands Road in the same village, Larkin again complained of the house owned by Mr Dowling in his letter to D.J. Enright: '... I can't ignore the blasted RADIO which seems a feature of everyone's life these days, and it prevents me from sitting thinking and scribbling in the evening, yet if I grumbled my complaint would be regarded as eccentric as a complaint against the traffic or the birds or the children outside'. (Larkin 240-41).

In the letter to Judy Egerton, Larkin has already hinted at the dreary life in a rented room which will be an inevitable part of his life in the coming years, and this life is what is portrayed in "Mr. Bleaney." The 'blasted RADIO' mentioned in his letter to Enright is 'The jabbering set' in "Mr. Bleaney." This radio represents the postwar Britain in which radio has become a symbol of both cultural and technological change marked by liberal thinking, individual freedom and a persistent questioning of the status quo in all social and political institutions such as family, marriage, government, law courts, etc. The speaker's examination of Bleaney's life and his room points at his (speaker's) intention to give a descriptive picture of the self and its dependence and independence. Unlike "Wants," "Mr. Bleaney" is a poem that exposes Larkin's skepticism at the independence of the self. This is unique because in most cases Larkin has highlighted the importance of the self and the need to defend it from the domination by others. The two letters mentioned above complains of not only loneliness but more about the unhealthy environment created by the others in the house where he is lodged. The dilemma

is between the self and the unhealthy environment where the self is placed. This is a postwar phenomenon ascertained by the diction itself: 'upright chair,' 'sixty-watt bulb,' 'jabbering set,' etc.

If one's life is to be determined in terms of how he lives—'That how we live measures our own nature'— the speaker tries to know how Bleaney lives to determine the standard of his life. However he could not come out with a definite answer. The speaker says, 'I know his habits' in the fourth stanza and contradicted himself by saying 'I don't know' at the end of the poem. This is a state of confusion. But with no option in hand, after a minute examination of Bleaney's life, the speaker has to take Bleaney's room: 'So it happens that I lie/ Where Mr. Bleaney lay.' It means that the speaker is like Bleaney who has no home, no wife and no family. However this Bleaney has some positive aspects of life including some success. He is a failure only 'materialistically' as Lolette Kuby writes:

> Materialistically, Mr. Bleaney was a failure, but there had been overtones of love in his life that the speaker is blind to. Much of what he knows about Bleaney is, after all, apart from a few material objects, learned from the landlady's compulsive chatter about him. From her point of view quite a different Bleaney might be envisioned. This Bleaney would be one who maintained lasting friendships; one with an urge to salvage and beautify a littered, tussocky strip of land; one who could evoke the concern and warmth of a landlady to the extent that she prepared special sauces for him, accommodated herself to his schedule, even bought a television set to please him. (99)

This nature of Bleaney shows that he can still enjoy the company of his landlady, friends and relatives even though he is deprived of the material comforts of a posh life.

Thus, Bleaney bears the characteristics of a normal man in his own nature that can create beautiful human relationships though the speaker cannot see that side of his personality. When the speaker chooses to stay in the room where Bleaney stayed and starts fixing Bleaney's life within the material description, he always hints at what Bleaney has rather than what Bleaney is. Here, Bleaney is higher than the speaker: 'The speaker is isolated and lonely, while Bleaneydoes not appear to have been so' (Kuby 99). However four months[3]after the completion of "Mr. Bleaney," the loneliness and isolation are welcomed by Larkin in the poem "Counting":

> Thinking in terms of one
> Is easily done—
> One room, one bed, one chair
> One person there
> Makes perfect sense; One set
> Of wishes can be met
> One coffin filled. (CP 108)

The description of the room here is same as that of MrBleaney's. Here, the speaker approves the room because:

. . .counting up to two
Is harder to do;
For one must be denied
Before it's tried. (CP 108)

It is not certain whether the poet desires to be alone or his choice of the room is a compulsion. Yet living in such a room is a natural choice for a common man in view of his economic condition in the postwar years. This is to say that economic condition is instrumental for alienation of an individual thereby rendering him friendless.

