Ted Hughes and his Animal World: Analysis of the Poems of Ted Hughes by the Yardstick of Eco-Criticism

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In this paper a study of some of the poems of Ted Hughes has been made from the perspectives of Eco-Criticism. The world of Ted Hughes is that of unfathomable mystery and he always want to explore the tremendous energy manifested in the world of nature and animal, birds and plants. He has paid attention to even a small and fragile plants or flower like snowdrop or water lily. His poems show his quest for the manifestations of vitality at the heart of the organic universe of which humans are unaware. He is fond of creating myth with different animals and in his presentation even the humble animals like crow and pig get a new dimension for the readers. There is always a sympathetic treatment from his part for the animals like all the Eco critics. He creates a mythical connection between animals and humans. He perceives a kind of feral energy at the heart of the cosmos and the animals are the symbols of this energy. He also advocates animal-right in his poems which also secures his position as an Eco-critic. Like all the Eco-critic he is preoccupied with the animal world which is for him is superior to the world inhabited by us because the former is guided by instinct and not by rationalising gremness. A man cut off from deep-rooted instinct becomes alien to the circuit of creative energy. In this paper I will attempt to show how his works come under the umbrella of Eco-criticism with special attention to his poems like ‘The Hawk Roosting’, ‘The Hawk in the Rain’, ‘An Otter’, ‘Thrushes’ and ‘The Jaguar’. His nature poems like ‘Wind’ or ‘October Dawn’ also drags our attention as Eco critical poems. Again a special attention has been paid by me to his animal-imagery.

Eco-criticism is The study of literary texts with reference to the interaction between human activity and the vast range of natural or non-human phenomena which bears upon human experience encompassing issues concerning flora, fauna, animals and landscape and weather. This involves re-reading the existing literary canon in eco critical terms, that is, the attempt to address standard literary texts in the light of what they reveal about human relations with the non-human world. A writer like Thomas Hardy for example presents a human crisis against a background in which alternative discourse of time and space are constantly invoked to provide ironic distance upon the action. Tess Of the D’Urbervilles may be cited as an example. Again a eco-critic will view a novel like Wuthering Heights (1847) not only from the perspective of Feminism, Marxism or Humanism but will also address the interaction of human and extra-human phenomena, in this case the Yorkshire landscape, the weather and the ubiquitous animal imagery invoked throughout the text. The term was first used by William Ruekert in 1978 and it has its beginning in the academic field probably after 1990. Early examples of expanding the subject of Eco-criticism include work by Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy in their collection Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, and Pedagogy. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin’s editorial in Interventions, “Green Postcolonialism,” addressed the roots of Western environmental assumptions and the “difficulty” that they pose when reading postcolonial literature by bringing environmental history and colonial legacies together. The very definition of humanity depends on the presence of the non-human, the uncivilised and the savage. The poems of Ted Hughes
exemplify the superiority of nature and animal world to the human world. His preoccupation with the wild life may surely term him as an Eco-critic.

Ted Hughes uses myths and folk and cultural beliefs in his process of producing poetry, thus keeping himself aloof from the Movement Poets of the 1950’s. The Movement Poets like Philip Larking, Donald Davie, Kingsley Amis and others preferred logic, cool reasoning and clarity of statements in their poems and disliked the mythical and allusive mode of writing poetry. But Hughes showed a readiness in utilising myths to explore the contemporary reality as well as inherent, intangible mystery of Nature and human identity. D.H Lawrence has also studied the power, energy and single-mindedness of animals in his Birds, Beasts and Flowers. His attempt is similar to that of Hughes in his perception that animals do not suppress their instinctual energy to wear the mask of fake gentility like the humans. But unlike Lawrence Hughes does not sentimentalise or rationalises animals. His animal poems are informed by empathy as well as detachment. Interestingly enough a playwright of absurd theatre like Samuel Beckett has used animals like sheep, dogs, parrots in his plays to express his disgust and contempt for the human and the rational.

