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The Elements of Mythology and Folk-Tales in the Poems of Ted Hughes with Special Focus on *The Crow: From The Life and The Songs of the Crow*

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Abstract:

The modern writers are largely influenced by the mythic and folkloric patterns that intrinsically reflect the subconscious-originated, universal fears, dreads, hopes and aspirations. The groundbreaking poetry of Ted Hughes is richly layered and grained with these elements. This research paper seeks to find out the origin, modes of employment and the literary function of the myths and folklores used by Hughes.

Keywords: Myth, Animal poems, Ted Hughes.

“Myths are the expression of the primordial images in the collective unconscious of man. In the beginning man had certain experiences and received them in their psyche in the form of images. Since they are the first images they are called archetypes of the collective unconscious.”

The above cited paragraph is the opinion of Carl Gustav Jung (qtd. in Trivedi). According to Jung the unconscious patterns of age old impressions play a prominent part in the production of literature. They serve to gauge the present in the terms of the past and vice versa. They are the means to distort, recreate and reform the reality as a master code is placed in front of the issue the writer deals with.

The use of mythological figures and stories in literature is not a novelty. The Elizabethan writers and the continental renaissance writers employed mythic figures extensively from Greek and Roman mythology. Although they used them as literary allusions without being aware of the more fruitful way of using their patterns to indicate the sameness and universality of both experience and perception, the fact is that they felt the vague reappearance of age old stories, even if partially, in their writings. It is safe to say in their writings they used readymade myths with a given value in an accepted set of narratives. To borrow the words of Coleridge, “in them the old instinct brought back the old names” (qtd. In Cuddon 220).

The difference of the modern writers from the Elizabethans is conspicuous not only in their treatment of subjects but also in their use of mythology and folklore. While in a relatively

stable age, in an age when values are stable, authors tend to use the classic myths allusively; in an age which is obviously transitional and witnesses the drastic changes in all spheres of life, the myths acquire new meanings, sometimes they are subverted, too. It is easy to point out that when the past authors used myths, their intention or rather primary aim was to enrich the poetic quality by adding layers of older connotations; the 20th century writers reinterpret them. As a result they use mythology with a richer meaning in their works. The authors' great shift from the past writers is that the modern writers trace the origin of the captivating myths in the human psyche and hence it is the human psyche on which they seek to work. Before the revolutionary step, myths were more or less mere scholarly allusions from Greek or Roman classics.

Another striking feature of the modern writers is the extensive use of folk-lore and folk-tales. As a matter of fact the folk-lore was the culture of the marginalized people in the eyes of the so called intellectually superiors. It was a source of plethora of interesting stories that gave true and vivid pictures of an 'otherized' society with all its superstitions, practices and norms of life. Russian critic Vladimir Propp was a pioneer to unmine the critical values of the folk-lore. In his seminal work "Morphology of the Folk Tale" he reduced all folk-tales to seven spheres of action and thirty one functions of narratives. The hidden goldmine of the cultures of neglected and despised people then opened its rich store to the writers. In Spain, Federico Garcia Lorca used the elements of African folklore and the stories of gypsies in his poetry; he even used the rhythm peculiar to the gypsies' harp- playing in his poetry. The consciousness that the folk tradition is the truly native tradition, the tradition from the roots of a special cultural upbringing, made many renowned scholars and poets explore the terra incognita of the folk culture. William Archer collected many songs of the Kola and the Santhala tribes and took the pains to translate them. In Bengal Vishnu Dey used these songs in many of his poems (Tripathi, 270). The emergence of the Marxist critics acted as a catalyst to the exploration of the cultural heritage of the marginalized, colonized people. Ted Hughes borrowed the materials and the concept of the North American Indians' 'Trickster' story cycle and transformed it into a new shape in his 'Crow' poems.

