

## **Violence in Ted Hughes's *Lupercal*: A Reading**

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**ABSTRACT:** Ted Hughes's second volume of verse *Lupercal* (1960) tends to depict that the essence of existence – both of life and the phenomenal universe is solely founded upon violence. In the world of nature, birds, beasts, fishes, insects and human life, there is a continual war- a battle inside and with external forces. And there is always a victory of the powerful. That is the law. Power dominates and powerful exists, and the antagonists are either destroyed or devoured. The eater-eaten relationship determines the course of life on earth. This is true both in the world of animals as well as human. The words 'values', 'culture' and 'humanity'- are all coined by man for appropriating the demonic act of power and subjugation. Hughes unveils this raw truth in his *Lupercal*.

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Violence lies in the laws of nature – human nature as well as external world of nature. It remains one of the cardinal components in the poetry of Ted Hughes. He is a contemporary poet and started writing immediately after the chaos of the World War-II. He witnessed and experienced the devilish dance of death and disaster caused by the Great War that virtually demolished the very basis of human civilization and culture. The immensity and vastness of the Great War- its horror and devastation; its fire and ferocity; its wounds and agonies was so profound and powerful that no soul on earth could escape the touch of its flame and fire. As human being Hughes was deeply moved by its cruelty and brutality; its mindless massacre and butchery; its atomic fire and

organized mass-murder. He tends to present European cultural ethos as well as universal state of disorder and violence that rocked the life on earth. Hughes views violence in all spheres of life, nature and God. Hughes's view of Nature and God is dark, sinister, destructive and devilish. He journeys from micro to macro and tries to explore the dark and deeper recesses of human psyche. Nature to Hughes is not only fierce and violent but dark, desolate, obscure and terrifying. Nature of him is more violent, shivering, terrifying than that of Tennyson's Nature, 'Nature red in tooth and claw'. Both the external as well as the inner spiritual world of man are chaotic, cruel and horrifying. In this regard one of the famous critics Keith Sagar comments:

"In nearly all his poems Hughes strives to find metaphors for his own nature. And his own nature is of peculiar general interest not because it is unusual, but because it embodies in an unusually intense, stark form, the most typical stresses and contradictions of human nature and of Nature itself. The poems are bulletins from the battleground within."<sup>1</sup>

Hughes shows that Nature has neither any symmetry nor any harmonious uniformity; rather it is an arbitrary, demonic force which acts to create less and destroy more.

#### DISCUSSION:

*LUPERCAL* (1960), the second anthology of Hughes is a perfect manifestation of violence. It contains many great poems of Hughes which are unique in the history of English literature. In power, suggestiveness, technical brilliance and poetic gift the poems are unparalleled. The poems like 'Esther's Tomcat', 'Hawk Roosting', 'To Paint a Water Lily', 'View of a Pig', 'An Otter', 'November', 'Thrushes', 'Pike', etc. are supreme example of great literature. They are epitome of power and energy, embodiment of brilliant linguistic usages and poetic craftsmanship. The poems uphold the 'murderousness' of Nature, its ferocity and blood-thirstiness, with measured depth and accuracy. The bare, naked violence in Nature as well as human nature seems almost shocking and unbelievable at its initial encounter. Hughes uses raw, rustic, prosaic, even primitive jargon, tough vocabulary, unconventional idioms and compounds to draw a bloody collage that is the truth, yet not the decisive truth. His voice is not refreshed, smothered and tuned by any pseudo culture and humanitarian lesson of the 'civilized' world. Hughes speaks of what he sees, hears and feels and not the fantastic, romantic, visionary golden dreams of an invented utopian culture. Hughes speaks of a dark, chaotic, unruly, bizarre, violent universe.

That is the reality, the truth. The mode of presentation in Hughes's poems is unique and there is no parallel till date, in the whole range of English literature. The profundity of his observation, the vaster range and dimension of his universe, the raw sharpness of his pointed expression, the versatility and diversity of his poetic medium make him a living myth in contemporary literature.

'Esther's Tomcat' depicts the dreadful picture of a tomcat springing up and attacking a knight on horseback. It suddenly pounces upon the knight and penetrates its sharp teeth in the knight's throat. The knight bleeds profusely, fell from the horse and dies. The poem is multi-dimensional in meaning. Through symbols and metaphors Hughes presents the picture of primitive killing instinct of man, from the Biblical era to the World War-II. The title itself is allegorical. The knights of the Biblical era represent any warrior killed in an ambush. The way Hughes depicts this art of violent attack and murder is appalling. The fierceness and ferocity of the sudden ambush and cut-slit art of the tomcat is truly shocking. The tomcat is depicted as a dumb, insensible creature having the strong impulse of killing. It fights an eternal fight, it kills and remains unharmed:

“...From the dog's fury,  
From gunshot fired point-blank he brings  
His skin whole and whole...”

