



Animal Imagery in Ted Hughes' Poetry: An Overview

Dr. Rajendra Prasad Sharma

Officiating Principal & Associate Professor, Department of English
Government Girls Post Graduate College Sirsaganj
Firozabad (U.P)

Abstract

Ted Hughes frequently writes of animal life, of nature and the inner turbulence of modern man who has created a huge gap between himself and nature and leading a life of materialism which is at the distance of reality. He considers beasts better than man because they live a real life in their natural surroundings. Hughes expresses human follies, anger and hatred through the animal kingdom. In fact, it is isolation and insecure position of man in nature which is vividly depicted in Hughes poetry. The present paper is an attempt to critically analyse the animal imagery in Ted Hughes poetry.

Keywords: *Animals, Beasts, Violence, Energy, Nature*

Introduction

Ted Hughes, a poet of versatile talent, was British poet Laureate from 1984 until his death on 28th October 1998. His poetry, as Seamus Heaney once said, reflects "racial memory, animal instinct and poetic imagination all flow into one another with an exact sensuousness." (Shekhawat 1). He is profoundly concerned with the question of human existence, man's relation with the universe, with the natural world and with his own inner self. Hughes is awfully serious about the problem of human consciousness. In this context Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts' point out:

Ted Hughes' endeavour is to gain access to, and give expression to a level, of being at which the continuity between the process of Nature experienced within and observed without is unimpeded by consciousness. Individual consciousness, insisting all the time on its separateness, is the cause of painful and destructive alienation from his inner life the obscure unhappiness of modern man. (Gifford and Roberts, 135)

Ted Hughes is a poet of animals and beasts. Violence is the prominent theme of his poetry what he called "vehement activity" and "energy". He says "Any form of violence, any form of vehement activity invokes the bigger energy, the elemental power circuit of the universe"(75). For Ted Hughes power and violence go together. His own gods are makers of the tiger, not the lamb. He is fascinated by violence of all kinds, in love and in hatred, in the jungle and in arena, in battle, murder and sudden death. Violence, for him is the occasion not for reflection, but for being. As Ben Howard suggested that Hughes "has often seemed to celebrate, if not the proponent of violence and destruction" (253). Through the images of the ruthlessness of thrushes, hawks, pikes, Hughes says that there is no alternative to this violence. He believes that mankind can pacify these forces of Nature. Hughes' interest in animals is quite central to his poetic vision, as these beasts, the crow, the jaguar, the tomcat, the skylark, the hawk, the thrushes, the horses, and pike, all are so close to and so much a part of nature, whereas man has

removed himself so far away from it. Man, as a result of the dominance of reason and consciousness, has created a huge gap between himself and nature. Hughes suggests that the modern man has cultivated his rational cognitive powers too exclusively, neglecting his own inner world of feelings, imagination and instinct, and has, therefore divided his own nature, cutting himself off from the natural energies of the universe.

Ted Hughes has a brilliant way of looking in to life. He expresses human follies, anger, and hatred through the animal kingdom. His descriptions of animals are not only unique and symbolic but also contain numerous metaphors. These metaphors relate a particular animal to all the other creatures and also to human experiences and human concepts. Thus, a thrush is a metaphor of single-minded efficiency which human beings lack. A horse is a symbol of total adaptation to its environment. A pike, a hawk, a jaguar all are their precise functions, their pure instinct. They are an indirect comment on the several contradictions and deflections that human beings are riddled with.

Hughes' close intimacy and interest in animals and beasts can be seen in his first collection, *The Hawk in the Rain*. The poem "Hawk Roosting" is written in the first person, as a dramatic monologue. It creates a comparison in the readers mind, between the hawk and an egoistic dictator. In this poem Ted Hughes portrays the thought process of the Hawk and relates it with the mind of every megalomaniac who considers other people around him as of no importance. The poem reverberates with despotic phrases and turns of expression. The hawk lives according to the rules designed by him and "No arguments assert" his "right". This

poem shows a world where the principal of might is right is followed. The Hawk says in a violent chillingly insightful manner, "I kill where I please because it is all mine" (14). The massive egotism running through the poem is, again, telling in its implications for the human world. The Hawk is shown as a tyrant who does not listen to the people around. This has allegorical significance in reference to human beings that unrestrained power in human brings when twisted and deformed, leads only to tyranny and oppression. This poem signifies self-assertion the following lines reveal it at fullest:

Now I hold creation in my foot
Or fly up, and revolve it all
slowly -

I kill where I please because it is
all mine. (12-14)

"Hawk Roosting" has similarity with Tennyson's "Eagle" (1851). The eagle is sitting on the top of the mountain and watching the earth "from his mountain walls". He falls like a thunderbolt and "the wrinkled sea beneath him crawls." Tennyson's Eagle is too as tyrant as Hughes' Hawk. Ekbert Faas referring the poem "Hawk Roosting" as "an exploration of the genuine self" is one way to "unlock the doors of those many mansions inside the head and express something of the information that presses in on us"(82). "I" in the poem stands for the supreme ego of the hawk as he sits on the top of the wood. He believes in action. He dreams about "in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat." Therefore, it is not the basic necessity of killing and eating that concerns him, but the style of it. Thus the hawk transforms in to a metaphor of supreme arrogance of man where he is haunted by power. The hawk believes that the trees, the sun, and the earth have

been created for his convenience. This metaphoric description shows that even circumstances support him. The earth is laid down for his inspection. He says:

My feet are locked upon the
rough bark.