Hughes's first published poems in "The Hawk in the Rain" (1957) are examples of his use of colourful, vivacious animal imagery. The powers of animals, given by nature, to remain in perfect harmony with the weird, forceful events of natural calamity is a thing man can only vainly struggle to achieve. Hughes once told his biographer Ekbert Fass that they were written in an effort to create an absolutely still language (Skea). Hughes's attempt in this anthology may well be seen as an inversion of the anthropomorphic fairy tales. Unlike the popular animal stories that tend to remould the existence of animals in human terms, Hughes's focus is on their difference. This power, grace and ability to find a place in nature is rather a threat to the human race as he is either denied or has rejected the facility. Like D.H.Lawrence, Hughes shows us their real nature and their superiority to us. Yet, in some poems of this book, some traces, though slight, of mythology could be seen. In the poem 'The Hawk in the Rain', the poet deals with a sacred theme in a profane way. The influence of Hopkins is seminal on this particular poem. If Hopkins uses the glory of the hovering bird in 'The Windhover' and a vision of Christ in the falcon to bring home his conception of divine

glory, Hughes sees the bird from the marshland and becomes aware of its power and ability to triumph over nature. In spite of all these, the ending is pessimistic as it foretells the ultimate fall of the bird, the ending of a bright career.

“The horizon trap him, the round angelic eye

Smashed, mix his heart’s blood with the mire of the land” (page 19, Collected Poems)

But is not it the pattern in nature? To some readers the ending may appear as a warning of the ultimate condition of an established religion. To negate a myth is not to deny it or destroy it; it is rather a kind of reformation; a different view of an age which is essentially different from other ages. In ‘The Thought Fox’, which is universally known as a poem of invocation, the Muse visits the poet in the form of a fox. This particular poem may also be viewed as the poetic representation of a poet’s poetic inspiration welling up from the id rather than from an external divine source. The chief image in this poem is that of the fox, and it is not a mimetic representation. It is almost surrealistic in the fade out, re-emergence and the stealthy movement of the fox. The fox, the universal figure in fables and folklores, is the central character in this poem and is represented as the concrete shape of the process of writing poetry.

“A fox’s nose touches twig, leaf;

Two eyes serve a movement, that now

And again now, and now, and now

Set neat prints into the snow” (page 21, Collected Poems)

The fox’s setting of prints is the metaphorical counterpart of the real printing of a page. The poem’s last line reads ‘The page is printed.’ Now to consider the folklore association the fox is the proverbial deceiver and in almost every tale he is ultimately deceived. Now to consider the ineffectuality of the fox as a character with the process of thinking is to face a disturbing question. The thought of a poet – is it bound to be a failure, with all the cleverness, all painful tricks? The cynical note in Hughes’s other poems regarding metanarratives may serve as a clue to this question. The view of Coleridge, as expressed in ‘Kubla Khan’, that the poet can never reproduce the stream of emotional feelings in writings and fails to fulfil the project he/she has undertaken is a more romantic counterpart of Hughes’s poem.

In the analysis of the influence of mythology in the poetry of Ted Hughes, it should be remembered that for Hughes a myth was not a literary device to enhance the value of his writings but on the other hand a living, growing organ in the flow of life. He was interested in the Occult and the Neo-Platonism. “Mythic poets”, Hughes wrote in “Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being”, “seem to be a distinct biological type. In their works beneath the surface glittering of the plot there lies a deep mythic plane... all archaic mythological figures and events are available as a thesaurus or glyphs of token symbols. For such poets, myth is a part of the essence of their poetry rather than something on which they draw from time to time.” (qtd. In Skea)

Hughes's belief in the energy, power and ability to control creativity that are inherent in the myths has been given a powerful presentation in his prose writings. Ann Skea's book "Ted Hughes : The Poetic Quest" and the writings of Keith Sagar and Ekbert Fass trace the covert use of mythical patterns in the poetry of Hughes. The structure and the form of the books almost imitate the magical patterns drawn by Occult practitioners. The hidden practices of Alchemy, Cabbala and the neo-Platonism were an obsession with Hughes. It does not necessarily mean that he devoted himself to the practice of them, but what is important is that he did believe in the hidden powers. He believed and shared the view with the Neo-Platonists that poetry is a discipline, a mnemonic tool and it can be used to bring healing, creative energies into a world which is in sore need for them. Poetry was to him a magical faculty to make things happen in a way the poet wants them to happen. In an interview with Amzed Hossain, Hughes said, "One of the greatest problems that poetry works at is to renew life, renew the poet's own life, and by implication, renew the life of the people, if they respond to the way he has done it for himself" (qtd. In Skea). In "Wodwo"(1967) the existential question of the meaning of selfhood is the issue that integrates the poems. The answer of this question is neither simple nor easy to grasp. We are always part human, part animal wild creatures of nature. To create the proper symbol, he took the help of the myth of the pagan goddesses- they are superhuman and yet, their vitality was described in terms of their association with wild animals. Almost every poem in this book was written to celebrate the power of the goddesses. He especially chooses Isis, Minerva, Hecate and Epona. In 'The Rain Horse', the man bogged down in the field suddenly realizes in an epiphany the power and energy of the horse, he is trying to tame, in himself. The horse was in ancient times a familiar of the goddess Epona, a nature goddess and a renowned shape-changer. This shape-changing aspect, the protean aspect is the hallmark of nature. So the goddesses celebrated in this book become associated with nature.

