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# **THE PORTRAYAL OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN PHILIP LARKIN'S POEMS**

*By*  
**Dr. Khadeeja Saeed Ismail**  
Instructor  
English Department  
College of Education  
Salahaddin University-Arbil

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**Abstract:**

Philip Larkin (1922-1985), a remarkable British poet, novelist, and critic was born in Coventry, educated in Oxford, and was for many years librarian of the Hull University Library. Though he was initially inspired by Yeats, Larkin found his own voice with the discovery of Hardy's poems.

He is regarded to be unique in presenting the welfare-state world of post imperial Britain in a vivid unsparing and tender way. He is known of his pessimism, his depiction of loneliness, age, and death (Abrams2565). He has a bleak outlook on human life in his society and hides his romanticism behind the mask of irony. In addition to observing places, he is known to be a keen observer of people as his poems are full of recognizable individuals. He is a realist who presents the world and individuals as they are.

As a late modern poet, Larkin was not satisfied with certain values in his society and he criticized them. He had an eye for betterment. In fact his observance and attack of certain individuals was a means for attacking the crowd.

This research aims at shedding some light on the way that Larkin exposes his individuals and his aim behind it. It focuses on the examination of certain individuals, who very often represent their society, through analyzing several poems. It shows how Larkin's role is restricted to the mere criticism of certain habits within such individuals without suggesting any ideal alternative.

For the sake of paving the way, for the reader, to comprehend Larkin's poems, the researcher will focus on the presentation of certain features of his poems and his agnostic approach along with the presentation of the literary context of twentieth century poetry. This will contribute to clarify the cause of the creation of the poet's critical thoughts about the individual and the crowd, in his society.

**1- The literary context of 20<sup>th</sup> century poetry:**

The twentieth century is marked by a dramatic point in the history of English literature. Artists moved towards exploring and making a sense of an increasingly bewildering world. Disparate and often secular beliefs substituted the shared values of the nineteenth century because of the inappropriateness of the traditional literary forms for discussing a fractured society and the artist's loss of confidence in his ability to control the world around him. This is due to the effects of the First World War which became a symbol of futility and senselessness for many, and the Second World War

which had even more devastating and wider-reaching effects than the First World War (Thorne242).

With the end of the Second World War, much of Britain was in ruins. The landscape of ruins was undoubtedly forming an integral part of much of the literary works of 1940s and 1950s. Literature in this landscape was reflected as a metaphor for broken lives and spirits, and, in some less-defined sense, for the ruin of Great Britain itself. This ruined land could astonish its observers with joy in some literary works (Sanders577).

In the post-war period, as the country struggled to make sense of what had happened, poets focused their emphasis on the experimentation and the impersonality of the artist. They abandoned the traditional sequential development of narrative and verse structures, the conventional literary diction, and the established values of artistic practice. As a result of breaking away from long established rules and conventions new aesthetic perceptions, which looked at the world in a different way and reassessed man's positions in the universe, are created (Thorne243).

Therefore the modern age was an age of disaster and chaos on a social and moral level along the world. In the late nineteen-fifties (the age of Larkin), there was a decline in values cherished by societies as the flames of Second World War were still burning. In fact, people had witnessed great destructions in the wake of First and Second World Wars. It was the period in which Philip Larkin was born and brought up (Iftikhar 371).

## **2- Philip Larkin and His Agnostic Approach:**

Philip Larkin is one of the central poets of the Movement, a number of poets in the 1950s who think that the source of true poetry is intelligence and craftsmanship. It is probable that Larkin's verse is a reflection of the cool tone, tight form, and intellectual approach which are the typical principles of the verse associated with the period (Thorne 323). The Movement poets, in their poetry, reflect everyday life emphasizing clarity, democratic values, and intellectual detachment (Sabouri25). As a member of the Movement poets, Larkin is regarded in many ways as typical of the "angry young man" of the 1950s, who is alienated from the past and the present, dissatisfied with tradition and irreverent. Yet the fact of Larkin's being distinctive and to some degree representative new voice ought not to be overlooked (Sanders 602).