It took the whole of creation

To produce my foot, my each
feather:

Now I hold creation in my foot.
(9-12)

Creation here refers to God. The line is an example of metaphysical conceit. Hawk asserts triumphantly: "I kill where I please because it is all mine" (14). Critics like Carol Berke, Colin Falck and Christopher Porterfield point out that these lines reflect fascism. Hawk's way of life pertains to the tearing off all heads; suggesting that he is above all moral and social laws. He decides the allotment of death. The path of his "flight is direct through the bones of the living" and "no arguments assert' his "right" (20). On an ending note, he declares that the sun is behind him. He has eclipsed the sun. To put it further the sun lives in his shadow. The Hawk states that nothing has changed here, as his eye has not permitted it to. The word eye denotes both "vision" and "insight". The last line functions as an open challenge to the universal fact that change is inevitable:

I am going to keep things like this." (24)

This is a thought provoking complex poem and provides various interpretations. Hughes uses the Hawk as a metaphor for the extreme state of a mind of a serial killer or a dictator like Hitler. "Hawk Roosting" is one of the most anthologized poem representing the consciousness of an animal expressing its single mindedness blended with human arrogance.

Hughes poems establish a connection between man, animals and nature. "The thought Fox" is another important animal allegory poem of the collection *The Hawk in the Rain*. It is about writing a poem. The poet endeavours to compose a poem and the thought of writing comes to his mind like a fox. This poem shows that animals are actually Hughes' poetic inspiration. Before the fox is thought, Hughes mind is a 'tabula rasa' where nothing is conceived and born. Gradually it takes possession of the poet so much that the "page is printed"-a poem is born. Towards the end of the poem, the fox is completely and immediately alive because it has been printed very artfully upon the page. It is midnight and the sky is starless, silent and totally black. The poet feels a disturbance in his mind. The thought of writing a poem in the fox image causes his disturbance. The poem begins with this disturbance:

Through the window I see no
star:

Something more near

Though deeper within darkness

Is entering the loneliness. (5-8)

The fox actually jumping through the eyes of the poet : "Till, with a sudden sharp not stink of fox/It enters the dark hole of the head" (22). The fox enters the lair of the head as it would enter its own lair, bringing with it the hot, sensual, animal reek of its body. In fact, there is no fox at all and nothing has been changed in the external darkness : "The window is starless still; the clock ticks, The page is printed" (24). All this has been done purely by the imagination. In fact, the fox is poem and the poem is fox. Symbolically, the movement of the thought pervades and finally originates the composition of a poem not only one poem, but all poems in general. The critics usually draw a

comparison between Ted Hughes and D.H. Lawrence as far as animal poetry is concerned. Lawrence has a much greater respect for the integrity and independence of the animals he writes about. In "Snake" Lawrence beautifully describes the frightening experience of confronting a snake. His manliness provokes him to take a stick and kill the snake but he is fascinated by the innocent beauty of the snake and spares him. P.R.King remarks that "Hughes emphasis on wild creatures and his concern for them is a clue to the importance the poet observes of what animals symbolize in his work" (132). It also reflects that animals are superior to man in dominance of their rational self.

"The Jaguar" describes the different types of life styles of animals at a zoo and expresses how the animals who roar and bleat in cages feel being trapped. This poem, as Gifford and Roberts have noted, "is not a poem of just observation but of longing and affirmation, particularly in its final lines which broaden out to suggest a human possibility" (156). This poem shows comparisons and contrasts among certain animals in the zoo. It shows slow, lazy, active and energetic all sorts of animals. In the comparison of energetic jaguar other animals seem to be "fatigued with indolence". "The apes yawn and adore their fleas in the sun" (1). Then the poem shows how "Cage after cage seems empty" as "painted on a nursery wall"(8). But the hero of the poem jaguar is enthusiastic and full of energy. His free spirit remains rendering his watchers 'mesmerized'. He refuses to accept the limitations of his caged freedom. Like a messiah figure, he seems visionary and spontaneous. Wild creatures live a life of repetition and monotony. They are mentally and physically inanimate. But Jaguar is a symbol of

freedom. He seems to laugh at man and tell him that four walls do not make a prison for him. The mesmerized crowd unconsciously has discovered in the Jaguar his own nature instinctive self, which it has drowned in its intellect:

He spins from the bars, but
there's no cage to him

More than to the visionary his
cell:

His stride is wilderness of
freedom:

The world rolls under the long
thrust of his heel. (16-19)

In the poem "Pike" Hughes explains and introduces the superficial dimensions of the pike. The whole body of pike has green and yellow strips across it which appears like its identifying marks, green tigering gold. The life of the pike is defined by this physical design; it is subdued to its instrument. The violent nature of pike is hereditary : "the malevolent aged gain" (3). The poet shows three pike he "kept behind glass" from the time they were in their first stage of being" three inches long" (1). Hughes has always utilized animals as an exaggerated metaphor for the instinctual inclination of Man. The revengeful nature of pike is also allegorically referred with some persons who cannot tolerate the competition and believe in demising off the competitor. Pikes are so ferocious and furious that they can eat each other.

Conclusion

Thus Ted Hughes' poetry is dominated by animal Imagery. It provides the most vivid expression of the cruelty, the fierceness and the violence of beasts. Speaking about Ted Hughes' use of animal for allegorical significance *London Times* Contributor Thomas Nye, said "Hughes once

confessed" that "he began writing poems in adolescence, yet had love for wild animals and always wanted to possess one"(12). The fact remains that Hughes in his poems examines the isolated and insecure position of man in nature and his changes of overcoming his alienation from the world around him.

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