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## MYTHOPOETIC IMAGINATION IN TED HUGHES POETRY

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### ABSTRACT

*Ted Hughes the world famous British poet is regarded as a poet who wrote on animals and birds. Myths and legends are ubiquitous in all Religio-Cultural tradition of the world. Ted Hughes weaves a web of mythology in his poetry using animal imagery and animals as the protagonists of his poems. It is pertinent to note that Poets from ancient past to the modern era have written poems on birds and animals. The Arab poets and the Persian poets were no less than the modern-day English poets in using myths and animal imagery in their poetry. Ted Hughes is a remarkable poet who uses myths not in the way the other poets of his age or his precursors used. He borrows the myths from biblical texts and from folklores and legends and with a colander he sorts the myths and regenerates the new myths. His mythopoeic imagination expressed through animals make him a greatest poet of his era and the new era to come.*

**Keywords:-** Myth, Mythology, Sufi, Legends, Poetic Tradition, Biblical Texts, Arab Poets, Creation, Satire, God, Imagination, Folklore, Crow, Jaguar, Horses, Hawk, Lineage, Childish Prank, Parliament, Conference, Attar, Chaucer, Milton.

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### MYTH AND ANIMAL IMAGERY IN THE POETRY OF TED HUGHES

It is surprising to notice the coincidence that the mythic poet, Ted Hughes (1930-1998) was born in Mytholmroyd, West Yorkshire, in 1930. The name of his birth place slightly correspondences with his use of myth in his poetry, this is purely coincidental but it does lead someone to correlate his use of mythology in his work. Hughes had an opportunity to experience the beautiful landscapes, Rock Mountains and the moors of Yorkshire. His nature poems reflect the omnipresent power of nature. He studied Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge which played a vital role in his literary and mythological studies. The name of the place Mytholmroyd where Ted Hughes was born is rather accidental but it can well be taken as a symbol which ultimately shapes the life of the poet as a myth creator. Ted Hughes has emerged as a major English poet during the last thirty years. He is intensely concerned with the question of human existence, man's relation with the universe, with the natural world and with his own inner self. He is appallingly serious about the problem of human consciousness. He sees the man surrounded by the hustle and bustle of monotonous life. Hughes employs myths and legends through animals in his poems.

### USE OF MYTHS

The use of myth and the use of animal imagery is central in the poetry of Ted Hughes. He is the creator of newer myths using the older myths. John Milton in Paradise Lost has sat to justify the ways of God to

man, the situation reverses with Hughes, Hughes has sat to satirize the ways of God to man. Ted Hughes uses enormous biblical myths and legends, uses them on his own, satirizes and recreates new myths. The cynicism, the sarcasm and the employment of words and the use of birds and animal imagery give refreshing effects to the poems which the modern generation feels as they turn the pages and start reading the poems of Hughes. The modern man is tired of old monotonous biblical mythology where Gods and Angels and Fairies tell the unbelievable tales of creation. Hughes come forward with newer and fresher myths of the old tales for the new generation. The appetite of the modern new generation is therefore satisfied Hughes. The modern generation is now reading, enjoying and appreciating the newer myths. Ted Hughes thus has done a remarkable work by synchronizing the mythology with modernity. In the process of synchronization, Ted Hughes like Eliot does not sever the from tradition. Hughes proves his individual talent by maintaining the established tradition of Christianity. All these qualities are reflected in his magnum opus collection of poems, Life and Songs of Crow. Myths become the life force and the animals provide the medium for his poetry. The mythological canvas of Ted Hughes is very wide which stretches from Old American Eskimo myths to the pagan Gods and Goddesses. Ted Hughes uses many myths in his poems. The edifice of his poetical works rests on the foundation of mythology. He borrowed myths from the biblical and folkloric traditions of the world. His magnum opus, the Life and Songs of Crow is a collection of poetry flooded with various myths and folklores of the world. The myth of creation which is found in almost all socio-religious traditions of the world is aptly, wonderfully and magnificently used by the poet in his poem the 'Lineage,' which is included in the collection. Thy myth says that the world was created out of nothing. The Hindu sacred texts such as the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Puranas contained vivid description of the creation of the world. The Semitic religions- Judeo-Christian traditions also have the myths of creation. How the world came into being. The book of Genesis of the Old Testament contained the creation myth. Ted Hughes has used this myth of creation very nicely in his poem. The poem Lineage in which the myth of creation is embroidered goes as under:

