

# Englishness and Post-imperial Space



# Englishness and Post-imperial Space:

*The Poetry of Philip Larkin  
and Ted Hughes*

By

Milton Sarkar

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*To*

*Professor Himadri Lahiri*  
*who taught me to look ahead*



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The idea about the topic and thrust of this book had its genesis in some observations made by Professor Mohan Gopal Ramanan of Hyderabad University in his excellent article “Macaulay’s Children” published in *London Magazine* (February 1985). While discussing the study of English literature in India, he suggested some areas where Indian scholars can make some useful contributions. Among others, he mentioned how the poetry of Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes can be studied from postcolonial/post-imperial perspectives. As I soon discovered, not much work has been done in this area. Even today, I have not come across any book-length study of the topic, although I have read in the meantime some articles, published recently, dealing with the theme. For reason of length, those articles could not have been exhaustive. It appears, therefore, that the topic of this book is very appropriate in the context of my socio-cultural and academic locations. Professor Ramanan was kind enough to send me a copy of his article and also a copy of his illuminating book *The Movement* (1989), which I failed to locate in any library in my part of the country. I take this opportunity to acknowledge my indebtedness to him.

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—Milton Sarker

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

This book attempts to examine the poetic works of Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes in the context of the contemporary socio-political condition of England. It was a “post-imperial” situation. The term “post-imperial” has been used here in the particular context of the post-War situation, as it has been felt that the loss of empire affected the mindset not only of the political leaders of the nation but also its common middle class population who felt the impact in their lived experiences. It was a very important factor no doubt, but in artistic and cultural representations the impact may not always be directly stated. Mediated through artistic sensibilities, the percolated experiences were not always rendered in political terms. But the mindset regarding the “presence” and “absence” of the imperial power to “act,” “supervise” and “dominate” is traceable in different manifestations in the literary works of the time. Therefore the term “post-imperial space” will not always be used to refer to the political phenomenon of the loss of empire; it will also be employed to indicate situations – social, cultural, psychological – where the impact of the loss was perceived in a more complicated, but less visible, way. To make things more complex, other factors like growing industrialization and large scale immigration began to impact upon the common life. Often such combinations of emerging factors were referred to as “modern.” One cannot deny the presence in contemporary works of an overwhelming sense of frustration and ennui as well as of a pressing need for resurgence and regeneration both of which can be, in some way or other, related to the political situation of the time. Such a complex of emotional responses can be traced in the works of the two poets this book will discuss. In the observation of Alex Goody, Larkin and Hughes “share in their absorption with this place (England) as one that is, or is being, lost and can only be partially glimpsed in decay through the form of poetry (Larkin) or must be forcefully recreated in poetry to resist the inevitable decay (Hughes). For both, it is Heritage that is being lost...” (139). Both Larkin and Hughes returned to the old England most notably through a return to the gradually vanishing beautiful landscape, the national myths and legends, to

archetypal English customs and conventions, in a word return to what has been called “Englishness.” In this book the main thrust of our arguments will be that both Larkin and Hughes responded to the post-imperial space mainly from the point of view of Englishness. Thus in this book “Englishness” will be a framework that will bind the works of the two poets together; it will be a constant reference point. Though widely read and discussed, seeing their works from the present perspective could be an undertaking quite unique.

The idea of what Steve Padley calls “Englishness as a literary concept” (83) is an interesting area of study. Englishness has been evolving for centuries. Intricately connected with the values emanating from England as a geographical space and England as a socio-cultural space, Englishness as an abstract idea is intrinsic to the identity of a people who gradually became politically powerful, so much so that the sun never set on the British Empire. The sense of power became associated with England, which extended its political domination over a large number of colonies. That is why Simon Gikandi rightly observes that an English identity cannot be imagined “outside the history of Empire and the culture of colonialism” (213). The empire, even when it ceased to exist, went on to exercise a vital role in the English consciousness for a long time. This sense of power was gradually absorbed in the very concept of Englishness.

In her Introduction to *Englishness Revisited*, Floriane Reviron-Piégay points out that the concept of “Britishness” was forged in the eighteenth century. Protestantism brought together the peoples of England, Scotland and Wales. Initially it did not conflict with Englishness. On the contrary, both ideas continued to exist together and indeed often overlapped. Actually it was never only the English who were out to define and redefine Englishness: “Rule Britannia” (discussed in the concluding chapter), for example, was penned by the Scot James Thomson. The English did not feel uncomfortable with the wider connotations of British identity.<sup>1</sup> It has been pointed out by Reviron-Piégay that the industrial revolution, like the Empire and the two World Wars, which shaped the British psyche, was “pan-Britannic” in nature. Later the Scots and the Welsh began to cling to their own ethnic identities as they started realizing that Britain and the British Empire were more English in nature than anything else. The assumption of Scottishness or Welshness is conceived as “a sort of compensation for or counterweight against the predominant role of English” (Reviron-Piégay 2). Kathleen Wilson makes a similar point when she observes that despite sharing some important features with European and Celtic cultures, Englishness took care to differentiate itself from other “island races” on “assumptions which ranged from the superior capacity of

English people for rational thought to the greater aesthetic beauty of the ‘pink and white complexion’” (40). She further comments that “centuries of historical differentiation” even within the British Isles ignored the “shared roots in a Gothic past” (4). As a result, despite the presence of “other ‘island races’ in the British archipelago, there was clearly one superior ‘Island Race’” (4).