If in the above poem the poet valorises the classical myth, in 'Theology', he punctures and distorts another well-known myth- this time it is no pagan myth; it is the story of the Bible, the myth of Genesis and the fall of man. In the Bible, Eve bears the burden of the guilt as she was allured to the traps laid by the serpent. Adam is given the status of a sacrificing hero who prefers the banishment with Eve to the lone enjoyment in paradise. The Serpent is the unequivocal plotter and villain. The poem of Hughes, on the other hand, embarks upon a sheer negation- "No, the Serpent did not/ Seduce Eve to the apple". The poet dismisses the whole story as mere 'corruption of facts' and the old, venerated story falls upside down. Hughes is to probe deeper to retrieve the facts. All we have is corrupted facts but what we get from Hughes as the real fact is a baffling, ambiguous and circular reason-

"Adam ate the apple

Eve ate Adam

The Serpent ate Eve

This is the dark intestine." (page 161, Collected Poems)

Nowhere did the Bible face such a threat from so little ‘facts’. The romantic aroma of Adam’s fall and the possibility of a future redemption are stripped off from the story. The title brings into the focus the presence of a revealed god which the rest of the poem refuses to give. But why this deliberate distortion? Cappaccio writes,- “The alchemists` believed that the Bible is told through the voice of a male, but the stories came from much older mythologies where female goddesses held supreme position.”

The Bible was once denounced as an ‘anti-feminist’ text. So it is an example of corruption. The grace, mystery and the creative powers of a female mythology were lost in the male version of the Bible. What was the real story? We shall never get the answer. The reality had been thrown into oblivion. In order to restore the loss, Hughes is to re-invoke the symbol of ‘Uroborus’, the tail-eating serpent, the emblem of mysterious male and female unity. This snake is, unlike the biblical serpent, the symbol of production and creation.

In “Lupercal” (1960), Hughes turned to myth as a magical ritual. Almost all the poems were written as a covert invocation of power and energy. The skylark, the rats, the pike or the thrush are seen as powerhouses of elemental energies which man can but vainly seek. The lupercalia was celebrated as a mythic ritual to celebrate the bond between man and animal- the milk feeding of Romulus by the she-wolf. Poetry is a powerful deity that can shape the force of life in a more desirable way. In the last poem ‘Lupercalia’, Hughes calls the mysterious flow of power-

“. . . maker of the world

Hurrying the lit ghost of man

Age to age the holds

Touch this frozen one.” (page 87, Collected Poems)

William Blake was a seminal influence on Hughes and the latter followed the footprints of the former when in the Crow poems he sought to create another mytho-epic. This time it is a folk-mythology with a fallible God at the centre. The ‘Crow’, the eponymous hero or rather the anti-hero of these poems turns out to be inadequate. The origin of this mythic cycle has been explained by the poet himself.

