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Allegorical, Mythical and Symbolical Significations in the Poetry of Ted Hughes

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Abstract:

Ted Hughes is the versatile and prolific poet in the whole gamut of the second half of the Twentieth century. The unique procurement of the poet is the employment of animal imagery which has profundity and variety of connotations. These images incorporate a galaxy of Natural beings- seen as well as unseen viz terrestrial, aerial, and aquatic. To interpret them at their surface level is a misconception on the part of a reader because they are poetized figuratively and mythically. They serve for the poet as a medium and a way of communicating his innermost feelings, and also his perceptions regarding this visible world. The present study tries to elucidate the same, and thereby offer a novel dimension for Hughes's readership. The textual illustrations, cross references, and juxtapositions between the present and the past are the salient peculiarities of the paper.

Poetry is a flame which sets ablaze the ambit of literature. It is such as asset without which we cannot even imagine of the literary art. Since inception, poetry has witnessed countless ups and downs, but it has always sustained its glamour and grandeur. Different genres have evolved and developed, but none has entertained and instructed the readers in the manner poetry does. It would not be an exaggeration if we say that with the birth of poetry, the wonderful world of literature has started its expedition which is still tireless and exuberant. A galaxy of poets has come and gone, and they have contributed to the poetic tradition as per their competence and the need of the hour. Among them, some have carved an indelible image in the hearts of readers, and have become legends and myths for the posterity

What differentiates Ted Hughes from his fellow poets in the second half of the Twentieth century is the distinctive and deviated treatment of his subject matter. Hughes like his modernist masters such as G.M. Hopkins, W.B. Yeats, and T.S. Eliot, uses allegorical, symbolical, and mythical techniques which dress his ideas and thoughts with profundity and variety. By employing these tools, the poet makes vivid and striking comparisons and contrasts between the past and the present, old and new, and demonstrates how much the primitive conventions are transformed, and how many loopholes have taken birth in traditional western culture in a so called modern advanced age. He feels that the need of the hour is to think of reformation and regeneration of the crushed down cultural and religious values. He like a prophet propagates the message for such revival through his writing by using the weapons of allegory, symbolism and myth.

Allegory is any piece of literature in which the characters, setting, or action is presented with double standard meaning-literal as well as figurative. The term 'symbol' also entails anything which signifies something else, in addition to its surface denotation. The symbols are of two categories conventional and personal. In the former category, the writer uses the already established symbols which serve his/ her purpose; and in the latter's case, the new symbols are generated and a poet, by doing so secures a universal recognition. Being a well-read and a pioneer in many ways, Hughes utilizes both kinds of symbolism, and bestows his work with the probability of multi-dimensions.

Another salient feature of the contemporary poetic output is the abundant employment of the myths. The Greek epithet 'Mythose', denotes any concept, thought, or story which cannot be questioned in its reliability. The myth consists of various rites, rituals, legends, folklores etc. In Hughes's poetry, particularly in his matured work, myths play a vital role. Seamus Heaney, in his oration, at the Memorial Service for Ted Hughes at Westminster, has declared that as DNA is the generic code, so myth is the poetic code for human mind. Myths have numerous actions and functions to perform, and so are defined variedly. William Blake says that a myth can seduce a genuine poet to inflate his themes into cosmic incomprehensibility. A myth is contrived mostly by using metaphors and symbols. When a cluster of effective symbols assume their strength for dramatic narrative, they can be named as a myth. Hughes asserts that developing inwardly means "organizing the inner world or at least searching out the patterns there and that is a mythology" (*The Unaccommodated Universe* 204). His approach towards myth is very unique among all moderns:

Obviously many poems take myths as their subject matter, or make an image of a subjective event, without earning the description 'visionary', let alone 'mythic'. It is only when the image opens inwardly towards what we recognize as a first hand as if religious experience, or mystical revelation, that we call it 'visionary', and when 'personalities' or creatures are involved, we call it myth (*Shakespeare and the Goddess of Being Complete* 35).