In the beginning was Scream

Who begat Blood

Who begat Eye

Who begat Fear

Who begat Wing

Who begat Bone

Who begat Granite

Who begat Violet

Who begat Guitar

Who begat Sweat

Who begat Adam

Who begat Mary

Who begat God

Who begat Nothing

Who begat Never

Never... Never... Never...

Who begat Crow

Screaming for Blood

Grubs, crusts

Anything

Trembling featherless elbows in the nest's filth.

(‘Lineage.’ Ted Hughes Crow P.2)

A parallel can be drawn between Lineage and the myth of creation as contained in the Old Testament. The myth is as under:

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

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Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day." Ted Hughes here regenerates the myth using the old myth. In the biblical myth of Genesis, God creates the world, whereas in Lineage, God ponders what to do with the bodies of man and woman after their creation because they were dead and soulless. It is the Crow who cuts the worm into two halves and pushed the two ends one into man and other into woman. This marvellous act of crow when God was sleeping helped God create the world. One can find here that by solving the problem of God, Hughes satirizes the old myth the world was created by God. Here the entire myth is replaced by the newer myth where crow and not the God creates the world. It is a Wonderful use of myth using the imagery of the bird Crow in this poem. As the poem is very short the poem in full is reproduced as under:

"Man's and woman's bodies lay without souls  
Dully gaping, foolishly staring, inert  
On the flowers of Eden.  
God pondered.  
The problem was so great, it dragged him asleep.  
Crow laughed.  
He bit the Worm, God's only son,  
Into two writhing halves.  
He stuffed into man the tail half  
With the wounded end hanging out.  
He stuffed the head half headfirst into woman  
And it crept in deeper and up  
To peer out through her eyes  
Calling its tail-half to join up quickly, quickly  
Because O it was painful.  
Man awoke being dragged across the grass.  
Woman awoke to see him coming.  
Neither knew what had happened.  
God went on sleeping.  
Crow went on laughing."

(‘Childish Prank.’ Ibid P 8)

The entire collection of crow poems contained beautiful and refreshing myths. Both the use of myths and the use of animal imagery made the poems splendidly readable and enjoyable. Poetry on birds and animals is not a new idea. Right from Greek and Sanskrit to Arabic and Persian languages, poetry on birds and beasts have been considered the vehicle of transformation. English is no exception to it. We see that Geoffrey Chaucer has written The Canterbury Tales and the Parliament of Fowls, so also Farid-ud-Din Attar has written The Conference of the Birds, ‘Mantiq-ut-Ṭayr’ and Ted Hughes has written the Crow poems properly known as Life and songs of Crow, Lupercal and Hawk Roosting. All these poets have used animals or birds as their protagonists telling the biblical tales unlike Ted Hughes who tells as well as satirizes. The pivot or the logos of all these poems revolves round the myths, legends and folklores of world religions through birds and animals. Ted Hughes mythopoetic imagination can well be compared with the mythopoetic imagination of a 12th Century Persian poet Farid-ud-Din Attar. Attar's protagonist in his epic poem, ‘The Conference of the Birds’, is Hoopoe, a bird under whose leadership a conference of birds is held to find out Simorgh the mythical and the mystical bird. The birds feel spiritual vacuum so they arrange a conference to decide to have a leader. Attar was a Sufi poet. The Sufi view of God is different than the traditional Islamic view of God. The God seen and imagined by Attar through the birds' eyes is similar to the Christian God seen by Ted Hughes through the eyes of the Crow. The use of imagery and poetic imagination of both Attar and Hughes is beyond encomiums. Both take the bird as the metaphor or the symbol to present the hollowness of man. It is not that the poets after the industrial development has felt the inner vacuum, the inner vacuum was felt by man since its mystical and mythical