“Crow grew out of an invitation by Leonard Baskin to make a book with him simply about crows. He wanted an occasion to add more crows to all the crows that flock through his sculpture, drawings and engravings in their various transformations. As the protagonist of a book, a crow would become symbolic in any author`s hands. And a symbolic crow lives a legendary life. That is how crow took off.” (qtd. In Skea)

The first Crow poems appeared on broadsides and limited edition books. In 1970, “Crow: From the Life and the Songs of the Crow” was published by Faber and Faber. But the Crow poems are not confined in this book alone. The sequence extends itself into other books and poems and some issues are dealt with in some of the children`s books, mainly in “How the Whale Became”, a book that was published in 1963. This pattern may be indicative of

Hughes's conception of life as more chaotic and disordered than we think it to be. In a chaotic world in which we get chaotic experiences, the thought and the language expressing the thought are bound to be chaotic. Thus, the crow story has never been published, before the publication of collected poems, under a single cover.

To understand the Crow of Hughes, it is necessary to understand the God of Hughes. This God has been modelled upon the Biblical God with some differences. This recreated God is ineffectual, imperfect, and fallible and at the same time fatherly, benevolent and powerful. In "How the Whale Became" God creates creatures out of clay but He does not create everything; the whale grows of its own accord and the bee is created by a demon. Thus, the God is fallible and can be deceived. Skea says- "Unlike the omniscient God of the Bible, Hughes's God can be cheated, betrayed and even kept in ignorance."

In his crow poems, mainly in "Crow: From the Life and the Songs of the Crow", Hughes created a frame to give a final expression of his immense plan of creating a folk-mythology or rather a mythology of his own construction. Through the quasi-human figure of the crow, he made a journey to dive deep into the human psyche. In these poems Hughes is obsessively drawn to the theme of death; and this complex issue comes with the theme of rebirth. The obvious result is his writing becomes more and more complex. This journey to the unconscious is seen in mythological stories as the journey to the underworld. In Homer and Virgil, the questing heroes, Ulysses and Aeneas had to undergo this journey. This journey again recurs in James Joyce's novel "Ulysses"- though in this modern version the journey is more psychological than physical. The whole journey is enacted on a psychic plane. For Hughes it was perhaps the shamanic journey to know the truth, the hidden, the unknown and the forbidden knowledge. This journey has recurred in covert form in many folk-tales and myths in which the hero goes to a hidden place to retrieve something precious and something necessary to the climax of the plot.

Such a vast conception must have a pre-planned origin. The story of the crow is not a linear narrative. From their creator we get at least two views of the origin of the crow. Of the first origin we may look at the poem "Lineage", and the other is the speech given by Hughes in Adelaide. The above mentioned poem acts as a key to understand the project of Hughes.

'In the beginning was Scream

Who begat Blood

Who begat Eye

Who begat fear.....'

The poet then gives a full list of things created by this Scream. It created 'Wing', 'Bone', 'Guitar', 'Sweat', 'Adam', 'Mary', and then comes the climax-

'Who begat God

Who begat Nothing

Who begat Never

Never Never Never'

In the next stanza, a stanza consisting of just a single line, the poem turns to the story of the crow

‘Who begat Crow’.

The final stanza describes this Crow-

‘Screaming for blood

Grubs, crusts

Anything

Trembling featherless elbows in the nest’s filth’ (page 218, Collected Poems)

This is the lineage of the crow. The poem is a description of the creations made by the Scream. Apparently disjointed materials like ‘Violet’ and ‘Sweat’ are created by the same agent. Hughes here uses the inversion of the Vedic conception of creation. According to the Vedas the world was created from the sound ‘Om’ and this creation would turn into this sound at the end of the world. Every myth is concerned with creation and when this myth of the creation presents the story of the creation of a world that is harmonious and integrated, the story of the crow originates from the scream. Hughes always centered his focus on the void, the id, the unreason. This meaninglessness and purposelessness of the creation has been dealt with in many crow poems. We may take the instance of the poem ‘Two Legends’

‘Black was the without eye
Black the within tongue
Black was the heart
Black the liver, black the lungs
Unable to suck in light
Black the blood in its loud tunnel
Black the bowels packed in furnace
Black too the muscles
Striving to pull out into the light
Black the nerves, black the brain
With its tombed visions
Black also the soul, the huge stammer
Of the cry that, swelling, could not
Pronounce its sun.’ (page 217, Collected Poems)

When Hughes sees blackness in everything of this colourful world, it is expected that this world must owe its origin, at least in this mythology not from the creative ‘Om’, but from a scream, which has no further meaning and has rich association with passion. In ‘Lineage’, the only emotion that has been described is ‘Fear’. The fear, we may arguably claim, is the first emotion felt by a child, the screaming cry of a new-born babe is the instinctive reaction. If the first line is deliberately omitted from the poem, the whole poem turns into a series of questions. And the set answer that would rise in the mind of a Christian is obviously ‘God’ . the acceptance of the scripture falls and gets shattered when we come to know that it is the

scream that claims the fatherhood of the world and the culmination of his creation is the Crow. The creation is then a dark creation and the crow is the darkest atom with its thirst for blood.

