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War, Violence and the Poetry of Ted Hughes: A Reflection

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Abstract: The two devastating wars account for the streak of violence and animality in Hughes’ poetry. The absolute intellectual deadness and loss of human values caused by World War –I, further aggravated by World – II, altered man’s attitude towards life. Animality and cruelty was escalating at the cost of rationality and human values. Hughes, having been brought up in such an ambience, is deeply influenced by the present condition of the human world. Consequently, as a writer, he is mystified regarding the poetic treatment of the soothing aspects of life. For him what pervades the world is not rationality but animality, not light but dark, not urge for love but for power, and above all, not God but the devil. It is such thought of Hughes that inspires him to seek his poetic muse in the world of violence and animality. The paper aims to traverse through Hughes’s treatment of violence in some of his select poems.

Key words: war, violence, animality.

The entire period of 20th Century in human history can be considered as war century for it has witnessed two major wars and various minor wars. Wars, no doubt, wrecked the psyche of the 20th century man; it also created a new inspiration for almost every poet of the century. While the World War I had brought about a ‘Spiritual Idealism’ in the mind of mankind, the World War II had given to mankind something higher – ‘Spiritual Realism’. Purification of soul, not through imaginative idealism but through concrete realism had been the main aim of the modern poets after the horrible World War II created a terrible and formidable havoc in the well-organized human society. The atom bomb was a terrible weapon of destruction for the military commanders, but to the poets of 30’s and 40’s was a ‘harbinger of peace’. They (the poets) were ethically convinced that the havoc wrought by this deadliest weapon of mass-destruction would serve as a lesson to humanity and convey to man the futility of war. War poets like Wilfred Owen, Rupert Brooke etc. were mostly concerned with the futility of war and loss of human values. Owen’s ‘Strange Meeting’ is a veritable account of the futility of war, the negligence of human emotions and, above all, innumerable dead bodies of young vigorous soldiers. However, the most outstanding contribution work concerning war is T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” which touches the very sterility of modern man, but not without justifying the way of redemption as the last line suggests: “Shantih, Shantih, Shantih”.

The poets of the first half of the 20th century (or Eliot’s generation), therefore, gave an exuberant of literature imbued with vigorous and energetic response to the war besides philosophical questions and spiritual quests following the consequences of the
First World War. In comparison to Eliot’s generation, the poetry of the second generation (after WW-II) is dormant, inert, and the poets seemed to recoil from the destruction, horror and disorder of the war years. While some of the poets of the 1940s adopted a neo-romantic attitude, the poets of the 50s, reacting against such attitude, made a conscious effort to focus on the real person an event. By choosing the real person and event, the poets of the 50s endeavoured to make poetry less scholarly, sophisticated and show the poet as the man next door communicating with man in the street. Consequently, most of the poets failed to explore beyond the surface reality. However, the Movement and ‘New Lines’ poets of the mid ‘50s strived to go beyond the surface reality to give a touch of transcendental philosophy in their works – a tradition set by the seniour group of poets. The Movement Poets, though adopted the path of the senior poets, were quite different from their guides in terms of poetic exploration. They revolted against obscurity in poetic language, the use of myth and allusions in poetry which deliberately keeps the reader from getting the accurate message of the poem. The Movement Poets, therefore, adopted simplicity of language and strived to highlight the necessary intellectual component in poetry, apart from making people aware of the present reality by basing their poetry on a commonsense standpoint.

Ted Hughes (17 August 1930 - 28 October 1998) is one of the most renowned poets of the movement whose poetry is marked by great variety and vitality. He was a British Poet Laureate from 1984 until his death on 28 October 1998. Hughes was a versatile poet and is best acknowledged for writing influential poems having the traits of bold metaphors, echoing language, imagery, and speech rhythms. Hughes's poetry, according to Seamus Heaney reflects these traits along with, "racial memory, animal instinct and poetic imagination all flow into one another with an exact sensuousness." Hughes's poetry signals a stunning departure from the customary modes of the period. Unlike R.S. Thomas & Tom Gunn who preferred to write on the bleak beauty of the British Landscapes Ted Hughes preferred to differ by choosing to focus his poetic works to root in nature and, in particular, the innocent coarseness of animals.