The habits of the speaker make him different from MrBleaney who can win people like the landlady. Though the sense of alienation forms part of their psychological burden, the degree of loneliness is higher in the speaker's case than that of Bleaney's because when the speaker cannot develop a relationship with anyone,Bleaney can do it atleast with his landlady. While Bleaney could enjoy 'summer holidays,/And Christmas at his sister's house in Stoke,' the speaker cannot enjoy such social gathering. The last two stanzas are significant in exposing the dull humdrum life in postwar England and the associated theme of alienation. The dull unromantic life is described as:

But if he stood and watched the frigid wind
Tousling the clouds, lay on the fusty bed
Telling himself that this was home, and grinned,
And shivered, without shaking off the dread . . . (CP 102)

Again the eventual end of this unromantic life as:

That how we live measures our own nature,
And at his age having no more to show
Than one hired box should make him pretty sure
He warranted no better, I don't know. (CP 103)

Having examined the lifestyle of Bleaney, the speaker is suddenly stopped by the coffin image alluded by the metaphorical 'hired box': 'it is death as the only certain solution to the riddle of the goal of life; and it is the awareness of the coming of death and man's "costly aversion of the eyes from death" which *dissolves* [emphasis King's] any possibility of our dreams becoming the reality' (King 37). This fact about the end of life is true not only for Bleaney who 'warranted no better' but also for the speaker who will follow a similar life by staying in the room Bleaney once lived in. Both of them live in the same fashion but Bleaney' warranted no better' while the speaker says 'I don't know.' Thus when the coffin image comes in the penultimate line, both Bleaney and the speaker fail to realize their dreams.

The language of the poem is simple and colloquial and this simplicity helps in the portrayal of the simple and uneventful lives of the speaker and Bleaney. The shabby room and the environment surrounding it create a

disgusting atmosphere from which both of them cannot escape. There are 'Flowered curtains, thin and frayed,' 'Bed,' 'upright chair,' 'sixty-watt bulb,' 'no hook,' 'no room for books or bags,' 'saucer-souvenir' and 'the jabbering set' in the room. It shows that it is a low rent room having no amenities of a posh life. Outside this room are 'a strip of building land,' 'Tussocky, littered,' 'frigid wind' and the 'clouds.' It shows the unpleasant life they experience within the limited scope of their lives.

The materials available in the room belong to the postwar England. The poem could not have been written in any other time except in the postwar period which is characterised by various austerity measures of the government which cut the English posh life down to size. The speaker and Bleaney are, therefore, unquestionably postwar English bearing the brunt of the economic weakness of Britain.

The speaker in the poem tries to compare 'I' and 'he' only to realize that 'we' which unifies both 'I' and 'he' will at last end in 'one hired box.' He will also move out of the room in the manner how Bleaney is moved out in the first stanza of the poem: 'They moved him.' The verb 'move' is transitive here. They 'moved' Bleaney because he did not or could not move 'at his age.' It raises a question: Is he dead? The fact that he has 'no more to show' means his game of life is over. However the speaker's examination of Bleaney's life ends in 'I don't know' which is very important for Christopher Ricks: 'The pronoun ('I') which so often marks the crucial turn or takes the crucial stress in his poetry; the colloquial negative 'don't'; and the admission as to doubtful knowledge'. (Ricks 282). This makes the room 'What something hidden from us chose' (CP 183) and not the original choice of the speaker or Bleaney.

Interestingly, the speaker and Bleaney can be examined as one character split into two like the 'you' and 'I' of T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Bleaney's failure in life is also symptomatic of the speaker's case in the sense that both of them are unified in the 'we' of the first line of the last stanza: 'That how we live measures our own nature.' It means that the way they live are similar. The speaker's mood, anxiety, failure, anger and alienation are registered in his exposition of Bleaney's character one by one along with the description of the room. Then the coffin image 'one hired box' and the self-skeptical 'I don't know' put the whole drama to an end. Thus the speaker and Bleaney are belittled within the limits of the four-wall room with nothing special to give or take. They become very small within the small dreary room.

Larkin's portrayal of Bleaney shows his clarity and dexterity in the observation of reality and its impact on the common man. The language, style, theme and technique show the depth he looks into the everyday life of postwar England and how alienation forms the nucleus of human psyche in his time. It is how he becomes 'an uncommon poet for the common man'.

Notes :

[1] Throughout the essay the term 'postwar' is used to mean the time (particularly the first two decades) following the Second World War.

[2]All references to Larkin's poems including "Mr. Bleaney" are from Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, edited by Anthony Thwaite; hereafter referred to as CP followed by the page number within parenthesis.

[3] "Mr. Bleaney" was written in May 1955 and "Counting" is believed, according to Anthony Thwaite, to be written in September the same year. Though he puts '?' after September in his dating of the poem in his edition of *Collected Poems*, it is accurate because of the close similarity of the themes of the poems.

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