Hughes's enterprise was to create a vast folk-epic which would tell the story of the crow. Hughes was motivated by the American artist Leonard Baskin who wanted an accompanying text for his anthropomorphic bird engravings. Hughes took the task in a serio-comic manner. They, he felt, would be a children's story book. Then the unexpected thing happened – the written bird assumed a sinister shape; from the harmless black bird it turned into a small black hole, an adversary of the sun and a denial of the systematic creation of God. This bloodthirsty and cynical Crow character by mixing with the sardonic and sometimes gruesome humour of the poems and the heretical manipulation of the Biblical lore made the poems sole property for adults. Hughes had to explain the origin of his Crow as he found that the critics were at a loss to clearly understand the origin of the poems and generally misinterpreted them. Hughes's self-attributed compulsion to clarify the birth or the advent of the Crow results in his elaborate clarification regarding the origin of this Crow.

Hughes writes, "One night, God dreamed that a great monstrous hand had clenched him about the throat. With tremendous speed and terrible violence, the hand dragged him, gasping from one end of the universe to the other. It slammed him down into the dirt of Earth, ploughing up great swaths of land with his divine face. Before he could begin to recover, the throttling hand wrenched him all the way back to where he had begun and this is where God awoke, in a cold, cold sweat.

Night after night, the hand nightmare came to torment God, throttling him to Earth and back. God – who created everything that is – could not think of what existed that could be so very strange and hostile to him. The hand revealed itself to have a voice and with it cruelly mocked everything that God had created, especially that which God held up as his crowning achievement... Man.

And so there ensued a debate about Man. God stood in his defence of his creation – given the situation and materials on hand, he insisted, Man is a good invention. In response the hand contended that Man is a hopeless, worthless waste.

And while the debate raged on, oblivious to the working of God or nightmare, Man sent a representative to the gates of heaven to seek an audience with God. There Man knocked and waited, knocked and waited, knocked and waited, and God was so consumed in his nightmare that he could not hear.

At last the debate reached its climax and the hand was left to give its final argument to God. Instead of its own words, it asked Man's representative to speak. And it just happened that Man had sent him to ask God to take life back because men were fed up with it. Betrayed, God was enraged and challenged the hand to go see if it could make something better.

And that is just what the nightmare has been waiting for, and so with a howl of delight, it plunged down into matter and made its great achievement.

And thus Crow was born." (qtd. In Turkington)

Thus, according to the plan of Hughes, the Crow is a betterment of Man and at the same time a failure because his ambition is to take the place of Man. He is supposed to be superior to Man but all he tries is to be Man, who has declared himself inadequate. This plan may not be helpful to all singular Crow poems, as they have their own layers of meanings. Many Crow poems also refuse to adhere to this structure; they give totally different versions regarding the

origin of creation. In 'A Childish Prank', the Crow is seen planting the seed of life into the inert bodies of man and woman.

But why did Hughes take the Crow to be the hero or rather the anti-hero of these poems? This apparently aberrant choice bears age old mythic pattern. In many folk-tales the questing hero going on an adventure comes to the stable full of beautiful horses and he needs one for the next part of his journey. But the king's daughter advises him to take the dirty, scabby little foal and not to take the beautiful bay horses that he would be offered. And it turns out that this mad decision, at last, saves the life of the prince. This foal does wonders and the mission which otherwise would have been suicidal turns out to be a real success. This same mythological pattern can be clearly seen in many movies where the hero deliberately prefers for a weapon that would put him in disadvantage but at the crux the choice saves the situation with some so far unseen and unsuspected qualities.