separation from God. It is felt since the fall of Adam. In his Crow poems, Hughes spread the tapestry of mythical tales in Two Legends, Crow Darker than Ever, Genealogy, The Apple Tragedy and many more poems. The Sufi poet Attar does not satirise the creation of God. He accepts the natural world as it is. He does not raise questions as to how all happened, he simply poses questions and wants to satisfy the thirst of knowledge, ilm-ul-gayb the secret knowledge. The Crow of Hughes exercise reasons and analyse logically and scientifically the biblical myths. Hughes does not accept the myths as reality. He examines the myths on the anvil of logic and scientific understanding. Hughes is not an orthodox theologian, he is a poet of reason and understanding. He uses the myths but to justify the biblical myths, he presents them obliquely. In Apple Tragedy, The God comes with the newer game, that is the game of procreation. It is said by many scholars and theologians and priests of all religion that the world is the game played by God. In Hindu mythology it is called Leela of God. In Hindu Puranic tales especially Srimad Bhagawatam, the word 'Leela' is used as the Divine Play of God. Though dualistic and non-dualistic schools of thought have different versions of Leela, it is not my purpose here to discern and discuss it philosophically. The purpose here is to drive home the idea how different myths are interwoven in the poetry of Ted Hughes. In Apple Tragedy, Hughes says;

So, on the seventh day

The serpent rested,

God came up to him.

"I've invented a new game," he said.

( 'Apple Tragedy.' Ted Hughes Crow P.72)

Here after the creation of Adam and Eve, God comes with a new plan or a new game. In Genesis, it is said that God created the world in six days and kept the seventh day as the day to rest. Here God on the day of rest come with a new game at which the serpent is amazed. God reveals the plan;

But God said: "You see this apple?"

I squeeze it and look-cider."

The serpent had a good drink

And curled up into a question mark.

Adam drank and said: "Be my god."

Eve drank and opened her legs.

( 'Apple Tragedy.' Ted Hughes Crow P.72)

Hughes is a modern poet of scientific age of knowledge and reason. Here the God twists the apple and make cider which is drunk by Serpent, Adam and Eve. The Judeo-Christian myth that the forbidden fruit was eaten by Adam and Eve on the temptation of the Serpent is completely reversed by Hughes in his poem to give it a logical outfit. Nowhere in The Conference of the Birds, the myth is reversed. Attar's birds set out to a long and arduous journey of seven valleys of quest, love, understanding, liberation, detachment, unity, astonishment, resulting ultimately in destitution and nothingness. The Scope of Attar and Hughes on the use of myth and imagery of birds runs parallel. Attar does not find the solution as he was constrained by the boundaries of Islamic Sharia, whereas the freedom enjoyed by the modern poet Hughes led him to distort the biblical myth to adapt it to logical temperament of the age to find the solution of the creation myth. Hughes' interest in animals is central to his poetic vision. The animals and birds, the crow, the jaguar, the tomcat, the skylark, the hawk, the thrushes, the horses, and the pike, all are extremely associated or rather mingled with nature, whereas man has remained aloof and alienated from nature. This aloofness or disassociation of man from nature is perhaps the result of his rationality or his consciousness, or his faculty of reasoning. The birds and animals have remained stuck to nature whereas the human is alienated from all of its naturalness. Hughes distinctly uses the animals as the heroes of his poems does not mean that Hughes is writing the kindergarten couplets. His interest in animals is his feelings that humans have gone astray from their right path whereas the animals have remained faithful to what they were created. The ferocity and violence through which the animals such as the jaguar are presented reveals the vitality, the might without reason or rationality. The animals lack the sense of emotions and feelings, whereas the humans are endowed with these qualities. Due to the advancement of science and technology and due to the advancement of human's reasoning faculty, the man has become