Tomcat unfolds layers of meaning. Their actions symbolize the aggressive, attacking, violent, killing instinct of man. The insensitive and callous actions of both the animals uphold the primitive animal instinct of human beings. Through its title and semantic usages, 'Esther's Tomcat' shows the continuity of violence from Biblical era to contemporary bloody history of man.

The greatest acknowledged poem of violence by Ted Hughes is probably '*Hawk Roosting*'. It is violence incarnation. The poem possesses vaster philosophical dimension. Hawk symbolizes diverse elemental forces of the universe with their exact color and form. The action of the Hawk is shown as decisive destiny of destruction and there is no sophistry in his art. The poem is prismatic and radiates colorful lights from innumerable angles. Hughes himself recognizes the bird as Nature and God. Although many of the approving critics are enthusiastic to identify the

bird as the symbol of some totalitarian ruler like Hitler, Hughes himself disagrees. He explains his points of view in the following lines:

“...The poem of mine usually cited for violence is the one about the ‘Hawk Roosting’, this drowsy hawk sitting in a wood and talking to itself. That bird is accused of being a fascist... the symbol of some horrible totalitarian genocidal dictator. Actually what I had in mind, was that in this hawk Nature is thinking. Simply Nature. It’s not so simple may be because Nature is no longer so simple. I intended some creature like the Jehovah in Job but more feminine. When Christianity kicked the devil out of Job what they actually kicked out was Nature....and Nature became the devil. He does not sound like Isis, mother of the gods, which he is. He sounds like Hitler’s familiar spirit...”<sup>2</sup>

He thus, equates the Hawk with the God of Job. Thus Hughes’s Hawk is the embodiment of both Nature and God. Of course, Hughes’s god is a malevolent god - a dark, sinister and destructive force. This god is a tyrant god. The way Hawk unfolds him and proclaims his activities is awful and evokes the feeling of horror and mortification. It perches upon the topmost branch of the tree, sees the earth below with sharp, searching and penetrating eyes. It monitors and rules the earth with its strong feet and sharp claws and beaks. The hawk speaks like a tyrant. Solipsism is his manner, to kill and butcher is his action. He is the messenger of murder and death. He kills and eats the flesh and bones of his prey. He does whatever he likes. The hawk expresses his audacity and pride like a tyrant. He says:

“It took the whole of Creation  
To produce my foot, my each feather:  
Now I hold Creation in my foot  
  
.....  
I kill where I please because it is all mine.  
  
.....  
My manners are tearing off heads –  
  
The allotment of death”

(Hawk Roosting)

Hughes unveils the picture of a hopeless, loveless, bizarre world of violence, death and destruction. Chaos, anarchy and darkness prevail upon. Ravenous and voracious Nature dances upon the earth. Naked truth of Nature, human nature and the nature of Providence is nakedly exposed. Hughes's Nature is more bloody and violent than Tennyson's 'Nature red in tooth and claw'. When Nature speaks through the Hawk and proudly proclaims, 'I kill where I please', 'My manners are tearing off heads', and that he is the 'allotment of death', Nature's bloody, voracious and violent image is immediately evoked. Hughes's Hawk also symbolizes God. Job's god in the Bible is the god of hawks:

“Doth the hawk fly by thy wisdom, and stretch her wings  
toward the south?

Doth the eagle mount up at thy command, and make her nest  
on high?

She dwelleth and abideth on the rock, upon the crag of the  
rock and the strong place.

From thence she seeketh the prey, and her eyes behold afar off,  
Her young ones also suck up blood: and where the slain are,  
there is she.

(Job: 39: 26 – 30)

And Hughes's Hawk speaks almost like Job's God:

'I kill where I please because it is all mine'

(Hawk Roosting)

'Whatsoever is under the whole heaven is mine'

(Job: 41: 11)

Hughes's Hawk also represents any creature that survives on the flesh of other creatures. The eater-eaten relationship is clearly stated by the poet when the Hawk says,

'For the path of my flight is direct  
Through the bones of the living'

Hawk may also represent any totalitarian genocidal dictator, like Hitler, on earth. It boastfully proclaims 'I hold creation in my foot'. Hawk may also represent the killing instinct, possessive impulse, devouring nature and destructive blind rage of any human being on earth.