Hughes had to do the same; he had to throw aside the majestic birds, the beautiful birds and to take the black banner of the crow as the symbol of his poetic quest. Many times Hughes had unequivocally expressed the disgust of the written literary tradition and the ambition to re-create the past oral, bardic tradition in poetry. This decision reflects the choice of the prince with regard to his horse. Hughes had to clear the dead bunch of literary traditions and to make a new field. He declares that his "concern was to produce something with the minimum cultural accretion of the museum sort- something autochthonous and complete in itself, as it might be invented after the Holocaust and demolition of all the libraries, where essential things spring again." (qtd. In Moulin)

This desire to re-create the existing set of things after their purposeful destruction is another myth, the myth of final cleansing. In many religious scripts the apocalypse, the final destruction of the world holds a pivotal position. It shows the fear and the dread. This fear is not personal and has a universal appeal. In the Puranas the figure of Kalki, the final incarnation of Lord Vishnu is the god of cleansing. In our deep unconscious we tend to believe that a new world is impossible unless the old one is terminated first. In the Bible this is the apocalypse. Yet, as it has been said, this is to the collective psyche at once a matter of welcome and repulsion. This grand theme is reduced in the hands of Hughes into the symbolical figure of the Crow, the proverbial cleanser. Hughes never believed in the grand narratives. The splendour is absent in his Crow poems, but the pattern, the master code is there- how much broken and inverted it may be. To write the songs of the Crow, the songs that he would probably sing, "Hughes had to develop a new phraseology, 'a super simple and a super ugly language', a syntax alien to the common reader" (Skea). The dual aspects of simplicity and ugliness are prominent in the language employed in the poems. But the philosophy of life as expressed in them is at once 'simple' and 'ugly', too. Hughes never tries to justify the inversions of the prior myths in his works; he simply brushes aside the previous versions as if they were but cobwebs surrounding the facts, and tells the fact bluntly. In 'Theology' (Collected Poems, page 205), the opening line pulverizes the Biblical ground of original sin and the consequent grand myth of self-sacrifice and redemption. It begins-

'No, the serpent did not

Seduce Eve to the apple’.

The crow, even as a simple bird of blood and flesh, has rich association of meanings. The story of Hughes’s Crow comes complete with all the mythological growths which crows have gathered through their long existence. It is the most intelligent of birds and lives on every piece of land. In almost every country it has acquired a place for its own in the folk tales. Its ability to survive is a mystery in itself. The best summation of the crows comes from Hughes himself- “the crow is the indestructible bird who suffers everything, suffers nothing . . . it is the oldest and highest totem culture of Britain.” A totem is an almost archetypal image, so there is something mythical, something surplus, something mysterious in this bird.

Hughes’s Crow is no flying, cawing bird. It is a crow and at the same time the amalgamation of the aspects of God, man and Satan. He is the final version of man and re-enacts the history of man. To put succinctly the nature of the Crow: ‘Crow himself plays pranks, refuses to learn the world ‘love’ and reenacts the stories of Adam, Oedipus, Ulysses and Hamlet’ (Sanders 643).

Sophie Pollard traces the elements of the Freudian ‘Oedipus myth’ in the poems of Hughes. Pollard takes some Crow poems such as ‘Song for a Phallus’, ‘Crow and Mama’, ‘Oedipus Crow’, ‘Crow Sickened’ etc and points out the similarity between the state of Oedipus in Seneca and the anxiety of the Crow in Hughes. Pollard also sees the poems as a development of the poetic study of the ‘Oedipus complex’. In ‘Song for a Phallus’ the very title hints at the phallic song and bears sexual connotations. In this poem the story of Oedipus turns upside down as Laius and Jocasta respectively turns into Daddy and Mammy. In this version the father seals the womb up as the message has arrived that the son would treat the father after the birth as a turd. When the baby comes out Daddy is about to castrate it. This fear of castration is the universal fear of the first stage of psychosexual development. At this juncture the mother comes to the rescue of the Oedipus with an overt sexual appeal.