Basically, Hughes gravitates for the allegorical and mythical treatment of his substance is associated with his well-gained knowledge of Anthropology and Archeology of which he has remained a zealous student at Cambridge. The former discipline deals with the study of mankind and its history since its very inception. While as the latter is the systematic study of primitive and perennial cultures, traditions, rites, rituals, art and architecture. In this regard, the most successful work in Hughes's profile is *Crow*, which is based on diverse myths and legends. He borrows them from multi-cultures and countries.

Hughes not only derived from the Old World and the New World, and from Indo-European traditions, but also widely and freely alludes to the source of the Eskimos, the Persians, Japanese, and above all has ransacked the *Talmud* and the *Holy Quran*. These treasures of valid and reliable knowledge contribute fully to realize Hughes's dream of creating the bewildering and puzzling figure of crow and embed its character with those features which have no parallel traces in any literature. *Crow* poems establish the real reputation of the poet as innovative and creative of higher degree. The objectivity and impartiality which the poet maintains throughout, adds to the grandeur of the book, and also fits to Eliot's concept of poetry: "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (*Tilak* 430).

There is no agreement among the thinkers and the critics pertaining to the reliable version of the crow tale, and therefore, several stories of variant and deviated natures have been propounded. But Keith Sagar, being an avid and voracious reader of Hughes, has expounded a version which is widely recognized as the authentic, and which is the exact match of the poet's construction:

After having created the world, God has a nightmare that ridicules his creation, particularly God's masterpiece Man...God challenges the nightmare to do better and the result is crow. God shows crow around the universe and sets him various tasks and ordeals, in the course of which crow becomes more intelligent and resourceful....Crow begins to wonder who his creator is and he encounters female figures whom he never recognizes as avatars of his own creator so that he always bungles the encounters. Finally he comes to a river he must cross where an ogress insists that he carries her across on his shoulders. Her weight strangely increases until the water is at his mouth at which moment she asks him a riddle which he must answer for her weight to decrease until she starts to get heavier again. This happens seven times. When they eventually reach the opposite bank the ogress turns into a beautiful young woman who runs off into the woods. Crow follows (*The Art of Ted Hughes* 40).

Through the image of crow, the poet raises many questions regarding a range of human assumptions, concepts and written records that are generally consulted in the poet's era, in the western civilization. In this process, the requirement of the important human values is felt, due to the skepticism of a displaced nihilistic existence. In the very opening poems, the poet recounts the account of crow's birth and lineage. This very description creates a sardonic and satiric tone of genealogies as told in the *Bible*. In "Lineage", Hughes displays Adam and Eve begot Mary who begot God. Since God is a woman born in the poem, He can produce nothing, except the idea of nothingness: "Adam begot Mary/ Who begot God/ Who begot nothing/ Who begot never/ Never Never Never/ Who begot crow. (*The Art of Ted Hughes* 110). In "Examination at the Womb Door", the poet emphasizes on the supremacy of death, although crow professes to be superior to death, as it is obvious in its reply when asked the same: "me evidently". Both poems "Crow Hears Fate Knock on the Door" and "Crow Tyrannosaurus", present through the bird's distorted vision, a bewilderment of man, as a half-man and half-animal, whose real paradigm in Hughes's poetry is Wodwo. In the last cited poem, the protagonist crow, trembles before the sheer bloody inclined creation and its food chain hierarchy:

Crow thought 'also

Alas ought I

To stop eating

And try to become a light'?

And his eye saw a grub. And his head trap sprang, stabbed (*The Art of Ted Hughes* 112).

Crow is a dynamic character that confronts the Energies to be tackled- dragon, serpent and ogress, hurdles in its way of ambitious quest. The bird during the journey learns to survive the worst, to bear the hard punishments for his mistakes, flaws and guilt, and ultimately to gain a suitable relation with female, who is also Nature. The quest of crow is identical of Hughes's quest to attain a broad vision and thereby, become a man in real sense, resurrected into an innocent world of joy and morality. Thus, through a mythical figure of crow, Hughes explicates ugliness, emptiness, sterility and desolation prevailed everywhere in Nature and in man. Hughes argues that true culture demands negation of human ego, and the crow as a paradigm of man, denies abandoning its self-hood. So it is a lampoon on religion and free thought. On the whole, the crow is such a symbolical figure that it is next to impossible to access exactly why Hughes has chosen this creature to depict his dimmest days. But whatsoever it may be, the volume is his masterpiece in essence, which incorporates irony, satire, and sarcasm within its microcosm. Its reading is surely amusing, alarming, terrifying and shocking.