Ted Hughes has written elegantly and fervently about the natural world. Animals in the poems of Hughes are metaphor for his views on life. The animals whom Ted Hughes arrests in his poems reflect the conflict between violence and tenderness the manner in which humans endeavour for ascendancy and success. Significantly, Hughes’ subjects range from animals, landscapes, war, the problem posed by the inner world of modern man, to the philosophical and metaphysical questions regarding the status of man in the universe. Nature plays a significant role in making Hughes poetry profound, but Hughes’ nature is neither Wordsworthian – ‘a nurse, a guide and a guardian’, nor Tennysonian – ‘red in tooth and Claw’ (In Memoriam Canto, 56), but the combination of both. In poems like “October Down”, “The Horses” and “The Winter”, Hughes views nature in the Wordsworthian tradition while in the poems like “Hawk Roosting”, “The Pick” and “Crow” he recognizes the power, vitality, violence, and predatoriness of Nature without any mistake.

That we find much of the streak of violence and animality in Hughes’ poetry goes to the credit of two devastating wars. The complete intellectual numbness and loss of
human values caused by World War –I, further aggravated by World – II, changed man’s attitude towards life. Animality and cruelty was gaining ground at the cost of rationality and human values. Hughes, having been brought up in such a world, is deeply influenced by the present condition of the human world. Consequently, as a writer, he is at a loss regarding the poetic treatment of the soothing aspects of life. For him what pervades the world is not rationality but animality, not light but dark, not urge for love but for power, and above all, not God but the devil. It is thanks to this, Hughes treats animality (or animal) as Muses to inspire his poetic mood. In the poem “Thoughts Fox”, Hughes is not concerned with the animal, but with the poetic energy and inspiration that comes out of darkness and from the image of fox which leaves is ‘footprints’ on the page. However, most significantly, “Thought Fox” embodies an abstraction, a thought coming to life on printed page, like a wild beast invading the speaker’s mind. The process is described in exquisite gradations –

I imagine this midnight moments forest:
Something else is alive
Beside the clock’s loneliness
But this blank page where my fingers move.

After an interval, the living metaphor moves into the poem:

Cold delicately as the dark snow,
A fox’s nose touches twig, leaf;
Two eyes serve a movement . . .

And the movement is complete in the last stanza:

. . . it enters the dark hole of the head.
The wind is starless still, the clock ticks,
The page is printed.

The same effect, as in this poem, of physical realization of a meaning, quick with its own rank presence, occurs in all the best works of Hughes. The poem “Wind” is more representative of Hughes in the sense that it presents literal reality rather than an abstraction made tangible. Nevertheless, it takes a symbolic meaning through the very nicety and intensity of its literal presentation as it is illustrated by the opening stanza:

This house has been far out at sea all night,
The wood crashing through darkness, the blooming hills.
Winds stampeding the fields under the window
Foundering black stride and blinding wet . . .

What makes Hughes’s animal poetry more striking is the symbolic connotation that his animals carry; the symbolism which reveals the very pathetic reality of his time.
His hawk in “Hawk Roosting” is taken as a symbol of fascism. However, Hughes explained what he thought of hawk in the following sentence –

Actually what I had in mind was that in this hawk Nature is thinking. Simply Nature, may be because Nature is no longer so simple. I intended some Creator like Jehova 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 gods, which he is. He sounds like Hitler’s familiar spirit. There is a line in the poem almost verbatim from Job (quoted in  Dyson, 1990).

And I think this is right since as the hawk speaks of his centrality, what he means is the centrality of Nature; otherwise a hawk is as mortal as any other creature and his description of himself as the centre of the creation would be an example of misguided, inflated ego:

I took the whole of Creation  
To produce my foot, my each feather:  
Now I hold creation in my foot  
. . .  
My eye has permitted no change  
I am going to keep things like this.