Like ‘Hawk Roosting’, ‘Thrushes’ is another powerful poem on violence. Like hawk they are also birds of prey. The narrator’s keen observations of the murderous birds, their unwavering, quick and sharp attack on the prey are lively and accurately presented through innovative symbols and images. Though like the hawk, the thrushes do not proclaim their power and glory, assert their authority and supremacy, their voracious, killing nature is manifested through their dreadful attack on the prey:

“Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn,  
More coiled steel than living – a poised  
Dark deadly eye, those delicate legs  
Triggered to stirrings beyond sense – with a start, a bounce, a stab  
No indolent procrastinations and no yawning stares.  
No sighs or head – scratchings. Nothing but bounce and stab  
And a ravening second.’

These thrushes possess dark deadly eye and their legs are delicate but prompt and swift to pounce upon a prey and stab it within twinkle of an eye. The fierce and terrifying nature of the voracious birds are exposed through their dreadful violent action. The moment the bird finds a worm or an insect, it pounces upon it and stabs within fractions of second. Then the poet wonders at the quickness of the bird’s action and says:

‘Is it their single-mind-sized skulls, or a trained  
Body, or genius, or nestful of brats  
Gives their days this bullet and automatic  
Purpose? Mozart’s brain had it and the shark’s mouth  
That hungers down the blood-smell even to a leak of its own  
Side and devouring of itself: .....’

(Thrushes)

The comparison of the decisive action of the thrushes with ‘Mozart’s brain’ and ‘shark’s mouth’ is startling and innovative. Hughes shows that violence in the world of birds and animals is the law of Nature. But the ferocity he depicts through this poem surpasses even the limits of our imagination. Mozart’s brain probably suggests the accuracy and beauty of the murderous art of the thrushes. It may also imply the great composer’s whole-hearted devotion, commitment,

dedication and complete concentration to achieve his purpose. In case of the bird's murderous art, the thrushes need patience, will power, concentration and determination to stab their prey. Their existence depends upon the killing of their prey. They live by means of the death of the insects and worms. The second comparison with the 'shark's mouth' immediately evokes action of the fierce eater of the oceans. The shark smells the blood of its prey and instantly bounces upon to kill it. Even it bites its own tails at the height of its mad ferocious attack upon its prey, to quench its blood-thirstiness. Through this allegory of thrushes and shark, Hughes suggests the domination and authority of the powerful over the weak and submissive and also the elemental laws of eater-eaten relationship in Nature. The use of some words and phrases indicate the murderous art of killing man in the bloody battle-field. This may be the First World War or any war in general. The phrases 'Dark deadly eye', 'Triggered to stirrings beyond sense', 'with a start, a bounce, a stab', 'bullet and automatic / Purpose?' 'blood- smell', 'devouring of itself', suggest violence in war. 'Dark deadly eye' is the fearful, pitiless, killing eye of an assassin, an anarchic, evil and devilish nature of man at war. The word 'triggered' suggests gun-shot and the word 'bullet' also suggests similar means of violence in war. The phrase 'with a start, a bounce, a stab' heightens the intensity of violence by prompt and ferocious attack upon enemy in an ambush. The phrase 'devouring itself' suggests the ravenous nature of the thrushes as well as other living creatures that live upon the flesh and bones other creatures. Hughes simply upholds the naked truth of this natural phenomenon of the murderous instinct of living creatures. All through the poem there is no trace of sentiment, feeling, pity and humanity. The reader is possessed by an overwhelming sense of strife, struggle, clash, killing and death. There is neither grace nor any beauty and pleasure. Violence is the ruling roost, be-all and end-all of existence. In his prose work, 'Reflections on the Death of Porcupine' D. H. Lawrence writes of the predators and depicts his full awareness of the scientific truth of the eater-eaten relationship in the world of Nature:

"Food, food, how strangely it relates man with the animal and vegetable world. How important it is! And how fierce is the fight that goes on around it. The same when one skins a rabbit, and takes out the inside, one realizes what an enormous part of the animal, comparatively is intestinal, what a big part of him is just for food-apparatus; for *living on* other organisms."<sup>3</sup>

Hughes follows the same idea of Lawrentian concept of violence. Like ‘Thrushes’, Hughes’s two other representative poems of violence in the volume *LUPERCAL* are ‘Pike’ and ‘An Otter’. To discuss the magnificence of the poems, along with ‘November’ and ‘Lupercalia’, M. L. Rosenthal comments,

“In such magnificent poems as ‘An Otter’ and ‘Pike’ – poems that with ‘November’ and possibly the mysterious poem ‘Lupercalia’ approach the full articulation of great art – it is sheer bitter endurance and the devouring ferocity lurking in every depth and crevice of life that obsess him.”<sup>4</sup>

An otter is an amphibious animal and a primitive creature. Hughes describes in details the features and nature of the otter. In the second section of the poem the readers visualize a bloody picture of the struggle for existence where the otter is shown both as prey and a predator. Man’s hunt for the otter with parsley and his hound and the otter’s strategy to save his life is depicted as vividly as in *National Geography* channel:

“The hunt’s lost him. Pads on mud,  
Among sedges, nostrils a surface bead,  
The otter remains, hours. The air,  
Circling the globe, tainted and necessary,

Mingling tobacco-smoke, hounds and parsley,  
Comes carefully to the sunk lungs.”