The general idea of contemporary criticism is that a work of art has its own autonomous entity and can be interpreted and evaluated independently, without taking into consideration the circumstances of the author. Such a conception urges a reader to detach a work from its writer and also to disregard the pleasurable pains which the latter undergoes while bringing the artifact into being. Dylan Thomas, the master of Hughes, like romantics, flourishes the myth of spontaneous and unpremeditated art, an

ecstasy, or what G.M. Hopkins termed “delirium tremendous imagination”. Although Hughes himself endorses that “the poem can emerge of a sudden complete and perfect unalterable, taking the poet completely by surprise as if he had no idea where it came from”. Yet the reality is something else. The process of writing especially poetry is a time consuming and hard labored task. One of Hughes’s painfully composing, but formidable achievement is “The Dove Came” which is comprised of a series of drafts and these drafts show the toilsome evolution of the poet’s thought.

“*The Dove Came*” is an epitome of Hughesian theriomorphic imagery for psycho-spiritual intention. Doves are only birds that nourish their young ones on milk, crop milk and this can be produced at any time in a year. They have not any particular and limited duration for mating and breeding, and consequently, are considered to be lecherous and sexually more fertile. Due to the same characteristic trait, they are associated to the goddesses-Venus and Ishtar. The effeminate traits of doves like suppleness and cozy warmth suggest their maternal, affectionate and careful endowments. These features connect the birds with Christian mythology, where the dove symbolizes the Holy Spirit. In the Christian Scriptures, the spirit of God alighted on Jesus Christ like a dove. Aphoristically, the dove symbolizes the keen meekness and fidelity. While writing this poem, Hughes might have Eliot in his mind:

The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare.
The one discharge from sin and error (*The Laughter of Foxes* 93).

The crux of the poem is the conflict between the two extremes- the affection in the descending spirit, and the destruction in the selfish world in which it is inclined to incarnate itself. The dove is portrayed as the guardian of a Blakean constructed universe of childish innocence, which seems to have a nexus with Lawrence. In the novel *The Rainbow*, the lovers Tom and Lydia Brangwen came together in the perfect marital union, and the lover knows that “She was the gateway and the way out”. The word rainbow represents unity and harmony which Hughes might be deliberating on here.

The killing of the dove in the poem is the real world of Hughes where pure innocence is an integral part of barbarity. It is again reminiscent of Eliot:

The dripping blood our only drink
The bloody flesh our only food.
(East Coker IV: <<http://www.tristan.com/43.net/quartet/coker.html>>)

A number of myths and rituals establish a fact that worshippers bathe themselves in the blood of an innocent sacrificial animal, and the slaughterers believe that by doing this, they will redeem themselves from their sins. In this reference, we have a graphic description by J.G. Frazer, a well-adept anthropologist of the modern world:

A bull, adorned with garlands of flowers, its forehead glittering with gold leaf, was driven onto the grating and there stabbed in torrents through the apertures, and was received with devout eagerness by the worshippers on every part of his person and garments, till he emerged from the pit, drenched, dripping and scarlet from head to foot, to receive the homage, nay the adoration, of his fellows as one who had been born again into eternal life and had washed away his sins in the blood of the bull (463).

According to Frazer, it is believed that vitality and potency of sacrificial bull would pass into the worshipper-killer. The slender dove-bird can be easily killed, but its willingness and non-resistance is purified and sanctified, which bestows upon it the status of absolute immortality. The crashing down of the dove suggests firmly that it is the pre-ordained destiny of the bird to be slain as it was of Jesus Christ to be crucified. The consummation of the dove’s mutton and blood recollects the last supper of the prophet Christ with his disciples. All this shows, Hughes’s access to the primitive mythology and his craft in modifying the sources as per his desired need.

Ted Hughes is greatly inclined towards bygone times in all its forms and connotations and with all its assumptions and evaluations. The dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the present predicament of the so called modern scientific age, pricks him to seek solace in ancient myths and fables. He applies these old tools in order to bring a reformation in follies and flaws for the betterment of humanity. His sensibility exhibits a parallel fascination for both Eastern and Western beliefs which have been influencing the writers since long before.

Hughes’s movement towards the past does not imply that he repudiates his culture, rather it leaks out his solemn concern for it. That is why Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts write:” Hughes’s interest in the primitive is not a rejection of culture, but a concern for culture” (N. pag.). The modern man’s behavior startles him and he realizes that people need cultural resurrection and sophistication which they have in the past. The poet is very specific in his approach to draw on ancient cultures and focuses only on what is related to the internal part of man, and concerned with the natural world. This acute comprehension enables him to observe how the present social order has given birth to certain dragonish giants and vampires that are devoid of moral responsibility and natural human goodness, and how these by-products have caused chaos and confusion due to their evil designs and malignant motives. All this is rendered by Hughes through his mythical technique.

Hughes’s treatment of the jaguar is not ordinarily as an animal, but symbolically it signifies much more. In “The Jaguar”, the poet creates a myth to display the Natural power and energy that can revitalize and empower, or it can also cause commotion and

destruction. The jaguar is a ferocious and untamable beast that appears like a zealous visionary. Its eye is "Satiated to be blind in fire" and its strength to spin the earth under the feet like a ball is evident:

The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel.
Over the cage floor the horizons came. (*The Hawk in the Rain* 4)

The poem demonstrates the frightening power of absolutely conscious jaguar. Symbolically, there is underlying encounter between humans as civilized and a wild predator that is superior in power. There is also suggestion that such a power actually belonged to man, and now it continues to maintain its flow, though in the Nature. Thus, through the mythical use, we as humans, become aware of our own inherited strength of glancing at a jaguar in confinement. Hughes has a firm belief that human beings are more entrapped in their socio-domestic environment than animals are in their traps.

The bird skylark has been a supreme fascination for the poets in all ages, due to its unique innate qualities. Different poets have treated it differently and symbolized its image as per their philosophy. The romantics, who are the real Nature observers, have also poetized the bird and highlighted its various physical traits, and bestowed it with some spiritual elements.

Wordsworth in his poem "To the Skylark" addresses the bird as "Ethereal minstrel", and as "pilgrim of the sky". The poet creates a sort of contrast between the earth and the sky through the image of skylark that being terrestrial aspires for celestial. Although the bird longs for even greater flights literary/spiritually, yet it must return to its physical earthly lodging. It is just like a pilgrim to the sky. The line "type of the wise who soar, but never roam" suggests the real purpose of the bird's adventurous leaps at the ungauged heights. Skylark's soaring is, looked upon as 'rising' rather than 'roaming' around. Besides, the phrase, "a privacy of glorious light", metaphorically reveals the religious tendency of Wordsworth.

Closely akin to the Wordsworthian treatment of the skylark, is P.B. Shelley's approach. Shelley starts with exclamation; "Hail to thee, blithe spirit" is absolutely religious in its intent. The spirit after death goes to heaven, just like skylark that tries to proceed its journey at the maximum height. The line: "The world should listen then, as I listening now", displays Shelley's faith in superiority of bird to human being, and it is the point which relates him with Hughes.

Though Hughes at the outset of the poem concentrates more on physique of the bird, and highlights muscle, blood, bone, feathers thrashing and heart "drumming like a motor", later on he goes beyond. The image of the head "barbed like a hunting arrow", produces more profound image "shot through the crested head". The skylark leaves for the heaven to be "burned out" and "sucked empty" by the burning sun. D.H. Lawrence in "The Crown" depicts the same: "It is a leap taken into the beyond, as a lark leaps into the sky, a fragment of earth which travels to be fused out, sublimated in the shinning of the heavens". (*Phoenix II*, 374). Both Hughes and Lawrence want to state a process of separating out the material and the spiritual, body and the spirit, the spirit to be carried up into the heaven, and the body retreated to the earth.

Hughes's treatment of the skylarks is not just like those of Shelley and Wordsworth, but he goes further in involving the mythology. The poet evolves the myth to hatch a resemblance between skylarks and Cuchulain, a heroic figure in Celtic mythology:

Manacled with blood,
Cuchulain listened bowed,
Strapped to his pillar (not to die prone)
Hearing to far crow
Guiding the near lark nearer
With its blind song... (*The Art of Ted Hughes* 92).

Cuchulain, a mythological hero, lived only for dignity, uses all his power and strength to avoid death. He believes that his dauntless bravery would immortalize his fame, although he is doomed from the very commencement. The larks have also been "burned out" and "sucked empty", not for famed name, not in effort to evade the life's inevitability, but in willing obedience and self abnegation. The song of larks suggests Cuchulain that he is "the strongest of the Strong", yet he is fragile and frail in comparison to the transcended powers, he resists. Thus, it becomes evident that human nature despite possessing lore and strength, can never overpower the non-human powers.

Hughes's allegorical and mythical preoccupation is crystal clear in "the Bear". In this poem, he is not concerned with the bear merely as an animal, but renders it with much symbolical and allegorical utility. Eskimo Shamans usually dreamed of bears during their search for knowledge. Furthermore, the bear was also venerated and worshipped in primitive times. On the basis of all this, Hughes treats the bear as a symbol of human's sleeping soul which can be awakened. If the spirit is revived, a person would realize him/her and the world, and would overcome the fictitious beliefs and recognize his place in the overall creation. In olden times, the bear was slaughtered as a sacrifice to regenerate the body and the soul, and in this way, the bear accomplished a holy purpose. The poet, in "The Bear" dwells upon the mythical bearings of the animal with the intention to make us aware of the need for self-renewal, and for an identification of the internal potential in humans.

Therefore, the readers and critics of the poetry of Ted Hughes must respond to his sense of the significance and dependence of allegory, mythology, and symbols, as an instrument for cultural and personal realities. Hughes's poetry tries out a variety of perspectives towards the prevailing cultures' clash with Nature as Keith Sagar says, "Whether it is possible to accept Nature as a whole, to worship it, perhaps even to love it".

The study of the process of Hughes's development as a poet, makes it clear how intimately, it is related to the mythic paradigm. The progression has a correspondence and semblance to the life long and complex process which ultimately leads to what William

Blake terms as 'four-fold vision'. Blake's coinage of "four- fold" means that these diverse stages are mutually dependent and intrinsically connected. When one passes through all the four phrases successfully, he achieves the vision which helps to comprehend and recognize the things in real sense. In the first stage, a person is required to undertake the inner journey out of dark dungeon, and be prepared to tackle the elongated and complicated battle. The second stage needs a right direction of energies and potentials that will overcome this battle and odyssey satisfactorily. The penultimate phase is the recognition and discovery of goodness and innocence. This shows the path to the final and foremost stage where one attains a unified vision, a vision which brings out the essence and sacredness of things.

Ted Hughes's span of life as a poet, traces this progression and transformation to a large extent although he deviates and retreats in-between. The earlier publications of his poetry such as *Lupercal*, *Wodwo*, and *Crow* have got earlier stages of the fourfold mythical vision, and the *River* has achieved the later, regenerative stages, and thus, completing the slow but persistent process of transformation over the poet. Therefore we can assert of Hughes what he himself said of Eliot that every poem must be read and recognized chronologically, as part of "the series which make up of the poet's opus":

The poet's each successive creation can be read as the poetic self's effort to make itself known, to further its takeover. This effort embodies itself in a complete visionary symbol of the poetic self and its separated predicament. The distinguished features of this kind of image are just these that it is visionary, that it is irreducibly symbolic, and that it is dramatically complete. The successive visions evolve in time according to the way the poetic self evolves in its hidden life (*Winter Pollen* 277).

It is now evident that Hughes's inclination towards antiquity ought not to be taken for his separation from and rejection of modern culture. He actually renovates the primitive superstitious beliefs as an aid to distract the mind of contemporary Western man from the evils and wrongdoings being done by him. The *Crow* poems and so the other subsequent publications expose the triviality and futility of the modern style of living, which is generally thought as an indication of the advancement and improvement, but is in the poet's vision as something hideous and pernicious for the authentic and true culture. The feeling for self aggrandizement and self-exaltation, inhuman disposition, detachment from Nature, and negation of instinctual life in modern man, are all deadly enemies of real culture. Hughes attempts to rectify all this in his poetry by employing the allegorical and mythical modes.

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