As to the content of Larkin's poetry, it is firmly linked to the urban world of the 1950s and 1960s. He investigates the emerging middle-class consciousness as a means through which to see the world, with a concentration on the false hope of commercialism; the uncertainty of the future; the alienation of the individual and the disillusion of unfulfilled

dreams. His ideas are directly connected with the type of world he observes and his personal response to it. Larkin seeks for an understanding of life via exploring familiar and everyday issues of life (Thorne324). The reason of handling negative aspects of life, in his poems, is probably obtained from his speech:

**I think a poet should be judged by what he does with his subject, not by what his subjects are. Otherwise you are getting near the totalitarian attitude of wanting poems about steel production figures.... Poetry isn't a kind of paint-spray you use to color selected objects with. A good poem about failure is success.**

(Martin & Hill81)

In Larkin's poetry, there is an evaluation of ordinary collective institutions- marriage, seaside holidays, British trains, Show Saturday hotels, churches; but he is outside them all (Alexander 393). Larkin is frequently referred to as a sardonic commentator on the social and cultural changes taking place. In his poetry, there is a precise yet detached observation of the world. Larkin is a compassionate observer in spite of his detachment and apparent lack of personal involvement. His ironic commentary is never regarded to be nihilistic: his images may act as a revelation of the banality of urban life, and his language perhaps suggests an underlying disapproval, yet the tone is ultimately objective due to his rejection of romantic myths and his reduction of things to their essential elements. Though his tone is not affirmative the reader is often left with something worthwhile.

Larkin sees a poem as a verbal device that can be used for preserving an experience indefinitely by reproducing it in whoever reads the poem. He does not have any didactic or political purpose, but to Larkin the process of writing is a mental clenching that crystallizes a pattern and keeps it still while you draw it. He uses two types of stimulus for retaining the things he has seen, experienced, or felt. In other words, he admits how beautiful something is or how true it is. The kinds of poems he writes are a reflection of these two sources of poetic inspiration- beauty and truth. His themes are about everyday life as the reader in his age no longer wants to deal with philosophers or paintings or novelists or art galleries or foreign cities. Yet it should be realized that while Larkin aims to write about ordinary things for the ordinary reader, his response to the "average" reader is vague (Thorne327).

### **3- The portrayal of the Individual in Larkin's Poems:**

Larkin's association with the Movement in English poetry during the 1950s and 1960s made him to be accused of being an anti-modernist, who

stood for a return to certain qualities displaced by modernist experimentation. Yet it is observed that rather than simply rejecting modernism, the poet took benefit from its examples. He adopted and refined its preoccupations, and modified its concerns in the light of the changed political and social circumstances of the late 1930s and 1940s (Corcoran148,149). Larkin is an ambitious poet as Swarbick states:

**Larkin was a more ambitious poet than his critics, and some of his admirers, have supposed: ambitious, that is not only in terms of his style of writing but also the kinds of questions he addresses, questions to do with individual identity and existence.** (Swarbick6)

Most of Larkin's poems present a clear-eyed view of contemporary life and its problems. Larkin rejects life because he thinks that it has never lured him. His rejection of life is also due to the world's indifference and its failure for having any use for him (Sabouri25, 27). The poet's rejection of the world is sometimes expressed by showing his disapproval of its values via presenting individuals.

Larkin's poems are full of recognizable individuals and landscapes since the poet is a keen observer of people and places. As a realist, he presents the world as he sees it without any apparent desire for changing what he observes. Meanwhile his tone is characterized by a dry cynical humor and a self-critical honesty because of his deconstruction of romantic visions of love and weddings, childhood and escapist dreams. He is known of his refusal to take things at face value, who strips away illusions, and questions universal truths rather than accepting them.

Larkin's portrayal of the individual and the crowd is distinctive. In spite of the creation of personal portraits of people, in his poems, the poet is more interested in the way individuals represent the mass of humanity. According to the poet, people are similar since they are all yearning for the same thing. All people share the qualities of being trapped by their environment, deceived by commercialism, and isolated from the real world as a result of their pursuit of the ideal. Larkin supposes that man's belief in his own individuality is an illusion because all people live in a commercial society that encourages the individual to define himself through acquisition.

Larkin's portrayal of the individual as a representative of the crowd is obvious in "Mr. Bleaney", the poem which is recognized as a representation of twentieth-century life in which pathos is substituted by horror at the moment of recognition. In this poem, the casual utterances of the landlady and the detached observations of the poet introduce the character of Mr. Bleaney to the reader (Thorne328, 329).