It is this ferocity of Nature, the Darwinian Nature: ‘red in tooth and claw’ that elicits Hughes’ praise. However, apart from these poems, there are certain poems of Hughes on animals that contain mystery, particularly when the mystery is associated with the object of description. The poem “Bull Moss” comes under this category which moves from eternal reality about the bull to the mystery surrounding his meekness and submissiveness:

Each dusk the farmer led him  
Down to the pond to drink and smell the air,  
And he took no pace but the farmer  
Led him to take it, as if he knew nothing  
Of the ages and continents of his fathers,  
Shut, while he wombed, to a dark shed  
And steps between his door and the duckpond.

A similar case is found in the poem “An Otter” where the very process of arriving at the definition of his amphibian is a problem. However the mystery behind these poems remains ever unsolved. According to Roberts and Gifford, the method that Hughes used in these poems enabled him to move from physical detail to general idea, from a specific moment to universal process.

Apart from nature and animals, the philosophy of death and love is also a crucial part of Hughes’ poetic content. Here regarding these themes, we find a close affinity
between Larkin and Hughes. Hughes expresses the sense of loss and poignancy that death brings. But he deliberately avoids sentimentality and morbidity by positing death in an ironical context. In “That Moment” from Crow, Hughes describes a death in a catalogue of subordinate phrases, which fill the first twelve lines, and then gives the main clause in the thirteenth: “Crow had to start searching for something to eat”. And this last line provides an altogether ironic perspective by emphasizing the hunger of the crow. In another poem “The Stone’, Hughes emphasizes the very central experience of loss:

Because she will never move now
Till it is not worn out
She will not move now
Till everything is worn out.

In some of his later poems like “Moor town” and “Cave Birds”, Hughes conceives of death as culmination of the reality of life. For Hughes begins to see connection between physical extinction and the religious experience, that is of shaman. To put it in a nutshell, in such poems, Hughes shows his ability to understand and negotiate poetically with death. Most of his later poetry reveals his attempt to write about a world where people do really die; to write with a subtle touch of realism and less sentimentality and pathos. Here Hughes resembles Wallace Stevens (American poet) who equally accentuates death as the culmination of life.

Hughes’ love poetry, like Larkin, also proposes his failure in the world of love and romance. His collection of eighty-eight poems entitled Birth day Letters depicts Hughes’s love for his wife Sylvia Plath since their first meeting and in the years after her suicide. The poem “St. Botolph’s” is an account of Hughes’ first meeting with Plath in the Cambridge University in 1956. This poem begins with a sad and melancholic tone which seems to be overwhelmed by an unfathomable pain and sorrows, and moves with a subtle description of the beloved’s physical beauty, and again culminates in a melancholic tone:

First sight. First snapshot isolated
Unalterable, stilled in the camera’s glare
Taller than you ever were again.

. . .
And the face – a tight ball of joy
. . .
As if I saw you that once,
Then never again.

In fact, this poem reveals for the first time Hughes’ account of one of the century’s most tragic literary love stories. This is a poem written by someone obsessed, stricken and deeply loving. According to Andrew Motion, Birthday Letters is Hughes’ greatest book, as magnetic as Robert Browning’s poem for Elizabeth Berret. Motion further declares that there is no sense of setting scores or self justification in the poems. The poems truly
depict heart of darkness, a black hole of grief and regret. Above all, in these poems, Hughes brings his own pain and sorrows to light.

In his poetry Hughes captures not just live animals, but the aliveness of animals in their natural state: their wildness, their humidity, the fox-ness of the fox and the crow-ness of the crow. Hughes's focus on animals is his effort to elucidate his feelings on the human circumstances. Hughes, in his poems, examines the isolated and insecure position of man in nature and his chances of overcoming his alienation from the world around him (Shekhawat 2012, 12). Significantly, the violence Hughes projects in his poems is “a greater kind of violence, a violence of the great works.”(qtd. in Dyson 101). He just points out the disharmony and imbalance in nature and suggests the ways of restoring them and making the world a better place. In doing so he brings about the core cause of cacophony and catastrophe in nature, which is without any doubt violence. In fact, he manages to harmonise in his poetry myriad forces existing in nature to retain truth, beauty and purity, particularly to redress some balance disturbed by human error.

Works Cited: