

## **The Pageant of Contemporary World in The Selected Poems of Ted Hughes: A Critical Analysis**

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It is a known fact that the situation or the circumstances in which an individual dwells moulds him or her in a particular way. The external environment plays an important role in the development of human personality. Thus the world in which human beings live, to a large extent shapes the individual and ultimately provides shape and structure to the society. Ted Hughes is a writer who in his poetry expresses that the pursuit of material benefits in modern times has led to the neglect and abuse of both the human soul and the natural world.

This paper is an attempt to analyse the reflection of the contemporary world in Ted Hughes's poems- "The Hawk in the Rain" and "The Jaguar". It also probes into answering the questions regarding the 'so-called' progress of the contemporary human beings. Predominantly it is believed that the progress of human kind in various fields such as economic, educational, cultural has drastically altered and raised the living standards along with its shortcomings.

As the contemporary world progressed economically, there occurred degeneration in the life of human beings. The prime motive of the people became earning more money, which ultimately resulted in selfishness, self-centeredness, indifferent attitude towards others. As the result of Second World War, the mental tranquility of the contemporary man was disturbed and there existed a state of chaos and disequilibrium in the world. Thus, it can be said that Hughes's poetry reflects these degenerations of the contemporary world through animal imagery. According to Stan Smith:

... He brought a breath of provincial fresh air into an increasingly drab metropolitan culture. The Macmillan era needed its prophets, its avatar of an order beyond the bland

superficialities of affluence and consumerism, became another of those recurring discoveries of the Romantic Era, the noble poetic savage, warbling his native woodnotes wild to an appreciative audience. (35)

Hughes being a prolific writer had published several volumes of verse, each containing a substantial number of poems. The volumes are; *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), *Lupercal* (1970), *Wodwo* (1967), *Crow* (1970), *Gaudate* (1977), *Cave Birds* (1978), *Remains of Elmet* (1979), *Moor Town* (1978), *The Diver* (1983).

The poems like "The Hawk in the Rain" and "The Jaguar" give an insight into the human psyche (implicitly) kept in direct comparison with the animals. These two poems reflect the vices or virtues present in human beings which hinder or promote their growth/progress and alternately the progress of society as human beings are the building blocks of a society. But it could be said that, Hughes's poems also indicate the path along which humankind should strive to go forward. The term "reflection" according to Collins Learners Dictionary is, "a comment or thought that expresses your idea about something". And the poems of Hughes's are the expression of his ideas about the world in which we live today.

Another definition for the term "reflection" again from Collins Learners Dictionary is, "a situation or event which has the effect of making people aware of the particular aspect of someone or something". And Hughes's poems provide the same. It provides the readers an insight into or makes people aware of the situation prevailing in the contemporary world.

The poem "The Hawk in the Rain", from the volume of poems entitled *The Hawk in the Rain* published in 1957 presents a contrast between the steadiness, stability and self-satisfied Hawk to the unsteadiness, sense of the dangers and always aiming for perfection of human beings. It shows the supremacy of hawk over humans as hawk follows its instincts while humans always get tangled up in a conflict of choosing intellect over instinct.

The poem opens abruptly, "I drown in the drumming ploughland. I drag up" (Hawk 1). The word "I" (Hawk 1) not merely represents the poet himself but also the whole humankind. Thus Hughes in this poem is the representative of whole humankind. According to Hughes man struggles desperately to "drag up" (Hawk 1). "Heel after heel from the swallowing of the earth's mouth" which could be interpreted as the attempt of modern man trying to detach themselves from the basic entity or the roots of its very origin; and going away from their innate instinct of to be rooted which is very much present in animals which make them strong and to withstand any obstacles in life.

According to Hughes, there is a misconception in human beings that we can progress only when we leave our primitiveness behind while the same primitiveness is the sole strength of the animals. Human beings are in constant conflict due to the absence of self-satisfaction while the Hawk which is in total content with his environment, “hangs” (Hawk 5) “effortlessly at height” (Hawk 5) “steady as a hallucination” (Hawk 5). The poet feels envious of the hawk’s steady position while the, “banging winds kills” (Hawk 8) the “stubborn Hedges” (Hawk 8), and “Thumbs” (Hawk 9) his eyes and “throws” his breath and the, “rain hacks” (Hawk 10) his “head to the bone” (Hawk 10). While the man struggles and, “Bloodily grabbed dazed last-moment-counting/ Morsel in the earth's mouth” (Hawk 14-15).

In the last stanza of this poem, Hughes presents a positive aspect and gives a message that it is possible that Hawk will meet his end for his stubbornness i.e. for sticking to his natural instinct but the end will come “in his own time” (Hawk 16). Therefore, through this poem, Hughes urges to the people around, to be true to who they are and believe their natural instincts as everyone in this world will meet his/ her end one day but if we remain true to ourselves we will never be afraid of our end. It will come in our “own time” (Hawk 16).