In “Wilderness into Civilized Shapes” Wright begins her thinking from the same starting point as Huggan and Tiffin—trying to think the self-other dualism that has constructed the Western understanding of nature as something apart from human. In her words, the very idea of what constitutes ‘nature’ is an imaginary Western construction based on an Aristotelian system of binary thinking that differentiates humans from and privileges them above the so-called natural world. The separation of humanity from nature is at its most systematic in the philosophy of Rene Decartes and the philosophy of Enlightenment or Aufklarung. Reason is for Decartes is the quality that distinguishes humankind from non-human creatures. Val Plumwood argues that nature/culture, reason/nature dualism producing the weakened sense of our perception of Nature which refuses to admit the reality and seriousness of ecological crisis (Plumwood, Environmental Culture, p.3). Separation of humanity from nature has a long history. Industrial capitalism first appeared in Western Europe and was spread by colonialism and in the hands of the colonial power Nature and wild life suffered different kinds of exploitation. However, Ted Hugh has given superior status to animals. In his poem like ‘Hawk Roosting’, one of the most controversial and multidimensional of his poems Hughes has stressed how animal kingdom refuses to betray its abysmal qualities and desires whereas the human world constantly poses a rational outlook while being ignorant of their essential instinctual urges. Animal world lacks the sophistry which degenerates us. The attitude of Ted Hugh is purely Ecocritical in his treatment of the Hawk, the symbol of the Nature. Both the hawk and Nature are ruthless and unchangeable and both are endowed with the potentiality to destroy and devastate. Also, the hawk is as unifocal, undeflected and cruel as Nature herself. Man has been given an inferior status to the predatory bird in this poem. The later lives by instinct whereas man finds his instinct paralysed by the rational mind. Man is plagued by guilt, remorse and sorrow and to escape from horrifying reality man dreams and again when he wakes up he is torn and tormented by strife. The hawk is free from all these kinds of falsifying dreams.

The poem ‘Thrushes’ is also characterised with the same kind of vivid and realistic imagery of the violence and ferocity of the bird like the hawk. They have deadly eye and automatic purpose and they are no less full of energy than Mozart’s brain and the shark’s purpose. The swiftness of purpose of these thrushes is contrasted with the procrastination of human beings. Blake has stated in one of his statements that the wrath of lion is the wisdom of God and tigers of fierceness are better than the horses of instruction. The violent animals presented in the poems of Ted Hughes surely conform to the concept of Blake. Another device used by
Hughes is that of the device used by the Formalists in the name of ‘Ostrananie’ or making strange. And with this literary instrument Hughes gives a new shape to the birds and beasts in the poems.

Ted Hughes is an Eco-critic in the truest sense of the term as he voices his protest against fake rationality under whose cover man kills his fellow beings and wild life and destroys Nature. Critics have accused him of glorifying violence. But he clarifies his stance by stating that his poems are not about violence but about vitality. Animals are not violent; they are so much more controlled than man. They kill for satisfaction of hunger and struggle for survival. But man murders other beings just to quench the thirst of greed and egotism and despite man’s constant effort to nip his inborn animal instinct, he succumbs to it in unpredictable situations. Besides violence is a source of energy, a power house, a condition of being. Life is conceived in positive violence and art in creative violence. Animals are presented as free of prohibitions and fear and full of life and concentration. With their innocence to human corruption, they emerge like Adam and Eve in their Pre-lapsarian stage in Heaven. The Hawk in the Rain illustrates all these idea- how a man is placed below the animals in the hierarchy built in his poems:

I drown in the drumming ploughland, I drag up

Heel after heel from the swallowing of the earth’s mouth,

From clay that clutches my each step to the ankle

With the habit of the dogged grave, but the hawk

Effortlessly at height hangs his still eye.

Thus, the poet is vehement and brutal and endowed with a spontaneous violence that tends instinctively parallel between nature of man and the ferocity of wild beast and birds of prey. His representation has no Wordsworthian serenity but like a true Eco-conscious man he presents Nature in its original state, that is Nature red in tooth and claw. He has a Shamanist idea that animals are more spiritual beings compared to man since they live a life based on instinct. Man is not free but is confined in his social life.

Ted Hughes is also an advocate of animal right and he is sensible enough to feel the plight of animals. This is another characteristic of an Eco critic who fight for the upliftment of wild life. The poems like ‘An Otter’ or ‘The Howling of Wolves’ are the manifestation of his disgust at human activity like killing animals purposelessly. Animals have their individual lives. They are the monarch in their kingdom. They enjoy life in the lap of Nature. But man callously intervenes in their world, kills them for sports or for amusement or for greed. An otter is a kind of animal which is capable of living both in land and water. It symbolises a mystery which lies in the heart of the world. Otter kills a trout to quench his hunger. It acts by its instinct. But the hunters who kill the otter just for its skin are fallen creatures to the eye of the poet because their act involves no heroism. This purposeless killing is brutal and devilish. Man murders Nature for mere commodification. This poem has a note of pathos which surely marks Hughes as lover of Nature and animals. Another poem called ‘The Howling of wolves’ similarly manifests the empathy of the poet for the trapped animals who have to suffer the cold blast of wind due to foolish act of man who victimises the animals without thinking for the little cubs of the animals. The useless deeds of man destroy the circuit of energy found in the animals. Animals are simple and innocent beings who gain no sadist pleasure in torturing others as human beings do. This very poem records the brutal torture inflicted on the wolves
by the human beings. The wolves have to endure the agony of being caught in a steel trap and
they keep howling in predicament. The poet feels that this agonising voice of the wolves is
actually the voice of Nature suffering in the hands of man. This kind of sympathy may be
expected from a man who is close to Nature and Hughes is surely one of them.