The attempt at differentiation noted in the earlier paragraph was more prominent in the Empire – outside the British Isles and Europe. It is in the colonies that Englishness was projected in a more pronounced way. The colonies as the space of imperial power, however, proved to be problematic. Face to face with the “Other,” their English “superiority” was put to severe test. Although they received loyalty and were able to make a section of the colonized population internalize a sense of cultural inferiority, they also faced stiff cultural and ideological resistance from them. Simon Featherstone contends: “the dynamic of empire becomes one of displacement rather than expansion and of hybridization rather than confident consolidation of existing cultural values and meanings” (20). To reinforce his contention he quotes Ian Baucom who comments that empire “is less a place where England exerts control than the place where England loses command of its own narrative of identity. It is the place onto which the island kingdom arrogantly displaces itself and from which a puzzled England returns as a stranger to itself” (quoted in Featherstone 20).

Krishan Kumar observes that “all that the English can really call upon is the highly selective, partly nostalgic and backward looking version of ‘cultural Englishness’ elaborated in the late nineteenth century and continued into the next” (*Identity* 269). Jeremy Paxman finds that the English as a people are “marching backwards into the future” (quoted in Reviron-Piégay 4). The paradox of Englishness thus lies in the fact that it is both stable and changing. Reviron-Piégay elaborates the point by saying that since the English have no traditional way to follow, they have to invent one. She mentions that “the display of the English flag representing the St. George cross during sporting events may be seen precisely as belonging to this new tradition” (4). There is therefore a deliberate attempt to construct an English identity in order to distinguish the Self from the Other – this “Other” may be the Scots or Welsh within the nation or coloured immigrants from outside. Both Ian Baucom in his *Out of Place* and Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* consider such constructions as the result more of emotional attachment than of reasoned consideration. Baucom terms this as an “affectionate condition” (12) while Anderson considers it to have “a profound emotional legitimacy” (4).

It is interesting to note that the academic discourse of Englishness received a boost mainly from the 1980s, which became more intense in the 1990s and in the first decade of the new century. Englishness was not a new phenomenon. But critics have taken up the issue with new energy and vigour only during and after the 1980s. In fact, there has been a proliferation of books on Englishness.<sup>2</sup> It is mainly because the paradigm of Englishness continuing from the eighteenth century suddenly began to face challenge.<sup>3</sup> Apart from the end of the empire and the two World Wars, issues like joining the European Union or accepting the new common currency (Euro) affected the independent status of England.

The focus in this book is mainly concentrated on the poetry written and published in the 1950s and 1960s. However, we have referred to some works which were written even earlier – in the mid-1940s – and also later – in the 1970s, 1980s and even early 1990s.

There are many works which deal with the disintegration of the empire. They are mainly written from the point of view of the formerly colonized people; literary works were concerned both with the colonial hangover and the attempt to break away from that. In this book, however, an attempt will be made to look at the post-imperial space from the point of view of the imperialists, in this case the British. Not much work has been done to explore the British psyche after the loss of empire. There was a sense of tentativeness, uncertainty, frustration and even anger as the sense of “loss” began to sink into the English consciousness. Moreover, the British frustration and anger were reinforced as everything in Britain began to change substantially, as will be shown in this book. One of the most important of these changes was the influx of the immigrants. This was greatly facilitated by the Nationality Act of 1948 which allowed immigration from the former and existing British colonies. As a result people began to come in greater numbers and settle in London and other parts of England. The arrival of the SS *Empire Windrush* at Tilbury on 22 June 1948 is considered to be of great importance in this respect.<sup>4</sup>

There has been a series of literary, cultural attempts to define these changed and changing contours of Englishness and also a necessary historical connection between colonization/imperialism and the arrival of new immigrants. Louise Bennett, for example, in her poem “Colonisation in Reverse” (1966) speaks of, in typical creole terms, how “Jamaica people colonizin/Englan in reverse” (16). Louise shows how hundreds and thousands of “ship-load” and “plane-load” Jamaicans thronged England (“Jamaica is Englan bou”). Like “fire” they “immigrate” and “populate” England, the “seat a de Empire” (16). The most glaring truth she wants to bring home to us is the fact that from England’s point of view, it is a

situation even worse than war (“What a devilment a Englan!/Dem face war an brave de worse”). The English were once in Jamaica, in the process of “colonization”; that is why the Jamaicans now are in England, in the process that she aptly calls “colonization in reverse.” Moniza Alvi also, in her poem “Arrival 1946” (1993), picks up some objects – washed items like “underwear” on the clothing line – which are indicative/symbolic of changing England. The boat the character called Tariq came by docked at Liverpool from where he took a train. What he observed during his journey was an “unbroken line of washing/from the North West to Euston” (204). The appearance of these items in the open takes even Tariq by surprise and he wonders at the prevalence of such “strange,” and of course “foreign,” elements in the “Englishman’s garden”: “An Empire, and all this washing,/The underwear, the Englishman’s garden” (204). As a result of such large-scale immigration and several other factors resulting from the weakening of the British power in the international arena, the entire socio-economic situation in England began to change. The impact of all this on the psyche of the mainstream British population can easily be imagined.

In the next two sections of this chapter, an attempt will be made to deal with the socio-political background and the contemporary poetic landscape respectively, without which any discussion of the poetry of the period in general and of Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes in particular would remain unfinished.

## I

The loss of empire, as has already been mentioned, was a serious setback for England from the point of view of politics and that of the British psyche as well. It created a sense of loss, a vacuum. At the social and political level several forces were at work and these contesting forces were vying for primacy. As a result, the socio-political structure was undergoing transformation. The new order required new priorities, and waste outside the country had to be cut in order to create a new economic order at the domestic level. Withdrawal from the role of the empire-builder, from the centrality of attention and activity, was something to which creative writers were responding in their own individual ways. The insecurity and angst caused by the loss of empire made the whole British psyche shrink. Frustration and disillusionment, even anger were evident in their works. Insularity, in turn, ruled the roost with most of the writers who became more and more concerned with the “English” elements in their writing. Thus we find the great international and cosmopolitan

themes, of Eliot for instance, being replaced by ones of narrow domestic importance like the description of the changing English countryside, or fauna like crows, hawks, pikes, otters, jaguars and foxes or by trivial objects like bicycles and trains. For these poets, who came after World War II with memories of shells, mortars, concentration camps and the concomitant angst, fretfulness and remorse still fresh in their minds, “Englishness” emerged as a sign of failure to come to terms with the contemporary England. To them Englishness was a “confirmation” (Heaney, “Englands” 341) of their threatened identity.

In the Foreword to his book *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* Donald Davie asserts that “works of literary art are conditioned by economic and political forces active in the society from which those works spring and to which they are directed, forces which bear in on the solitary artist as he struggles to compose” (1). In view of the above statement, an overview of the socio-political condition emerges crucial for the proper understanding of the literature of the period. By July 1940 Lord Halifax, the British Foreign Secretary, put a paper to the Cabinet which for the first time accepted that Britain’s future survival depended upon substantial assistance from the United States. Britain was negotiating to obtain 50 First World War destroyers (small, fast warships) from the United States of America (henceforth referred to as USA) in exchange for granting the USA bases in seven British colonies. On 22 August of the same year, Sir Kingsley Wood, Chancellor of the Exchequer, presented a paper to the Cabinet indicating that Britain was virtually bankrupt. It “marked the effective end of Great Britain’s status as an independent power” (Ponting 505). Churchill sent Professor Tizard to the US in August with design details of some of Britain’s most secret inventions – microwave radar, the cavity magnetron, chemical warfare formulae, special explosives, jet engine designs and so on. Before receiving aid, Britain was forced to sell all its assets in the USA, some below their market value. Churchill felt Britain was being not just skinned, “but flayed to the bone” (Ponting 510). By March 1941 the USA Congress approved “Lend-Lease” (Childs 10), which meant American war materials did not have to be paid for. However, Britain had to accept USA views on what rules should guide future international trade.

The crushing economic and military realities of the post-1945 world relegated Great Britain to the position of “America’s junior partner” (Lawrence 529). After her meeting with President Truman in January 1952, Evelyn Shuckburgh observed, “It was impossible not to be conscious that we were playing second fiddle” (32). Playing the supporting role did not come easily to the citizens of a nation which had



grown accustomed to being at centre stage. The English officials continued to think and act as if they were the policy-makers and agents of a great power. The most striking evidence of their attitude was the decision to proceed with the manufacture of an atomic bomb.

Immediately after the Second World War, Great Britain was obliged to withdraw from its most prized imperial possession, India, in circumstances which suggested that the “British authorities had lost control” (Butler xii). Actually in the history of Great Britain World War II marked the end of an era and ushered in a new one. The Labour government was voted to power in 1945. And in a slow but steady way Labour did dismantle the British Empire. The chief British actor was Attlee, who towards the end of his life believed that he would be best remembered for what he had done to facilitate the transfer of power in India. He saw it as a moral duty, to which he and his party had long been pledged, and, for he was a pragmatist, an advantage to Britain. The Treasury would no longer have to dispense money to maintain a British garrison in the subcontinent and, if Britain got the terms it desired, commerce with India would continue to flourish. Attlee also appreciated that a peaceful exchange of power and a stable India would add to British prestige and serve as a “bulwark against Communism in Asia” (Lawrence 547). He and his chiefs of staff also wanted India within the Commonwealth, and if possible as an ally which would continue to host British bases. Attlee’s mandate to Mountbatten, delivered in February 1947, instructed the Viceroy to secure “the closest and most friendly relations between India and the UK. A feature of this relationship should be a military treaty” (Lawrence 547). Even the successive Conservative Governments of 1951, 1955 and 1959 did not effect any change in their policy. Geographically contracted to a “Little England,” the government had to assume a more modest role in international affairs. It seemed to many that “the Empire was on the way out, the welfare state was on the way in” (Judd 14). After coming to power replacing the wartime hero Winston Churchill, the Attlee cabinet started building up a Welfare State that assured health care, subsidized housing, social insurance, old age pensions and so on. Asa Briggs, quite reasonably, remarks that in the twentieth century, “warfare has necessitated welfare” (quoted in Kumar, “Setting” 23). The Labour Party came into office to implement its socialist policies in the domestic space, their top priority being the building of a Welfare State. In Attlee’s own words:

The Labour Party came to power with a well defined policy worked out over many years. It had been set out very clearly in our Election Manifesto and we were determined to carry it out. Its ultimate objective was the creation of a society based on social justice, and, in our view, this could

only be attained by bringing under public ownership and control the main factors in the economic system. (Quoted in Heffer 21)

Thus the energy of the nation turned inwards, making the centrifugal centripetal. In the introduction to *Intercultural Voices in Contemporary British Literature: The Implosion of Empire* Lars Ole Sauerberg has employed the two terms “explosion” and “implosion” in the context of expansion and loss of British domain (11). An “explosion” is the upshot of huge concentrated energy looking for an outlet. “Explosion” is an appropriate metaphor to describe the British imperialistic expansion of power, to extend the imperial space. The building of the British Empire could well be compared to a slow-paced explosion. Colonies provided various English industries with the raw materials. England manufactured the finished products and then they were sold back to those colonies. This is how a vicious circle was formed: “Imperial expansion depended heavily upon the export of manufactured goods from the metropolitan centre in exchange for raw materials from the periphery” (Cain and Hopkins 663). An “implosion,” on the other hand, begets force by the need to fill a suddenly created vacuum. The idea of “implosion” can aptly portray the shedding of Britain’s empire and the consequent creation of a void – the “void” which, as Tom Nairn argues, points to “something persistently missing, something absent from English national identity itself” (262). The energy, earlier going from Britain to various parts of the world in keeping with the imperialistic expansion, changed its direction and came back to Britain herself this time. This vacuum – resulting from the loss of empire, in our context – needed to be filled up.

Empires can be thought of as “multi-ethnic conglomerates held together by transnational organisational and cultural ties” (Cain and Hopkins 664). They were expansionist by definition and had globalizing ambitions. In the early 1930s, as B. J. C. McKercher points out, Britain was the only power that could fairly claim to have retained a “truly global stature” (quoted in Cain and Hopkins 676). This lofty position continued to be identified with the possession of empire. The empire was woven into the fabric of the great British institutions: “the monarchy, the Church, and Parliament” (Williams 203). It was only after the outbreak of World War II that Great Britain’s dependence on the United States became so acute that her global leadership had to be “first shared and then surrendered” (quoted in Cain and Hopkins 677). Actually, the contraction and eventual demise of the British Empire was one of the most dramatic indicators of Great Britain’s changing status in the twentieth century. The disintegration of the British imperial system was remarkably rapid. From being the largest empire in the history of the world in the 1930s, Britain’s global

system amounted, by the late 1960s, to “little more than a few outposts or ‘points’” (Butler xi), and to a set of relationships embodied in the Commonwealth, successor body to the empire. Moreover, Britain’s external relationships seemed, by the late 1960s, to have undergone a fundamental reorientation: from being a power with truly global interests, Great Britain was coming to be seen as one of a number of “middle-ranking powers whose interests were bound up in continuing plans for the integration of Western Europe” (Butler xi). The Suez Crisis of 1956, on which Larkin wrote a poem from a domestic point of view (discussed in Chapter II), has often been depicted as a “turning point” in the history of Great Britain’s external relations and status as an imperial power. Under the Anglo-Egyptian Agreement of 1954, the British “bowed to USA pressure to evacuate, within two years, the Suez Canal Zone” (Jackson 146). The last British troops left in March 1956. Only weeks after that, on July 26, 1956, Egypt’s President Gamal Abdul Nasser nationalized the French- and British-owned Suez Canal. Great Britain was the biggest single user of the Canal. Two-thirds of Western Europe’s oil was imported via the Canal (Blake 366). Seeing Nasser’s move as a serious threat to British interests, Britain’s Prime Minister, Sir Anthony Eden, secretly initiated plans for an Anglo-French invasion. The two countries prepared for joint operations by air, land and sea, inviting Israel, long angered by Egypt’s attacks on her territory and support for Palestinian guerrillas, to strike at the same time: the British and French “cooked up with Israel a secret plan for a joint simultaneous invasion” (Campbell 92). On October 29, the Israelis attacked, giving Great Britain and France an excuse to invade Egypt in the guise of peacemakers and protectors of the Canal. The Egyptians were enormously aided by world reaction to the invasion. By an overwhelming majority the nations of the world, including the USA and all the Commonwealth countries except Australia and New Zealand, opposed the Anglo-French action and called for an immediate ceasefire. The Soviet Premier, Nikolai Alexandrovich Bulganin, sent threatening messages to London, Paris and Tel Aviv. It was the USA’s attitude above all that proved decisive: President Eisenhower refused to supply oil to the West until Great Britain called a halt. Faced with a drastic run on sterling in addition to the oil crisis, the British government turned with relief to a Canadian proposal to form a UN Emergency Force for Suez and on November 6 both Great Britain and France accepted a ceasefire. The Eden government still hoped to extract concessions from Egypt in return for the withdrawal of British troops. But Eisenhower was adamant there would be no help with oil supplies until the troops were out. By December 23 they had all been withdrawn. The Suez fiasco provided the humiliating proof

that Britain's days of Big Power intervention were well and truly over. Stripped of global power, Great Britain was reduced to the role of an onlooker, a "kind of umpire nation, able to see through the law, always looking for justice" (Fowles 157). The war illustrated Great Britain's problems in defending a genuinely global imperial system, and its inability to prosecute, unaided, a war in two hemispheres simultaneously. The lesson of the entire period, from the mid-1920s, that imperial defence would require the assistance of at least one powerful ally prompted London increasingly to seek to appease the United States, and involve the Americans in security arrangements. Once the War had broken out in Europe, Britain found itself seeking USA support. For the Labour government of Clement Attlee which took office before the end of the Second World War, maintaining Great Britain's status as one of the "Big Three" global powers was an unquestioned priority. In the government's worldview, the empire occupied a central role. However, imperial policy in the post-War years was affected by the new conditions in which Great Britain found itself. The country's economic situation was of overriding significance. Exhausted by the demands of war, the British economy faced a difficult period of readjustment, at a time when it was expected to support not only greatly extended overseas commitments, but also an ambitious programme of domestic social reform. The international climate, too, harboured many uncertainties: the disintegration of the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union and the onset of the Cold War lent added significance to fears that the United States might once again retreat into isolationism, leaving Britain to shoulder the burden of defending Western Europe from an aggressive Soviet Union. Soviet ambitions seemed to include "the dissolution of the British Empire" as well (Butler 63).

A major determinant in policy during this period was Britain's economic position. Attlee's ministers were unfortunate in having to confront three major crises during their time in office: in 1947 in relation to sterling and the dollar shortage, in 1949 over devaluation, and in 1950-51 surrounding the financial implications of massive rearmament. All of these would have important repercussions for Britain's external policies, and especially the imperial connection. Forced to shed more than a billion pounds' worth of overseas assets during the war, Great Britain was now the world's largest debtor, to the tune of around £4.7 billion (Butler 64). Having depended for so long on invisible earnings, Great Britain's balance of payments position seemed bleak. Compounding this, in August 1945, was the shock of Washington's abrupt termination of Lend-Lease. As John Maynard Keynes famously observed, Britain faced a "financial Dunkirk"

(Butler 64) unless it could secure substantial USA assistance. Keynes and his team of negotiators failed to persuade Washington to provide the hoped-for interest-free loan (in recognition of Britain's wartime sacrifices). Instead, the American loan of \$3.75 billion (at two per cent interest), and the writing-off of Lend-Lease debts of \$21 billion for \$650 million, came with unpalatable "strings." Among these, one of the most problematic for Britain was the promise to ratify the 1944 Bretton Woods agreement by cancelling the sterling balances and making the pound fully convertible into dollars by the middle of July 1947. The sterling balances were funds held in the Bank of England by overseas governments, representing Britain's sterling debts to these countries, often arising from wartime expenditure. By the end of the war, they totalled £3,150 million, about a quarter of which was owed to the colonies, with other major sums owing to India and Egypt. Cancelling the balances was opposed by the Treasury and the Bank of England, which saw them as assets, enabling Britain to import goods on credit and reinforcing the position of sterling as a major world currency. In political terms, too, cancelling the balances would be difficult (Hyam xlii-xliii). To aggravate matters, Britain was already facing internal economic difficulties early in 1947, when a severe winter caused a fuel crisis and a consequent decline in industrial production. Not surprisingly, Britain's growing financial problems led to calls within the government for major reductions in Britain's overseas commitments, especially its military spending. Not only would this save dollar expenditure, but it could also free scarce labour for deployment in the export drive. Among the additional responsibilities currently being borne by Britain were support for the Greek regime in its civil war against Communists, justified on the grounds that such a sensitive region as the Mediterranean could not be left vulnerable to Soviet encroachment in the event of a Communist victory. Occupation forces had to be maintained in Germany and the civilians in the British Zone had to be supplied with food. At a time when USA help to Great Britain and Western Europe was still limited, and Cold War tensions appeared to be worsening, it was clear that, given its already severe balance of payments problems, Great Britain's economy was being stretched too far. All of this coincided with the deteriorating situation in India and Palestine (Reynolds 162-3). Evidently, cuts had to be made. There followed, during February 1947, a series of decisions which had far-reaching consequences for Britain's world role. Chief among these was Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin's declaration that the question of the future of Palestine would be referred to the United Nations, that aid to Greece and Turkey would end almost immediately, and that Britain would withdraw from India by June 1948 at

the latest. These decisions seemed to represent a watershed in Britain's world role, a recognition of national enfeeblement and an acceptance that some tasks, such as the defence of Greece and Turkey, would have to be surrendered to the much more powerful United States. As the Chiefs of Staff argued in October 1952, "Our standard of living stems in large measure from our status as a great power and this depends to no small extent on the visible indication of our greatness, which our forces, particularly overseas, provide" (quoted in Kent 133–4). The unfolding challenge was to find means of preserving Britain's global interests at a cost that was acceptable, given the significant reduction in the country's assets in the post-War world and its accumulating economic problems. Not only was the economy growing more slowly than that of some important rivals, but also the balance of payments position remained difficult. The government found itself forced to continue a regime of austerity while trying to increase industrial production. (Larkin's observation quoted at the beginning of Chapter II, is evidence of this.) To complicate Britain's balance of payments difficulties, the country's overseas competitors were not only becoming more economically powerful, but also supplanting Britain in some of its traditional export markets. Standing in the way of even and steady economic growth was the phenomenon of stop-go economic policies, in which expansion and restraint alternated in a frustrating manner.

Angela Thirkell in her novel *Peace Breaks Out* (1946) fittingly says that, with the Labour victory of 1945, "the Brave and Revolting New World came into its own" (quoted in Kumar, "Setting" 16). Initially there was dilly-dallying regarding the control of the state over the economy and wholesale nationalization. But like a great leveller the World War II inverted the whole scenario. John Maynard Keynes and William Beveridge could well be deemed the two major exponents of post-War reconstruction. Keynesianism was a means of maintaining full employment by stimulating demand, usually in the form of tax cuts or increased public spending to create jobs. As Eric Heffer observes, Britain said yes to "Keynesian concepts of government intervention in economic affairs to create and maintain employment. With such policies the life of the mass of the people was transformed" (22). Actually state planning and state control of the economy as well as welfare was deemed by almost all to be an absolute necessity at that time. The Liberal party's manifesto *Britain's Industrial Future* ("The Yellow Book") (1928) was particularly influential in bringing about the collectivist thinking of post-War Britain. Also thinkers like Oswald Mosley, G. D. H. Cole, the Webbs, Barbara Wootton and so on became influential with their socialist writings. The

urge to construct a new social order, demolishing the older one entirely to move forward towards a democratic socialism, produced a new temperament in post-War British society. This new mood opposed the reckless bohemianism, the abundant sloppy emotionalism of the neo-Romantic 1940s, and also the political bias of the Marxist 1930s, and to crown it all, any sort of extreme pronouncement. Rather, it preferred what came to be known as the “middle option” or mixed economy.

A “people’s peace” (Webster 7) that emphasized welfare at home, especially through the post-War development of the welfare state, corresponded closely to the rhetoric of a “people’s empire” (Webster 7) that emphasized ideas of welfare and development. The two major, and outstandingly important, welfare measures were the National Health Service Act and the National Insurance Act, both passed in 1946 and implemented with effect from 1948. The welfare legislation also included the Industrial Injuries Act. Another piece of relevant legislation, that covering family allowances, had already been enacted in 1945 by Churchill’s caretaker administration. The National Health Service Act nationalized the nation’s hospitals, about half of which belonged to the local authorities. The outcome was a transformation in medical care, especially for women and children, within a highly cost-efficient system. Aneurin Bevan, the minister responsible, wanted a service which would encompass all the nation’s citizens and provide them all, irrespective of their financial circumstances or where they lived, with completely free and comprehensive medical care. The legislation was based on Sir William Beveridge’s report on *Social Insurance and Allied Services* of November 1942 which recommended “public protection for all ‘from the cradle to the grave’” (Childs 17). Allan Sillitoe, the writer, commented that

the Health Service was a sort of enormous sign of relief – no more Panel – it made the most incredible difference to the mentality of the less well off – probably the greatest single factor in this century in creating a new pride in the English working class. (quoted in Childs 17)

Attlee told David Childs in 1962 that he believed it to be his government’s biggest single achievement in home affairs. Unlike the new social security system, though universal, it was not intended to be minimal in its level of provision. Under Labour the costs were kept to a minimum. Partly in consequence, regional inequalities long survived. Despite publicly expressed fears of the crushing costs of public demand for a bonanza of free teeth and spectacles – the real need for which had been seriously underestimated – up to the early 1950s the rise in costs of the health service only just kept pace with the rise in the birth-rate. Under the

National Insurance Act the whole population was brought, for the first time, into a comprehensive system covering unemployment, sickness, maternity, guardianship, retirement and death. The promised “housing drive” to solve the housing problem, which had been worsened by the war, was severely constrained and only in 1948 did the Labour Government meet the promised target of 240,000 new houses per year. In the economic crisis of 1947, only 189,000 were completed in the United Kingdom. A total of 1,192,000 had been added to the stock by 1951 (Tanner, Thane and Porter 98–102). However, under Attlee’s government over a million homes were built, which was not bad, considering the shortages of men and materials. Labour did implement the pledge to raise the school-leaving age to 15 in 1947. They also implemented the tripartite system of secondary education embodied in the 1944 Education Act without apparently considering its divisive features.

What deserves special mention is that it was not just Labour but the Conservatives who favoured the idea of welfare and neither of them sought to dismantle the apparatus of the welfare state. Eden’s successor, the urbane and surprisingly liberal Macmillan, took power with the United States’ backing and pushed through a programme of decolonization that at least equalled that of the Attlee government and in important respects surpassed it. As newly liberated colonies abounded and the artificial federations were allowed to collapse, the British public were told that they had “never had it so good” (Judd 15). Consumer spending and economic growth were the new gods, not the Empire and the crippling expenditure on forces “east of Suez.” Harold Macmillan came out with *Reconstruction* (1934) and *The Middle Way* (1938). The very name of the last-mentioned book sums up the prevailing middling mood. Also Winston Churchill, Lord Eustace Percy, Oliver Stanley, Robert Boothby and others sought the “middle option.” Moreover, there were groups like Political and Economic Planning (PEP), the Industrial Reorganization League, the Next Five Years Group etc. who did support welfare. After World War II almost all the parties, groups or factions, therefore, became unanimous in rejecting the nineteenth-century view of state planning and in accepting a welfare society.

Again, welfare demanded reconstruction not only in the material domain but in the moral or psychological sphere also. “Education for citizenship” which also implied “education for all” became the slogan. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) virtually became “a ministry of culture” (Kumar, “Setting” 19). From 1939 onwards, it also widened in bulk. Above all it adapted itself to the altered scenario by accommodating mass-culture. Up to this time the BBC had been like the prerogative of the



elite class; but now it started embracing the common mass by providing them with “light entertainment.” Thus the BBC presented its listeners with comedy programmes, current affairs programmes etc. Actually after the war the BBC turned into a virtual haven for the British literati. Thus, critics and writers like William Empson, Louis MacNeice, Herbert Read, George Orwell and others used it to give vent to their radical thoughts. The system accommodated even the radical elements (leftists) as it was the demand of the hour. Thus the war got almost all of the British intelligentsia involved. But the most important thing was – be s/he high or low, left or right, or anything else – war and the aftermath of war cut everyone to size giving birth to an all pervading radical egalitarian spirit in consequence. The consensus was that the new order should be built without privilege of any sort. *The Times* of July 1, 1940 wrote that “the new order cannot be based on the preservation of privilege, whether the privilege be that of a country, of a class, or of an individual” (quoted in Kumar, “Setting” 22).

Another aspect of egalitarianism was perceived in the social domain in the form of equality. Society started recognizing to a great extent the hitherto neglected marginalized people. They came to be valued only when they gave their lives in the war to save England. Their worth was grasped not just by Labour but also by the Conservatives, who ruled for thirteen unbroken years after 1951. Thus in the post-War and post-imperial phase England, so far deemed to be the England of the upper class only, became also to a great extent the England of the commoners. The collective struggle went a long way in narrowing the gap between the high and low. The agency of the BBC to modify the British culture based on class differences in order to re-establish a new one was also crucial. Even working-class families could afford televisions, cars, washing machines and holidays as well. To cite an example – the 300,000 televisions sold to customers in Britain in 1950 increased to 10,500,000 by the end of the decade (Halsey 24–6).