(‘An Otter’, *LUPERCAL*)

The otter lies under the surface of water to save him from the hunter. Under water he lives on the flesh of other creatures of water, particularly fishes. His predatory nature under water is presented thus:

“Blood is the belly of logic; he will lick  
The fishbone bare. And can take stolen hold

On a bitch water in a field full  
Of nervous horses, but linger nowhere.”

(‘An Otter’, *LUPERCAL*)

The otter kills fishes, eats up their blood, bones and fleshes to mitigate his hunger and to survive. Hughes shows this double nature of creatures – both as prey and predator. Keith Sagar explores the allegory underlying the poem thus:

“The otter is the opposite of the hawk who rules his element imperiously, the kingdom of daylight. The otter is also a predator, giving short shrift to the trout, but, since man arrived on the scene with his trained dogs, is also prey, dual again in this. No analogues are offered. But the otter, crying without answer for his long paradise, is surely, in part, an image of the duality of man, neither body nor spirit, neither beast nor angel, yearning for his Eden home where death was not.”<sup>5</sup>

‘Pike’ is another great animal poem of violence by Hughes. The poet, through a number of anecdotes, descriptions, narrations and impressions build up a uniquely integrated poem with perfectly wholesome artistic effect. The description of the pike evokes the feeling of horror and fear. The narrator uses such expressions for the pike as the

‘Killers from the egg: the malevolent aged grin’

.....

“Or move, stunned by their own grandeur,  
Over a bed of emerald, silhouette  
Of submarine delicacy and horror.’

The jaws’ hooked clamp and fangs  
Not to be changed at this date  
A life subdued to its instrument;  
The gills kneading quietly, and the pectorals.”

(‘Pike’, *LUPERCAL*)

The ruthlessness and horror of a pike is graphically presented by its physical feature and nature. ‘Killers from the egg’ suggests the pike’s primitive killing instinct. The ‘malevolent aged grin’ suggests the primitive creature’s murderous and vicious nature. ‘The jaws’ hooked clamp and fangs’ indicates voracious and blood-thirsty nature of the pike. The narrator’s consummate skill in presenting the anecdote of three pikes in a glass jar is interesting. The experiment is conducted with minute observation and accuracy. The outcome is horrific and awesome. It shows how weak

fish is killed and eaten by the strong two in the first day of the experiment and then the strongest pike kills and eats up the second one. This may be the struggle for existence and survival of the fittest where the strong one kills the weak. The bare naked truth of ferocity, ruthlessness and cruelty in the world of animal is so tellingly depicted by the poet. Through symbols, metaphors and allegory the poet shows the panoramic view of violence existing in all living creatures. The pike fishes are so destructive in their nature that they even kill and eat each other to mitigate their hunger and rage: 'And indeed they spare nobody.' From hunger, blood, brutality and murder, in the last four stanzas the poem runs through chaos and universal darkness.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Ted Hughes is keenly concerned with the cultural deprivation, moral depravity and psychic disorder and chaos of the last century. To him the external universe, the human world and the world within are battle-ground, an arena where there is more darkness, death and destruction than light, peace, prosperity and life. He shows not the trimmed garden but the dark, dense, gloomy natural forest where fear, ferocity, danger and death reign supreme. Hughes always tried to explore the deep-rooted instinct of man and unfolds the fundamental disintegration and chaos of human psyche. The poems unveil the dread and fear underlying the undisturbed surface reality of human mind. Violence in the poems of *Lupercal* reveals the dark cosmic force which is blind, anarchic and destructive. It promises no bright, sunny days for future but annihilation only. Fear and dread is the state; battle and blood is the law; annihilation and extinction is the destiny, of the poems. He performed this task by superb stylistic innovation, technical brilliance and inventive linguistic usages. He turns up his desired goal of poetic success with the use of unusual symbols and images; myths and history as well as topical references from recent cultural history. The use of such study as shamanism, ectoplasms, Para-psychology and exorcism also gave new dimension to his poems.

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