In another poem entitled as ‘Horses’ the poet depicts the silent sufferings of the horses. They
patient and passive horses, standing in the freezing cold symbolises the capacity to endure the
adversity of weather which we, the human lacks. In the poem ‘The Bull Moses’, a bull who is
subservient to man is treated with sympathy because the bull has enough power to kill his
master but he becomes tame due to sheer habit.

Another characteristic of poems of Ted Hughes is that he always tries to give a mythological
dimension to his poems on animals. Eco-critics in modern ages have traced the connection
between ecology and culture as every text is situated in a place which has its own
environment. Ted Hughes has equated Nature with myths and thus ultimately with culture. In
a January 1971 interview for the London Magazine Hughes explained the reason for choosing
a hawk by saying: ‘What I had in mind that in the hawk Nature is thinking... I intended some
creator like Jehovah in Job but more feminine’. Hawk is the symbol of the fierce forces of the
Nature which is necessary to balance the world. Hughes might have the same view which
Blake had perceived in the creation of The Tyger. The bird has been rightly bestowed the
power to rule in his own way. The poet wanted to cast the bird in the image of Jehovah who
is realised in Job as both destroyer and preserver. Modern man has forgotten the concept of a
unified, creative deity for he can only think of a benevolent God. Man has become ignorant
of the cruel side of God under the impact of Christianity. Hughes thus, through the image of
the hawk pays tribute to the Hebrew and Pagan gods and goddesses and unites the culture of
the Occident and the Orient. ‘The Jaguar’ is another poem in which Hughes intends to give a
mythical structure. This may be called a visionary poem as in the restless movement of the
jaguar the poet has visualised the image of someone who fights for a noble cause with a
spirit that cannot be confined in the boundaries of prison. The jaguar is depicted in the poem
as an uncontrollable spirit whose energy disregards the captivity of cages. His eyes burn and
body chases the bars of the cage like a flame. This adds a note of supra-human conception in
the formation of the animal. In the last stanza the jaguar is depicted as spinning the earth
under his feet like a ball or a prayer wheel. The total effect is to make the reader aware of the
terrific energy of the wild beast and to emphasise the superiority of this animal to us. The
jaguar has given the status of a mythical being by looking at which we feel the lacunae of
vitality in us.

Hughes as a myth-maker appears to be most impressive in his sequence of poems entitled as
‘Crow’. Crow has been created by God to improve the nightmarish condition of man. The
sight of nature and the sight of human beings both are terrifying to him as it was terrifying to
Adam and Eve to discover themselves in naked condition after eating the fruit of forbidden
tree of knowledge. The crow sees nothing cheerful around him and only finds desolation.
This symbolises man’s nature to spot out ugliness, emptiness and desolation in the creation of
God. Man also suffers from a superiority complex like the crow who esteems himself above
other creatures. Again this crow-myth may suggest desolation, purposelessness and absurdity
in modern life and the poet’s own apathy to this world. Modern man has lost spirituality and
their life has been dried up without the lack of spiritual essence. Again, in the poem ‘Crow’s
First Lesson’ the crow has been portrayed as a villain and a trickster. Crow appears as an
antagonist of God and God fails to teach him the word ‘love’. This may signify the failure of
man to follow the principle of love in this world. Crow image is actually symbolises the
modern man who is devoid of spirituality and lacks the blessing of God in their life. Thus we may see how apt Hughes is in making myth with common animals.

In the poem ‘Black Beast’ which is a sequence of the crow poem the Crow tries to find out the sources of evil but ironically does not realise that evil is inside him. Symbolically, this poem implies that man is unaware of the evil inside him. Man fights with evil but does not deal with the evil inside him. Crow interferes in the world of man because he has the same murderous aspect of man.