"Mr. Bleaney" is an example of a poem that opens with reported speech and seems to thrust the reader in the middle of a conversation, which happens during a specific set of circumstances (Stojkovic89):

"This was Mr.Bleaney's room. He stayed  
The whole time he was at the Bodies, till  
They moved him." Flowered curtains, thin and frayed,  
Fall to within five inches of the sill,  
Whose window shows a strip of building land,  
Tussocky, littered. "Mr. Bleaney took  
My bit of garden properly in hand."  
Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb, no hook  
Behind the door, no room for books or bags-

(Larkin 53, ll.1-9)

The poem's narrative opening is somewhat complex, as the quoted voice and the initial situation in the first lines of the poem are not completely identifiable until its second occurrence in the second stanza. The reported speech in the second stanza is attributed to a landlady, speaking with a potential tenant (the speaker of the poem) about the previous tenant (Stojkovic 89).

The creation of the setting is helpful in invoking the atmosphere of bareness and grimness of Mr. Bleaney's room. Consequently the graphic description of the room conveyed through manifesting the dinginess of those "thin and frayed" flowered curtains and the loneliness of the "sixty-watt bulb" reflect Mr. Bleaney's life, and by analogy, suggest things about the speaker who occupies the same room and share the same habits:

So it happens that I lie  
Where Mr. Bleaney lay, and stub my fags  
On the same saucer-souvenir, and try  
Stuffing my ears with Cotton-wool, to drown  
The jabbering set he egged her on to buy.

(Larkin 53, ll.10-14)

It is clear that the details about Mr. Bleaney's life, gotten from the landlady, deepen the feeling of emptiness as Mr. Bleaney's habits seem to be the habits of a lonely man. They also give the impression of the speaker's anxiety about being sieged within the cage of the physical space that used to be Mr. Bleaney's, and within the traces of his life style which haunts the speaker (Stojkovic100):

I know his habits- what time he came down,  
His preference for sauce to gravy, why  
He kept on plugging at the four aways-

Likewise their yearly frame: the Frinton folk  
 Who put him up for summer holidays,  
 And Christmas at his sister's house in Stoke.

(Larkin 53, ll.15-20)

The details which emphasize Mr. Bleaney's isolation in the modern world and the emptiness of his life suggest the senses of anxiety and alienation inside every individual in the twentieth century. This is due to Larkin's presentation of Mr. Bleaney to represent every individual and thereby the crowd in the modern world. The poem shows how people are trapped by their environment and isolated from the real world. The creation of a relationship of similarity and parallelism between Mr. Bleaney and the speaker is a suggestion of an identical relationship between Mr. Bleaney and every individual in modern society. This idea is presented through a description of Mr. Bleaney's residence and his style of life. Hence the poem tackles the themes of solitude and sociability in the life of an individual. As a matter of fact though the poem apparently is a mere narration of the story of Mr. Bleaney as a very boring man, Larkin also attacks very realistically the truth of our social life in which a person's character is judged by his style of living (Iftikhar 370).

Therefore Larkin is not an escapist and he understands that life is distorted by escapist fantasies as a steady diet of popular fiction or alcohol (Meyer 30). He never remains as a quiet spectator who beholds unacceptable events. Larkin's aim in portraying the individual is criticizing his behavior and his approach to life. Actually the persona in his poems is frequently a real critic of certain individuals that he exposes, and he shows his dissatisfaction of certain traditions within his society. Yet this does not mean that his personae are ideal figures. In "Dockery and the Son", though the speaker attempts to show himself better than the character he criticizes yet he fails. The poem opens with a conversation introducing the characters of Dockery and his son:

"Dockery was junior to you,  
 Wasn't he?" said the Dean. "His son's here now."  
 Death suited, visitant, I nod. And do  
 You keep in touch with-" or remember how  
 Black-gowned, unbreakfasted, and still half-tight  
 We used to stand before that desk to give  
 "Our version" of "these incidents last night"?

(Larkin 19, ll. 1-7)

A middle-aged speaker has visited his college after the death of one of his slightly younger fellow-students. The dean reminds him that though

Dockery was younger than him, his son is in the college. After looking around, the speaker realizes that his train is back (Stojkovic89).

I catch my train, ignored.  
Canal and clouds and colleges subside  
Slowly from view. But Dockery, Good Lord,  
Anyone up today must have been born  
In "43", when I was twenty-one.  
If he was younger, did he get this son  
At nineteen, twenty? Was he that withdrawn

(Larkin 19, ll. 10-16)

The speaker attacks Dockery indirectly as he got his son when he was nineteen or twenty. Nevertheless he undermines Dockery's ambitions of having a wife, a son, and good work by portraying himself as quite natural despite lacking what Dockery worked for:

...To have no son, no wife,  
No house or land still seemed quite natural.  
Only a numbness registered the shock  
Of finding out how much had gone of life,  
How widely from the others. Dockery, now:  
Only nineteen, he must have taken stock  
Of what he wanted, and been capable  
Of...No, that's not the difference

(Larkin 19, ll. 25-32)

In this stanza, the speaker struggles to come to terms with this glimpse of an alternative life. Moreover, he seeks for persuading himself that Dockery was wrong, and regards life as a state of existential transit rather than of accumulated family and possessions (Booth164). He criticizes Dockery for specifying his life for social and commercial issues.

Furthermore, there is an inevitable exposition of Larkin's private life, which he takes care to protect it from public gaze (Swarbick 3). It makes explicit how in a time that most of his friends and contemporaries had acquired second homes and second wives, he still disliked the idea of owning a house and all the things that went with it, including a wife. To Larkin, lacking such things means freedom for a man living in an increasingly acquisitive society. It was the University's threatening of tipping him out his rented flat into the street that pushed him into becoming a house-owner. Spontaneously, it was a sense of honor that persuaded him to invite a woman for sharing the house with him (Hartley4).

Therefore the speaker admits that though he is dissatisfied with Dockery's life he feels that his life is also empty and meaningless. The



combination of this duality gives the impression that Larkin, both a persona and person, must exist outside what is regarded the "ordinary" (Al-Banna 110).

Thus the researcher notices that Larkin is not affirmative in his claims and he leaves space for alternatives. This is due to the speaker's thoughts, who despite of his dissatisfaction with Dockery's life, he is dissatisfied with his own. Consequently, as it is often in Larkin's poetry, the speaker finds himself in a dilemma, caught between two alternative choices, both of which are unattractive to him (Pishkar 315).

It is obvious that Larkin is very realistic in his poems, as he gives few hints of cynicism. Spontaneously the poet has no didactic or satiric aims as he acknowledges that, "to be a satirist, you have to think you know better than everyone else. I've never done that". (Booth 4) As a matter of fact Larkin seems to be not different from his readers as he confesses that, "I don't want to transcend the commonplace, I lead a very commonplace life. Everythings are lovely to me." (Gilroy 11)

It is remarkable that Larkin's aim in writing poetry is restricted to the mere acknowledgement of the diseases in the society without providing radical treatments for them. This leads the reader to feel a sense of isolation among the individuals in modern society. In fact his presentation of such individuals is for exposing a late 1950s present in his poems. He saw an England of false cheer, cheap fashions, joyless wedding parties, drab recreation grounds, and "estatefuls" of washing (Sanders 603). As a member of the Movement, he sought for true English traditions as Alastair Fowler states, "the Movement poets returned to what they saw as the true English tradition. They eschewed foreign entanglements, weak syntax, and obvious difficulty and they brought everyday life back into poetry." (Sabouri 27)

Larkin's sardonic commentaries on life are sometimes directed to groups of individuals rather than one individual representing the community. In "Afternoons", Larkin expresses his views on young mothers taking their children to play in a park. He shows how marrying young and becoming mothers at a young age leads to their loss of identity. Though Larkin wrote the poem at the age of 37, he makes the reader, as one does at nearly 40, keenly aware of the signs of personal depreciation and realizing that the opportunities of youth will not be repeated:

Summer is fading  
The leaves fall in ones and twos  
From trees bordering  
The new recreation ground.  
In the hollows of afternoons

Young mothers assemble  
At swing and sandpit  
Setting free their children

(Hartley8, ll. 1-8)