monster. This may be one of the reasons why Hughes used animals as the protagonists of his poems. Hughes says “My poems are not about violence but they are about vitality. Animals are not violent they’re so much more completely controlled than men.” 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 his poems has its own appeal. This imagery shows Hughes’s immense powers of observation and an excellent capacity to represent his observations in words. In presenting the originality and contentment of various beasts, Hughes assumes the role of a cartographer and with scientific precision and poetic temperament he portrays the graphical and realistic images of animals. The vitality and the energy of animals with all its ferocity and violence sometimes lead the critics to attack Hughes as the poet of violence, but the main purpose of the poet is to present the animals as he has observed them. The poet is presenting the visual impression of the animals. The imagery in the poem Jaguar is marvellously realistic and poignantly awesome. A vivid picture of Jaguar with all its might and power and all its physical features is painted with all its ferocity against the other animals in the zoo. The Jaguar thriving with vigour and vitality has sharp and penetrating eyes which see nothing because they are burning fire of fury. The Jaguar is deaf because of “the bang of blood in the brain.”

This poem describes the different types of lifestyles of animals in a zoo. He expresses the feelings of animals who are trapped in the cages. This poem also compares and contrasts certain animals in the zoo with each other. It shows the slow, lazy as well as fast rapid movements of some animals. Then the poet introduces the hero of the poem the Jaguar. In 'The Jaguar', Ted Hughes uses metaphors and similes to portray the activities of the animals at the zoo. In the poem he compares the laziness of the animals with the energetic Jaguar, He compares by saying that animals are so lazy that they are "fatigued with indolence." The animals also get tired by the boredom and outrageous surrounding. The animals in the zoo are put on show every day for the people to watch but they get tired of moving and sitting in the iron cages. Hughes also describes about some birds especially the parrots in the poem which catches the attention of the people for food. As the guests move from one cage to another they get tired and when they reach the jaguar’s cage they find fierce behaviour. They see that the jaguar is not at all involved in getting the attention of the guests. He has the attitude as if he is a wild beast found in the jungle. Hughes introduces the fact that even the animals have emotions which are subdued. Symbolically, the Jaguar stands for those who stands for freedom, the age-old instinct ingrained in man, the desire to soar high in the sky of freedom is marvellously delineated in the image of Jaguar. Hughes has used Hawk as the protagonist of his two poems namely, The Hawk in the Rain and The Hawk Roosting. The Hawk is portrayed as calm and composed, seated at a height leisurely with his still eyes holding all creations on his wings.

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  
Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly  
I kill where I please because it is all mine.  
There is no sophistry in my body:  
My manners are tearing off heads

(The Hawk Roosting)

The Hawk is capable of killing anything because the whole world comes under his domain. The arbiter of life and death, he can routinely cut off heads according to his sweet will. ‘The allotment of Death’ is his privilege. His path strewn with bones of the living. Hughes has brilliantly and metaphorically painted the picture of the killer Hawk.

‘The allotment of death.  
For the one path of my flight is direct  
Through the bones of the living.  
No arguments assert my right.’

(ibid)

The ferocity and violence of birds is depicted vividly by Hughes in the poem Thrushes. The poet employs dynamic diction and powerful words to present the terrifying Thrushes. Thrushes have dark and deadly eyes. The Hawk bounces upon the writhing insect with his fiery eyes and takes them as his morsel of condiment. "Nothing but bounce and stab and a ravening second". The symbolic significance of the imagery in these animal poems can well be appreciated. It is the symbolic significance which imparts to this imagery a certain depth and profundity. Hughes does not write about animals for the sake of depiction of animals as he sees them. He finds in them some qualities which can help us to understand ourselves. Hughes says that animals are more adapted to natural environment than man. The man is away from his natural environment. The strength of animals lay in their natural instinct and their precise role. Thus, in this poem the Hawk is seated calm and effortless while the speaker is depicted as swayed away by ferocious wind.