The poems of Hughes like ‘Wind’ has an autobiographical note. It can be classified as Nature poem. Here the destructive image of Nature has been sketched and the helplessness of man to natural calamity is stated. In spite of advancement of science man can do nothing to prevent the forces of nature and he has to surrender to it. Man unlike the beasts cannot withstand Nature. Animals can understand Nature better than humans because they are guided by their instinct.

The Nature-poems of Ted Hughes have beautiful vivid graphic imageries. The freezing cold of October month in England is very difficult to endure both for humans and for animals. But when animals can bear to stay without shelters humans cannot get relief even inside of the houses. Animals are closer to the elementary forces of Nature and human beings shun to come in contact of nature. And that is why human life has become so artificial and full of duplicity, hypocrisies and insensible.

Hughes’s animal poems are among the best in his work, and among the finest in the whole range of English poetry. The imagery in these poems has its own appeal. This imagery shows Hughes’s enormous powers of observation and an exceptional capacity to embody his observations in words. In almost every poem, Hughes has pictured most vividly the various physical features of the particular animal he is dealing with. In the poem The Jaguar, for instance, the animal concerned is depicted as brimming with energy, thus offering a contrast to some of the other animals in the zoo. The jaguar has eyes which are sharp and penetrating, and which are almost blind because of the fire of rage in them. The jaguar is deaf of ear because of “the bang of blood in the brain.” Here, then, is an example of Hughes’s visual imagination, and his capacity to record his impressions in the kind of language which no other poet has ever used in this context: “by the bang of blood in the brain”; “the drills” of his eyes, “his stride is wildernesses of freedom”—these are striking words and phrases.

The poem Thrushes is also characterized by the same kind of vivid and realistic imagery. Here the violence and ferocity of the birds has most vividly been conveyed to us through the use of forceful vocabulary and striking combinations of words. The symbolic significance of the imagery in these animal poems can simply not be ignored. It is the symbolic significance which imparts to this imagery a certain depth and profundity. Hughes does not write about animals as if he regarded them as mere animal. He finds in them certain qualities which link them to human life. The symbolic animal imagery thus yields a significance which can enhance our understanding of ourselves. Hughes believed that the strength of animals lay in their instinct and precise function. The animals, according to him, are much more adapted to their environment than human beings. Thus in the poem The Hawk in the Rain, the bird sits effortlessly at a height, while the speaker in the poem is assailed by the ferocious wind which thumbs his eyes, throws his breath, and tackles his heart, while the rain hacks his head to the bone. Thus Hughes puts a human being at a disadvantage by comparison with a bird. Besides, Hughes also believed that animals were not, like man, undermined by a false morality or incapacitated by doubt. A hawk is a hawk, whereas a man has ambitions to be God-like and is therefore permanently frustrated. A hawk is always in its own element even when it dies an
elemental death. In the poem *The Jaguar* it is made clear to us that, while man may imprison and animal, he cannot imprison an animal’s energy and instinct, especially the energy and instinct of jaguar. Even in a man-made cage, a jaguar remains true to itself. Evidently Hughes believes that human beings are more caged in their domestic and social environment than animals are in their cages. *The Thought-Fox* is also partly an animal poem, in which the poet’s inspiration is compared to a fox making a sudden and silent entry into his head. In this case, instinct replaces intellect. In the poem *The Horses*, the ten horses are timeless; they inhabit their own world. They are “grey, silent fragments of a grey silent world.” These horses can fully cope with the freezing cold of the morning while the poet is unable to do so. The speaker in this poem, who is undoubtedly Hughes himself, expresses his own inability to cope with the elements, while the horses stand in a close relationship with those elements. The horses are as patient as the horizons; and they endure. Hughes has here made a credo out of the example of the horses. Like them, he wants to inhabit a timeless world and be tested by the elements. In the poem *Hawk Roosting* the poet does not praise the hawk so much as he denigrates man by comparison. The hawk is here seen as vastly superior to man who is unable to accept Nature for what it is and, instead, tries to tame it by giving it philosophical names. The hawk does not have man’s debilitating intellectuality or man’s slavish obedience to rules.

In this way, we may conclude that animal-poems of Ted Hughes have a humanitarian note about them. These poems betray the empathy of the poet despite his attempt to make distance from his creation. Besides, there is a naturalistic vitality in the poems of Ted Hughes. He has presented the animals with the characteristics of man but the animals have much more vigour than humans. All these features of his poetry will surely add the feather of Eco-critic in his crown. And the poems of him may be aptly analysed in the yardstick of Eco-critism.

**Works Cited:**