If life, in this poem, is seen as a day these mothers are in their afternoons, and if it is seen as a year, then the mothers are already at the end of the summer. "The hollows of afternoons" represent the emptiness of the mothers' lives and their isolation. The mothers and their husbands forget themselves and their weddings with the birth of the first child:

Behind them, at intervals,  
Stand husbands in skilled trades,  
An estateful of washing,  
And the albums, lettered  
Our wedding, lying  
Near the television:  
Before them, the wind  
Is ruining their courting-places

(Hartley8, ll. 9-16)

The mothers, who are caught among the falling leaves of the trees, are bound by their responsibilities in life. The new recreation playground is no longer the place in which they themselves played. Setting their children free implies that they are no longer free themselves. The wind is destroying their "courting-places", and time is closing all the locations in which their lives have been lived. Larkin rejects the way they live out a modern mythology (Booth 150,151).

Consequently, the weight of Larkin's critical examination is on the young mothers and their husbands who already forgot their weddings or even their rights in life. So the poem apparently tackles a very simple subject of the routine of the young mothers' assembling for entertaining their children. The title is delivered in the plural form to show that the habit is repeated every day. Yet in spite of treating an ordinary subject, the poet is capable of conveying the strengths of traditional rites and family and community customs. This is achieved through portraying young isolated individuals through whom Larkin expresses his thoughts about marriage as loss of identity, freedom and love.

Hence, it is fair to say that despite the absence of defiant modernists' assertions in Larkin's poetry; he is much more than the depressed recorder of social appearances (Evans 370). This is because of the poet's tackling of the most sensitive values in his age. In fact his aim in presenting various individuals in his poems is criticizing the individual's dependence on

societal structures. Among the significant structures that Larkin treats is that of the commercialized age. In his poetry an increasing interest in the consequences of the world and ordinary people of contemporary economic and business trends is observed. He dehumanizes such values as regarding everyday life as a market place, and treating commercial norms as the default setting of modern existence (Stojcovic181).

"Here", is a good example in which Larkin conveys his approach to his commercial society and its inhabitants, via describing a journey to the north-east coast of England through different locations. The poet aims at creating a sense of the chaotic urban world, through mirroring the entrapment of modern life:

Here domes and statues, spires and cranes cluster  
Beside grain-scattered streets, barge-crowded water,  
And residents from raw estates, brought down  
The dead straight miles by stealing flat-faced trolleys,  
Push through plate-glass swing doors to their desires-  
Cheap suits, red kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies,  
Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers-  
A cut-price crowd, urban yet simple, dwelling  
Where only salesmen and relations come

(Thorne 340, ll. 10-18)

It is clear that, individuals in this poem, who are referred to as "residents" and "cut-price crowd", are connected with objects quickly and randomly, creating the feeling of claustrophobia. This is due to Larkin's description of the eventful urban place, where landscapes, objects, and people flash, gather, cluster, disperse, and disappear before our eyes. Nevertheless the portrayal of human life is not flattering in this poem, as it suggests massiveness, indiscriminateness, and thoughtlessness. The individuals' indiscrimination with objects brings the sense of their underestimation in the modern commercialized society, since they participate in creating chaos. However what looks like a dismissive gesture to the individuals is shown in the few hints about the "unfenced existence" contrasted to humanity which the poet describes in the following lines:

.....Here silence stands  
Like heat. Here leaves unnoticed thicken,  
Hidden weeds flower, neglected waters quicken,  
Luminously-peopled air ascends;  
And past the poppies bluish neutral distance  
Ends the land suddenly beyond a beach  
Of shapes and shingle. Here is unfenced existence:

Facing the sun, untalkative, out of reach.

(Thorne 341, ll. 25-32)

This existential sphere is obviously not a human habitat since it is "facing the sun", "untalkative", and characterized by "loneliness" and "silence". Despite the fact that this place is "unfenced" and devoid of any demeaning objects or strivings of human beings, it is after all empty. This landscape looks hostile, and "out of reach". This means that the alternative for industrial societies mass-produce things and people is unlivable; therefore it is not an alternative (Stojcovic 186). Hence Larkin never suggests an ideal alternative for the values he criticizes.