Almost all the poems of Hughes provide a catalogue of the views regarding the contemporary world. As Anthony Thwaite puts it:

Many of the poems can be seen as parables of human life, but generally expressed in such spurts of energy that the tamed and untamed worlds blur (567).

In the poem “The Jaguar” Hughes presents a contrast between the so-called ‘caged’ jaguar to the ‘free’ human beings. The poem on the surface or literally presents a visit to a zoo with “apes” (The Jaguar 1) yawning and adorning “Fleas in the sun” (The Jaguar 1) and “The Parrots” (The Jaguar 2) shrieking “as if they were on Fire” (The Jaguar 2); and the “tiger and lion” (The Jaguar 4) “Fatigued with indolence” (The Jaguar 4) “Lie still in the sun” (The Jaguar 5). But these lines have deeper meanings too. The yawning of apes and adoring their flesh in the sun refers to the laziness and indifferent attitude of the human beings while the tiger and lions lying still in the sun fatigued with indolence refers to the comparison, the sun to tiger and lion as they are in cage they seem to be still as sun possessing the same power as the sun. But if they would be in the open, they could have been fatal in the same way as when exposed to the extreme closeness to the sun could be fatal to human beings.

The second stanza of this poem is quite deep in its meaning. As Hughes says:

...Cage after cage seems empty, or

Stinks of sleepers from the breathing straw.

It might be painted on a nursery wall” (The Jaguar 6-8)

The following lines can be interpreted as the cage representing the human body. Thus, it could be deduced that the body devoid of soul or spirit seems empty and the mere physical presence of a body without a soul “stinks” (The Jaguar 7) i.e. it is of no use and just a “breathing straw” (The Jaguar 7) which could be fruitful to ignorant people.

As the poem moves further, the entrance of the Jaguar with extraordinary energy, agility, and fierceness can be seen. The jaguar is contrasted against the humans. It is depicted as, “hurrying enraged through prison darkness” (The Jaguar 12) after the “drills of his eyes” (The Jaguar 12) and, “By the bang of blood in the brain deaf the ear” (The Jaguar 15) which reminds us of the predatory ferocity, rage, blindness, and deafness of our own human nature.

The fourth stanza ends with a remarkable line, “he spins from the fair, but there’s no cage to him” (The Jaguar 16) and the second line of the last stanza is also a remarkable one, “His stride is wilderness of Freedom” (The Jaguar 16). The whole gist of the poem is in these two lines. The Jaguar, here, is an animal caged by man; a zoo is a prison in which animals are condemned to solitary confinement for the crime of being non-human. They are put behind bars so as to prove man's mastery over the other species. But the jaguar is not ready to surrender; man cannot cage in or confine his instinct and energy. The jaguar’s essence is summed up in his being or in the fact of his very existence, “The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel/ over the cage floor the horizon came” (The Jaguar 19-20). But human beings try to be something else; but a jaguar remains a jaguar, true to his nature.

The similar feelings are experienced when we read the poems by William Blake. His poem “The Tiger” of *Songs of Experience* is somewhat similar to that of “The Jaguar”. Blake's tiger is a symbol for the fierce forces in the soul which are needed to break the bonds of experience. Like the “prison darkness” (The Jaguar 12) in which the jaguar strolls, the tiger strolls in the “Forests of the night” (The Tiger 2) which are of ignorance, repression and suppression. Thus, as Blake favors breaking the bonds of experience, so did Hughes, who wants human beings to be free, free from ego, self-centeredness, free from indifference and then only a man could be said free in the real sense.

Hughes's poetic style was unmistakably the most original style. The use of unusual word-combination, striking similes and metaphors, graphic and realistic imagery, use of alliteration, paradox, presence of obscurity and ambiguity are a few of the essential

components of his style. For Hughes, the appeal of sound of words was more important than their rival impact. As put forth by Aruna Sharma and Rinki Verma:

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 a usual intense stark form the most typical stresses and contradictions of human nature and nature itself. (36)

Thus, it could be concluded that the poems of Hughes provide a mirror image of the society in which we live. According to Stan Smith, for Hughes the purpose of writing is:

Bring up some lovely solid thing like living metal from a world where nothing exists but those inevitable facts which raise life out of nothing and return it to nothing. (98)

The symbolic significance of his poems can simply not be ignored, which imparts a certain depth and profundity. Hughes does not write about animals as if they are mere animals. 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. The animals according to Hughes much more adapt to environment than humans as their strength lies in their instinct and precise function. Hughes believes that the contemporary man is undermined by a false morality or incapacitated by doubt and also that human beings are more caged in their domestic and social environment than animals are in their cages.

## Works Cited

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