“O do not chop his winkle off
His Mammy cried with horror
Think of the joy will come of it

Tomorrer and tomorrer” (page 248, Collected Poems)

This sexual appeal of the male children slowly pushes the father away from the mother. Daddy throws Oedipus and the lucky boy ‘bounced up like a jackinabox/ And knocked his Daddy down’

The Sphinx then comes but without any inclination of answering the question Oedipus splits it from top to bottom. At last he kills his mother also and drenched in the blood imagines nothing has happened to disturb his foetal sleep.

This poem has also been analysed as the complex of a writer who suffers from the anxiety of influence. The Crow may be a writer with juvenile imagination, who fails to create but few characters. In the hot imagination of the Crow the Senecan version of the Oedipus myth turns into something raw and full of blood. He suffers, just like Oedipus from hubris and ultimately

falls the victim to it. The mother and the Sphinx both are female characters and they are ripped open. Is it to prevent the possibility of the next baby? The Sphinx is also Crow-like in its amalgamation of human and animal attributes. She is a threat and must be put to death.

In 'Crow and Mama', the Crow is depicted as a failure. When he cried the mother's ear 'scorched to a stump'; when he took a step the face is scarred. The Crow tries to escape but there is no place for him and when he tries a rocket the rocket crashes onto the moon. The crow is then the sinister, saturnine character who fails and his failure brings about also the agony of the mother- just as Oedipus brought the death of Jocasta.

The myth of Oedipus turns into the more complex story of Hamlet in some poems. The prince of Denmark has in his mind a more complex love, not unmixed with hatred, for his mother. When Hamlet has a sexual attraction towards his mother, the infidelity of his mother makes her an object of apathy to the young boy. Hughes's Crow shares the same aversion to the mother. The poem 'Revenge Fable' begins-

"There was a person
Could not get rid of his mother
As if he were her topmost twig
So he pounded and hacked at her"

'Crow Sickened' is a poem that is suggestive of the agony of Oedipus and his valorous act of blinding himself as penitence. The sickness of the Crow is something that cannot be vomited up. In great mental agony the Crow 'decided to get death' but his own body 'walked into his ambush'. And after a long and slow process of dives, journey and challenge he finally attains the blindness- "His eyes sealed up with shock, refusing to see". Yet, the last of Oedipus is heroic self-mortification with a suggestion of redemption but no such glory is allotted to the Crow. At last 'horrified, he fell'.

Ann Skea, on the other hand, brings to the light the elements of the folklores in the crow poems. In her opinion the Crow figure is an extension of the 'trickster' figure. This figure is a prominent one in the folk-stories of the North American Indians. She borrows the words of Paul Radin to emphasize the character of a trickster. Radin says, (a trickster is) "at once and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and is always duped himself". This figure can be seen in the European folk-tales in the character of the 'Fool'. In the Norse mythology in the figure of Loki. He is allowed to change stands; he is allowed to criticize everybody as long as the butt of his criticism is a general folly. Sometimes he is seen to deny even his own words. He seems at ease with everything. The Crow also displays these traits in his character with a strong sense of ego. The Crow suffers from a superiority complex. When modern intellectual man seems eager to pin down their existence with some set roles, the Fool or the Crow shares the absence of set characters spoken by post-structuralism. They menacingly remind us, that our small, fixed and permanent world is chaotic at heart where there is no identity for an individual. The opening of this chaotic world is the opening of suppressed id and triggers the climax of identity crisis.

Skea calls the Crow a ‘Guizer’. A Guizer is a character of who is in the language of Skea- “Comical, grotesque, stupid, ambiguous... part human part animal dawning godhead in man”.

This trickster figure is also the collective protest of physically weak but intellectually superior people. The common trickster figure in the fables is the fox or the crow. They are neither strongly built nor has any grandeur about them. But they share the power of the brain with the humans and with the help of it live a life of success.

This trickster figure also figures in the four major archetypal figures. There it is also dubbed as the Devil. In Hughes’s poems the Crow sometimes plays the role of the destroyer or the bringer of evil. In ‘Crow’s First Lesson’ from “A Few Crows”, God vainly tries to teach the Crow the word love and the result is disastrous. When the word is pronounced for the first time, ‘the white shark crashed into the sea’. The later efforts produce the bluefly, the tsetse, and the mosquito. The last and final attempt brings to the existence man’s bodiless head and woman’s vulva tightly wound around it. God uselessly tries to put them apart and crow ‘flew guiltily off’. So this Crow is the unconscious agent of mischief, his capability is beyond the power of God to control. Yet he is not a deliberate villain. The word ‘guilty’ serves as the ploy. He is no Satan.

