

## THE CONCEPT OF TIME IN LARKIN: AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

Time with its invincible powers is perceived from different angles in my in-depth study. Time has multisided and multifaceted powers to bring about multitudinous changes in all. Different poets and philosophers have referred to time and expressed their views from different perspectives. The most accepted fact is that time is a living or guiding force to bring about changes. Everything and everyone are governed in the reign of time as all ascribe their failure or success to time and its invincible forces. All quote the Sanskrit proverb: *kalah karoti karyani*. It is time that conquers the animate and the inanimate in its strict governance and man inevitably concurs with its powers. Time is not an abstract idea but a guiding or living force like the wind blowing, a river flowing and the sun glowing endlessly and constantly. From the point of view of the Indian philosophy, time is a moving and governing force. When all the things, created by God are governed as per the will of God, the creator, the celestial being; time is God in its manifestations. Time flows in its endless glide and takes it all with its ride. Time, like God in his transmigrations relentlessly rules all. In India, poets attach the concept of divinity to time, personifying it as 'Time' as per the Gita that says time is God to rule all in its unstoppable flow:

*Prahladaschamsi daityanam Kalah kalayathamaham,  
Mriganancha mrigendroham Vainateyascha pakshinam*  
The Gita, Canto: 10, verse: 30

In His message, Lord Krishna says that He is especially Time that moves endlessly for the reign of all lives. Larkin says that time is powerful to bring about all changes in life. He refers to the wind that symbolizes time in its incessant movement in the words of Veda Vyasa. As per the Gita, God is the wind to blow constantly:

*Pavanah pavatamasmi ramashshastrabhritamaham,  
Rishanam makaraschismi srotasamasmī jahnavee.*  
The Gita, Canto: 10, Verse: 31

The way Larkin deals with water, birds, the river, etc., the symbols of time are akin to those of the Gita. Krishna Paramatma, God says that He is the wind, the Ganges, Garuda (the bird-vehicle of Srivishnu) and all that denote time with their perennial movement. Larkin's philosophy of time is based on the Indian philosophy, but his outlooks are different as he concurs with it in the way the Gita deals with Time with the capital 'T' to personify time from the spiritual point of view. He sees time from the agnostic background in quest of his pragmatic approach.

The poets like John Milton, Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman also concur with the Gita in respect of the divinity of time. The poets like Milton and Poe who too agree with time's invincible powers, personify time:

How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth  
Stolen on his wing my three and Twentieth year  
‘On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-three’  
(**Poetry for Pleasure**, 9)

Toward which Time leads me the will of Heaven  
                   ‘On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-three’  
                   (Poetry for Pleasure, 9)



Science! True daughter of Old Time thou art  
Who alterest all things with my passing years  
‘Sonnet-To Science’ (**Poetry for pleasure**, 22)

The poets as mentioned above accept the supremacy of time as God in the way T.S. Eliot treats time as eternity and divinity. For them, the concept of time which is perpetual in flow is spiritual. Time starts not to end. Time is ever present in the present with the past and the future. The modalities of time: present, past, and future are always dynamically mixed up together and distinctly placed together in the other way. For Larkin, past, present, and future are mutually exclusive but not mutually oblivious. For Eliot, knowledge of the past enlivens the present and modifies the future. Time destroyer is the time preserver:

Time present and time past  
And both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past.  
‘Burnt Norton’ (**Four Quartets**, 14)

The fact is that the present contains both the past and the future:

You shall not think “the past is finished”  
Or “the future is before us”.  
‘The Dry Salvages’ (**Four Quartets**, 41)

For the Gita, time is the confluence of the past, the present and the future, the three in one, the time past and the future to be present in the present. For Eliot too time is eternally present from the spiritual point of view. Through time, time is conquered. But Larkin believes that changes in the practical or pragmatic point of view are inevitable in time’s domain, and the past is past and is never to be regained, “time and time over”. For Eliot, time is cyclic to lead to eternity but for Larkin, it is temporal, and it turns life transient in its flow.

Larkin is practical but not spiritual, historical and psychic in Eliot’s sense. As an agnostic, Larkin sees time from the practical point of view: “time’s rolling smithy smoke” (**CP**, 47)

Time flows endlessly, bringing about changes in its flow. It, as Alam Brownjohn observes, seems to ‘be passing slowly, luxuriously like thick cream pouring from silver jug’. (117) Larkin’s frequent employment of present participles like “flying”, “running”, “shining”, “crying”, “blowing”, “walking” and “journeying” as in “Dawn” signifies the continuous motion of time.

To wake, and hear a cock  
Out of the distance crying,  
To pull the curtains back  
And see the clouds flying.

(**Collected Poems**, 284)

Indians too believe that the cock, before sunrise by its crying-call, wakes up people to resume their activities. The birds in the nests chirping are the reminders of time and its incessant flow. They look at time from the practical point view. They firmly believe in time’s consistent and constant glide, and everything moves or changes in its journey. They agree to the fact that anything may stop but time never stops for it makes the sun rise to give the wealth of warmth and mirth of health to livings. They, therefore, attach spiritual importance and call it the Divine. They therefore believe that time is not just time from Larkin’s point of view but Time from the spiritual point of view.



For ages, most of the writers have referred to time, its origin, its functions, and its goals in literature in different ways so far. They have dealt with time in their own ways. Larkin is unique in the delineation of time but he, as an agnostic, concurs with the powers in his pragmatic approach. If he were a theist, he would accept the Indian spiritual point of view. From his agnostic background he opines that time interweaves and governs our lives in its reign because time is ‘man’s element’. What we are is measured by time or in time. Larkin’s poetry expresses the view:

Days are where we live.  
They come, and wake us  
Time and time over.

‘Days’ (CP, 67)

We cannot measure time, assess its powers and discover its origin. So it serves as “Earth’s immeasurable surprise” (CP, 112). Attempts to know its origin become futile as it is beyond man’s comprehension. According to St. Augustine, time is as old as God’s creation. As Hans Meyerhoff says, “God performed the act of creation within time; in fact, created time along with and in the act of creating things in time” (68). As time’s origin is unknown, its age is beyond our reading. As Hans Meyerhoff further adds that time is “Self-born and bred in time” (31). Hence time is ageless and endless.

Time emerges in our minds throughout our lives. All changes and experiences, as Hans Meyerhoff observes, emerge into time, becoming one with it. Kant, St. Augustus, etc., observe, “We are conscious of our own organic and psychological growth in time (1).” As Hans Meyerhoff’s study of time makes it clear, those human beings “become preoccupied and concerned with the consciousness of time and its meaning for human life” (2).

For Larkin, time is not an abstract idea but an invincible force for destructive and disruptive effects: “eroding agents”. He constantly grew conscious of “the essence of existence” and the riddle of time. As man and poet, he grew with the consciousness of time’s destroying forces to turn man’s life not only mortal but also futile. In time’s flow man’s life turns ephemeral and futile as it destroys man’s expectations, dreams, hopes, and are relentlessly destroyed in its passage. Consequently, his poetic sensibility was shaped by his constant preoccupation with the concept of time:

This is the first thing  
I have understood:  
Time is the echo of an axe  
Within a wood.

‘Poem XXVI’ (CP, 295)

Larkin concurs with the concept of time that does all works, ‘*kalah karoti karyani*’. He therefore grows conscious of time and its ravages and looks at time from his agnostic background. He does not treat it as an abstract idea but as a double-edged weapon to turn man’s life ephemeral in its traverse from birth to childhood, youth, manhood, old age ultimately to culminate in death, “the only end of age” to teach mortality to man. Like Larkin, Wolfe says, “The mystery of strange, million-visage time that haunts us with the briefness of our days”(66). Larkin also says that it is time which makes our lives mortal in its endless flow. He presents the fact of transience in life:

Whether or not we use it, it goes,  
And leaves what something hidden from us chose,  
And age, and then the only and of age. ‘Dockery and Son’ (CP, 152)

For Larkin, life turns futile by destroying relentlessly man’s expectations, desires, dreams and aims in life. For him, time flows endlessly and brings about many failures in life, love, nature, the life around, etc. against our wishes. Our lives are governed by unknown or mysterious powers, which are never in our control:



Something is pushing them  
To the side of their own lives.

‘Afternoons’ (CP, 121)

It is ‘something’ that is time alone that brings about changes are inevitable and indispensable to teach the grim truths of mortality and the stark realities of futility to fill in life with a series of disappointments and frustrations for life is full of illusions in time’s domain. As Larkin says,

Truly, though our element is time,  
We are not suited to long perspectives  
Open at each instant of our lives.  
They link us to our losses.

‘Reference Back’ (CP, 106)

We learn the fact that life is a series of illusions for missed opportunities but continue to hope that the future is the harbinger of good fortunes.

According to Larkin trees, unlike man, have restorative power. Trees put on tender leaves and shed them every year to restore by means of their restorative power:

The trees are coming into leaf  
Like something almost being said,  
The recent buds relax and speed,  
Their greenness is a kind of grief.

‘The Trees’ (CP, 166)

Time incessantly moves and relentlessly destroys our desires, expectations, hopes and dreams against our choice. In the domain of time, life is a constant struggle and unstoppable search for meaningful existence. For Larkin, life is prone to become futile in time’s terrain.

Larkin himself remarks that time is man’s element to cause changes constantly in man’s life in its eternal flux. Bruce Martin says that for Larkin, “Life necessarily means time” (3). For him, man’s life is past-present-future:

Always too eager for the future, we  
Pick up bad habits of expectancy.  
Something is always approaching; every day  
*Till then* we say.

‘Next, Please’ (CP 52)

By the time, the future, which is promising, becomes the present, filling our minds with dissatisfaction and frustration rather than enjoyment and encouragement as time relentlessly destroys our desires, ‘bad habits of expectancy’ and leaves us as Larkin says,

...holding wretched stalks  
Of disappointment” (CP, 52)

Larkin thinks that time is the harbinger of good future but realizes:

We think each one will heave to and unload  
All good into our lives, all we are owed  
For waiting so devoutly and so long,  
But we are wrong: ‘Next, Please’ (CP, 52)

Larkin from his agnostic background treats time as an invincible force to bring about inevitable changes in life in the way Indians treat time from the spiritual point of view. So, time remains his insoluble riddle. He both as man and poet confronts the riddle of time. Bruce Martin



agrees with him who says, “The passage of time, and the approach and arrival of death, still seems to me the most unforgettable thing about our existence” (47). Time in Larkin, as Salem K. Hasan says, “Keeps on pressing heavily upon his thinking as he observes the changes mostly for the worst taking place around him” (47). The moving force of time becomes the focal subject of his poetry.

Time, the nucleus of all the themes underlying life, flows endlessly, bringing about various changes in life and its flow is evident throughout the poetry of Larkin. Time is man’s element and an integral part of his life. It makes man exist in its domain. All facts, all emotions and values and dreams are not only measured by time, but they merge into it, becoming one with it.

Larkin’s idea of time entails a great mystery and reflects the fact that the secrets and wonders of time remain unknown. Time has attracted many literary minds for ages in different ways. How to measure, how it moves and brings about changes; and how it shatters our desires, aims, dreams and pretensions in our lives are significant factors to be discussed.

For Larkin, time functions as a double-edged weapon for its disruptive forces to turn life mortal and futile. It therefore functions as the destroyer. When it is given the status of divinity from the Indian context, it is also creator. As a pessimist, he doesn’t refer to the positive aspect of time. In its constant flux, time heals wounds, cures diseases, solves problems and presents solace from its positive or constructive role but he does not deal with the concept.

Larkin, as an agnostic, considers time an invincible force to have everything under its reign and control. If he had looked at it from a spiritual background, he would have given it the divine status and seen its constructive changes as a theist. As he has grown a pessimist from his agnostic background, he does not attach divinity and spirituality to it as an optimist. He believes that time is a destroying force. If he had seen it from spiritual background, he would have treated it as the one with positive as well as negative effects as it is both the creator and the destroyer like God as perceived from the Indian background. As a spiritualist, he would have treated time in the way the Gita treats time as Time, God from the Indian perspective.

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