The Hawk in the Rain is often considered as the poetry of nature but on close analysis, one can find that it is not the collection containing poems on nature. The central theme in these poems are violence, competition, war and conflicts. The Hawk is an emblem of humanity while nature is portrayed as spiteful force aiming to destroy life.

Hawk Roosting is another brilliant example of the poetic imagination of Ted Hughes. It contains not only the pictorial vividness of the Hawk but a poignant sarcasm on man desolate and alienated from nature.

The Hawk in the Rain is the collection of poems containing various poems such as The Hawk in the Rain, The Jaguar, Macaw and Little Miss, The Thought Fox and the Horses which are presented through animals. This collection contains the poems such as Decay and Vanity and the Soliloquy of the Misanthrope. It is thus evidenced from the content of the collection that Hughes writes not for the sake of presenting animals but he writes for society, for man to grow but not to sever his roots from nature. The poet was walking with toil on the ground because the ground was full of mud and the poet had hard time to pull himself from muddy ground in the heavy rain. As Hughes strolls hard, he catches the sight of the Hawk in rain which is perched at a height from where it sees the poet. The Hawk does not feel any pain, discomfort or any effort. He is seated and effortlessly.

### **MYTHOPOETIC IMAGINATION: HUGHES AND OTHER POETS**

Hughes is a modern poet who uses myths with logic and scientific understanding. Hughes exercise reason in presenting myths whether biblical or otherwise. At times, he seems to deviate from the popular mythology but his deviation is befitting his time and temperament. Unlike Milton the sole aim of Hughes is not to justify the ways of God to men. In presenting the biblical myth of creation as ordained in the sacred books of the Moses, he deviates from the Judaeo-Christian tradition. He is not afraid of any charge of blasphemy. He dares to describe and portray Crow mightier than the God. Here the poet does so, not to offend the Christians but he does so to put the biblical myth more convincing. How can the omnipotent and omniscient God not be able to decide what to do with the bodies of Adam and Eve? It is said that reason disappears when belief starts. The problem, the God faced was solved by Crow as he was existing before the God. This is very disgusting and contemptuous to the orthodox theologians, which Hughes dares to present in his poetry. Hughes through the ubiquitous presence and sharpness of mind of Crow solves the riddles of creation though offending to some clerics and critics. His use of imagery of birds such as the Crow, The Luperca, The Hawk are very astounding. Compared with other poets of the past and the present, Hughes occupies rather a slant position. Chaucer in Parliament of Fowls presents the myth of St. Valentine in a dream vision through the annual gatherings of the birds, where birds gather to revere St. Valentine. It is a unified exploration of Christian love, filled with Neoplatonic thought and imagery and inspired by the poetic tradition of Cicero and Dante. Chaucer does not deviate from the traditional Christian or biblical myth even though he uses ornithographic tapestry. The poet presents the myth of St. Valentine through the birds who gather annually to choose their mates. The myth and the characters of the poem are birds. Had it been in the hands of Ted Hughes, he might have seen the gathering of birds obliquely and might have presented newer myths with newer dimensions. Farid-ud-Din Attar a Sufi poet presents the allegory through birds within his limitations drawn by religious traditions. He also uses the myth of the mystical bird Simorgh and the quest of man to decipher the realms of the secrets of

the secrets. Man, right from his descent on earth tries to excavate the mysteries of the universe. He tries to get answers of the unsolved mysteries. In doing so, man had devised many stories and tales based on myths which as time passed, formed the part of biblical or religious myths and are revered literally by people. Attar like Chaucer and Milton uses such myths in his epic poem, *The Conference of the Birds*. Hughes does not use the myths in the way Chaucer, Attar and Milton used. He sees at myths with curious eye, examines with his inquisitive mind, thinks inversely and presents obliquely. His poems though labelled simply as animal poems are not the children's rhymes, they are the testaments of logic and powerful reasons on human understanding, caricaturing the age-old archetype of understanding.

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