However, the economy remained the major stumbling-block to both Conservatives and Labour. Thus the first and foremost concern of Harold Macmillan’s Conservative government was how the economy was to recover after Suez. In order to bridle the increasing wage demands and inflation Peter Thorneycroft, the new Chancellor, proposed “a reduction in the subsidies to nationalized industries, a curb on wages, and substantial cuts in defence and welfare” (Bloom and Day 2). The Conservative Party nevertheless could not dare to do this as “it would imply the withdrawal of more than half the only post-war social service which a Conservative government could claim to have created” (Morgan 174). In fact throughout

their tenure the Conservatives constantly increased subsidies in health care, education and housing. Still they had to face defeat in the election for their inability to modernize the economy.

The Macmillan era ended with the return of a Labour government under Harold Wilson in 1964. The Labour Party that succeeded the Conservatives had to suffer a similar fate for the same reason. The pound faced devaluation. In order to fulfil its commitment to welfare the Labour Party brought in a series of projects such as the abolition of capital punishment (1965), the expansion of higher education and the creation of the Open University (1966), the decriminalization of homosexuality (1967), the establishment of the giant Department of Health and Social Security (1968) and so on. As early as in 1956 Anthony Crosland wrote, “a fairer education system, better relations between workers and managers on the shop-floor, better welfare provision for the disadvantaged, more liberal policies towards censorship, abortion, divorce and sexuality – these were essential steps to a more egalitarian social order” (42). But what mattered in the election was Labour’s incapacity to rejuvenate the economy and its inability to deal with the unions.

However, the “swinging sixties” and the music of the Beatles seemed a “far cry from the age of imperial supremacy and high-minded duty” (Judd 15) and by the end of the 1970s welfare had lost its relevance, accused as it was of giving birth to a “dependency culture” (Bloom and Day 6). Keynesian economics, the mainstay of welfare, also suffered a serious setback at that time. Keynes believed in creating full employment by stimulating demand – but this increased demand was seldom met by increased production and resulted in greater imports that had to be squared from the foreign exchange stocks of the Bank of England. Whenever the foreign reserves were found to be flowing out too fast a crisis was created, requiring tax and interest rate rises, a tightening of credit and a reduction in government expenditure. Ultimately, the election in May 1979 of a Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher marked an end to support for the welfare state. Keynesianism was effectively replaced by Thatcher’s monetary policies. This move of Mrs Thatcher was supposed to provide the answer to the question, “What’s wrong with the British economy?” which, since the late 1950s, “has been at the very heart of political debate” (Porter 26). Monetarism intended to eradicate inflation by regulating the money supply. Thus there could be no borrowing or printing of money to meet wage demands. The money for these had to be obtained out of increased revenue arising from a more competitive economy.

Now, if we look back, the picture could not be called an all-happy one because of the breakdown of the “consensus” in the 1960s and 1970s. The

promise of equality and common culture was not fulfilled. Despite the material prosperity, inequality existed at the social and economic levels. In 1974, a British government was brought down for the first time by working class industrial activity (the issue will be dealt with while discussing Larkin's "The Explosion"). The economy suffered its first recession since World War II and when unemployment reigned supreme in the late seventies, class conflict transformed into racial conflict as well. Five years of sectarian feud in Northern Ireland made its presence felt for the first time in mainland Britain in 1974, in the mayhem of the Birmingham pub bombings. The reformation in the education sector turned out to be a miscarriage. True, there were some silver linings. In British society before World War II, the line was sharply drawn between "us" and "them"; between upper-class privilege and working-class endurance; the elite "high culture" of painting, music, drama and literature and the mass-culture based mostly on the cinema and the dance hall. However, after the war it appeared, at least for a while, that egalitarian beliefs might result in fundamental amendment in the make-up of the social order. But class differences, inequalities etc. in British society – though lessened to a great extent – still remained. The promises were only partially fulfilled. Indeed, "too much of the reconstruction of the Era of Consensus was in rhetoric rather than reality" (Marwick, *British Society* 277). In the circumstances nationalism could have been the only means to transform the social and political fabrics in Britain.

## II

In the wake of the welfare policies (as discussed in the previous section) Britain became a society of mixed economy and full employment – "Full employment for men was achieved" (Thane 98). This mood influenced the literary domain as well. The best literary manifestation of this middle of the road attitude was the Movement. In his poem "Creon's Mouse" (written in 1951 and published in 1955 in *Brides of Reason*) Donald Davie, the chief Movement theorist,<sup>5</sup> asked contemporary intellectuals to take a centrist stance shunning too much "daring":

If too much daring brought (he thought) the war,  
 When that was over nothing else would serve  
 But no one must be daring any more,  
 A self-induced and stubborn loss of nerve.

Taking his cue from Sophocles, Davie constructs a political allegory where Creon, an extreme right, rather a totalitarian fascist figure, could be held in check only by the suppression of the “colossal nerve” of Antigone, the radical leftist:

Creon, I think, could never kill a mouse  
 When once that dangerous girl was put away,  
 Shut up unbridled in her rocky house,  
 Colossal nerve denied the light of day.