Thus, it is safe to say that Larkin worked as a loyal distanced observer of the principles of society. In fact his aim behind writing is not to please or displease others as he acknowledges:

**Yet writing a poem is still not an act of the will. The distinction between subjects is not an act of the will. Whatever makes a poem successful is not an act of the will.... The poems that get written, if they do not please the will, evidently please that mysterious something that has to be pleased.** (Booth 1)

Therefore, the influence of social and political atmosphere of Larkin's time is profound on his poetry. As a matter of fact his poetry is a reflection of his realistic approach towards his time. Moreover a true portrait of post-war England is recognized in his poetry, as his poetic lines are reinforced by the cataclysmic scenario of post-war England (Iftikhar 372).

#### **4. Conclusion:**

The modern English poet Philip Larkin is a sincere member of his society whose aim behind portraying individuals is criticizing modern society and showing the modern individual and thereby the crowd the bad habits in modern life, and yearning for old values. Therefore Larkin focuses on various aspects of human life. Yet in spite of mixing his criticism with cynical hints he is not a satirist as he never transcends his readers in knowledge. In fact the poet introduces himself to the reader as a humble man, who is a lover of the common place. This is approved by the alienated personae he presents in his poems.

Being inspired by Hardy's poems, Larkin is similar to Hardy in restricting his role to the mere exposition of unacceptable ideas in his community. Nevertheless he is a very tender and compassionate observer, who observes precisely at distance and presents his thoughts realistically. Spontaneously, the reader feels a sense of alienation in Larkin's poems due

to presenting certain isolated representative individuals who are victimized as a result of modern man's blind following of modern values.

Larkin is unique in presenting his critical thoughts in a non-affirmative way. This is due to his suggestion of non-ideal alternatives for the values he is dissatisfied with. Consequently the speaker in his poetry is frequently in a dilemma between two alternatives, neither of which is fully attractive to him.

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## عرض "الفرد" في قصائد فيليب لاركن

برز الشخصية البريطانية فيليب لاركن (١٩٢٢ - ١٩٨٥) كشاعر وروائي وناقد. وقد ولد في كوفنترى واكمل دراسته في اوكسفورد وشغل وظيفة مدير المكتبة في جامعة هال لعدة سنوات. وعلى الرغم من تاثره بالشاعر بيتس في بداية مشواره الشعري الا انه اكتشف موهبته الشعرية مع اكتشاف قصائد هاردي.

وقد أُعْتَبِرَ لاركن فريدا في تناول حالة الرفاهية في بريطانيا، في مرحلة ما بعد الاستبدادية، بحيوية وسخاء. وعرف الشاعر بتشاؤمه وتصويره للعزلة والشيخوخة والموت. ولدى الشاعر نظرة كئيبة لحياة الانسان في مجتمعه، حيث يكتم لاركن افكاره الرومانسية خلف قناع السخرية. وبالإضافة الى ملاحظته للامكن فقد عرف الشاعر ايضا بملاحظاته الشديدة والدقيقة للاناس من خلال قصائده المعروفة بعرض الافراد. ويشتهر الشاعر بكونه واقعا نسبة الى عرضه الكون والافراد باشكالهم الحقيقية.

ونظرا لكونه شاعرا في اواخر العصر الحديث، فقد انتقد لاركن بعض القيم في مجتمعه لعدم اقتناعه بها. وكان ساعيا من اجل الاصلاح، وفي الواقع كانت ملاحظاته وانتقاداته لبعض الافراد وسيلة لانتقاده للمجتمع.

ويهدف البحث الى القاء الضوء على طريقة عرض لاركن للافراد وهدفه وراء ذلك. ويركز البحث على تقييم بعض الافراد الذين يمثلون المجتمع من خلال تحليل بعض القصائد. بالإضافة الى توضيح كيفية اقتصار دور لاركن على مجرد انتقاد بعض العادات والتقاليد في هؤلاء الافراد وعدم اقتراح الشاعر اي بديل مثالي للقيم التي ينتقدها.

ولغرض تمكين القارئ من استيعاب قصائد لاركن يركز الباحث على بعض خصائص قصائده ورؤيته المشكوكة بالإضافة الى عرض السياق الادبي لشعر القرن العشرين. ويسهم ذلك في توضيح اسباب تكوين الاراء الانتقادية لدى الشاعر حول الفرد والحشد في مجتمعه