Contrary to the common view, the poem paradoxically prescribes “loss of nerve” for Britain as it was the requirement of the time and Davie came out prophetic since excess of “nerve” or “daring” led to the Suez debacle (discussed in section I of this chapter). Prof. Ramanan points out that such an absence of “too much daring” prevented the possible war over the USSR’s move in Budapest in 1956 (“Authority” 38). That is why Neil Corcoran concludes that “Creon’s Mouse” is “very much a poem of the post-war moment, its recommendation profoundly in tune with a recognition of Britain’s imperial decline” (83). Davie writes:

Now Europe’s hero, the humaner King  
 Who hates himself, is humanized by shame,  
 Is he a curbed or a corroded spring?  
 A will that’s bent, or buckled? Tense, or tame?

To strike a balance between the two polar opposites, Creon and Antigone, stood the latter’s sister, the “centrist figure” of Ismene, who “trode the middle way of compromise, consultation, democratic give and take and eschewed the extremist postures of both the right (Creon) and the left (Antigone)” (Ramanan, “Authority” 38). In the 1950s Davie wanted the contemporary poets to adopt this Ismene stance. This Ismene stance or middle way of compromise could be traced in the Movement. In fact, it would not be improper to declare that the Movement provided the idiom to correspond to the new social temper. Thus, the Movement was the expression of welfare capitalism. A common culture would go with the Keynesian economy. The arts, like state benefits, should be available to all. Furthermore, the Movement’s characteristic disbelief in big ideas was a fair reflection of the consensus between the two major parties, summed up in the word “Butskellism,” a term coined by *The Economist* in its issue of February 13, 1954 to express the real lack of difference between the politico-economic policies of the Labour and Conservative parties. (“Butskellism” is a compound of the names of R. A. Butler, then

Chancellor of the Exchequer, and his Labour predecessor and opposition “Shadow,” Hugh Gaitskell.)

There arose the ideological structures which took Britain safely through the forties and brought her to rest in the fifties. That is to say, the mixed economy, “Butskellism” (in all but name), all-party acceptance for a welfare state, all-party rejection of the nineteenth-century vision of state planning as a horrible evil. (Marwick, “Middle Opinion” 285)

Actually, at that time there was a sense that ideology was dead and government was consequently a pure matter-of-fact affair. This proved a source of deep disappointment for many. Thus Jimmy Porter’s outburst in John Osborne’s play *Look Back in Anger* (1956), that there were no great causes any more, came to typify the mindset of the “angry young man” to the narrowed horizons of post-War, post-imperial Britain, horizons which found their consummate illustration in Movement writers. After the loss of empire Britain was no longer a world power. Britannia became virtually powerless at the site of her earlier victories. Gone were the eagles and the trumpets. The glorious and the flamboyant edged down. The predicament of imperial Britain was, to borrow words from Ted Hughes, that of a “deep-sea diver in two inches of water” (*Collected Poetry* 651) or an “old sword in its scabbard” (657). Dickens may well have written in the 1860s: “We Britons had at that time particularly settled that it was treasonable to doubt our having and our being the best of everything” (149) but it became something unthinkable a hundred years later. The erstwhile superpower was in danger of becoming a memorial of itself. Britain’s relative post-imperial decline necessitated a reconsideration of what it meant to be British and Britain’s role in the globe as well. One may ponder over the following conversation between Milan Kundera and Ian McEwan:

[Milan] Kundera: ... You see, if you’re English, you never question the immortality of your nation because you are English. Your Englishness will never be put in doubt. You may question England’s politics, but not its existence.

[Ian] McEwan: Well, once we were very big. Now we are rather small.

Kundera: Not all that small, though.

McEwan: We ask ourselves who we are, and what our position in the world is. We have an image of ourselves that was formed in another time. (McEwan 210)

In McEwan’s comment to Kundera – “once we were . . . big . . . small” – the political, economic and cultural fortunes of England are “inflected with a dying fall” (Rogers and McLeod 4). Since the end of World War II, both

the material circumstances of England and the ways it had been envisaged and projected had undergone sustained revision for a number of reasons. Caryl Phillips's comment "England has changed" (3) was of singular importance. In terms of social conditions, England's relation to the rest of the British Isles and the world overseas altered profoundly. The ascendancy of the USA and the USSR after the war, coupled with the increasing influence of American culture in popular music, film, television, the visual arts and literature, caused a shift in the perception of England both at home and abroad as at the centre of international power and global culture. Britain was thwarted in her quest for a role. In the early 1960s, Britain tried to enter the West European Common Market, but was rejected. (However, she succeeded in doing so at a second attempt some years later.) The dissolution of Empire, the debacle of Suez (1956), retreat from Cyprus in the later 1950s and the aborted reorientation towards Europe, all undermined the identity of Tory government and international prestige in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Undermined at the same time was a sense of social authority: "Everything about British class system begins to look foolish and tacky when related to a second-class power on the decline" (Bart Moore-Gilbert and John Seed 18). The island thought to be raised from the deep to govern the globe became, to use the name of Hugh Kenner's famous book, a "sinking island." Thus we find, in his poem "A Woman Unconscious" (written in August 1959) Ted Hughes talks about America and Russia (the then USSR):

Russia and America circle each other;  
 Threats nudge an act that were without doubt  
 A melting of the mould in the mother,  
 Stones melting about the root,

The quick of the earth burned out:  
 The toil of all our ages a loss  
 With leaf and insect . . .

(CP 62)

But significantly, Britain is nowhere in the scene. Actually, in the post-War, post-imperial period, and in the era of what is known as the "cold war," the two indubitable world superpowers were the USA and the USSR, far surpassing the UK. In her *English Journey: or the road to Milton Keynes*, Beryl Bainbridge's journey up the River Itchen on a trawler, from Hamble to Southampton's docks, takes her past the rusting, empty supertanker *Burmah Endeavour*. The tanker was built during the Suez crisis to take oil the long way round. It is now stranded in the Solent