If the Crow is taken as the dark self, the alter ego of God then the role played by him also functions as the motif of death in the poems. The crow, who is the bearer of the black flag (‘Crow blacker than Ever’) is also the unmistakable symbol of death. The primitive men were at a loss to understand death as it refused to be defined and hence in was to them the greatest mystery. In the myth created in the Crow poems the protagonist introduces the death and rebirth motif. The poem ‘Examination at the Womb Door’ gives a brief description of death through an interview before entering the world where death holds the sway. The poem commences- “who owns these scrawny little feet?” The answer immediately follows- Death. The rest of the poem then questions regarding the ownership of ‘bristly scorched looking face’, ‘still-working lungs’, ‘utility coat of muscles’, ‘unspeakable guts’, ‘minimum efficiency eyes’, ‘wicked little tongue’, ‘the whole rainy, stony earth’ and ‘all of space’ the only answer that comes repeatedly is – Death. At last the climax comes slowly

“Who is stronger than the will ? Death.

Stronger than love? Death.

Stronger than life? Death” (page 218, Collected Poems)

But when asked who is stronger than this death the Crow answers, “Me, evidently” and as a reward gets the passport to enter the world. Thus, Crow is beyond the power of death. The sinister and uncanny sense of being more powerful than the ultimate is the essence of this bird.

The crow also gave Hughes the opportunity to redefine the image of Biblical God. When in the post-war Europe the message of brotherly love and neighbour turned into farce, the poets felt the pressing need to create a new myth and to see the positive side of a myth that has failed in a negative way. They were made to see the profane elements in the scriptures.

Hughes sought a new definition of God. He took the stories from the sacred books. His repetitive use of same words recalls the style of the Bible- and Hughes created a new God to fit into a new mythology. The fatherly and omnipotent god is reduced to the status of a whining, querulous failed artist. The Crow is the deconstructive agent who can undo the creation. The Crow`s interference begins in ‘A Childish Prank’ (page 215, collected Poems) when God is disturbed and at a loss how to put the souls into the inert bodies of Adam and Eve. “The problem was so great, it dragged him asleep”. It is the time for the crow to intervene. He bits the Worm, ‘god`s only son’, into two writhing halves and fuses the bits into the two soulless parts. By doing so, he creates sex as the driving passion that neither man nor woman can either resist or understand. Surprisingly enough, when Crow manipulates the creation, ‘God went on sleeping’. So the creation myth falls upside down. The Crow is the creator of life and not God. Instead of the sacrificing hero, Christ, we get a worm writhing in the beaks of Crow as the son of God. And it is not the holy breath of God that brought life, it was and still is raw sexual urge. In the sacrilegious reconstruction of the Biblical lore the Crow also emerges as a trickster figure, for the trickster is traditionally the breaker of taboos and the destroyer of the holy of holies.

Hughes himself, however, seemed to feel that the trickster cycle had taken him too far, too fast. He described the writing of the Crow poems to Fass as being like ‘putting (himself) through a process’. And when asked by Fass if he felt the process had come to a kind of complete end, he said: ‘in a way I think I projected too far into the future. I`d like to get the rest of it. But may be it will take different form’. (qtd. In Skea)

Hughes has been constantly criticised for the hot pursuit of blood and violence; when the Crow poems were published this accusation was almost confirmed without further proof. But in fact the crow is a surrealistic and absurd reconstruction of the negations present within us- the id, the void and the null.

The German authors F.W.J. Schelling and Friedrich Schlegel had proposed that to write great poetry, modern poets must develop a new mythology which will synthesize Western past with the new discoveries of philosophy and the physical sciences (Abrams 180). Hughes was not satisfied with philosophy and the physical sciences; he extended his hands to the obscure folktales of the North American Folktales of native Indians. He also had the opportunity of reading Freud and Jung. While the folktales enabled him to deviate from the standard mode of narration, the deep psychological insight helped the poems have the expected universality.

Throughout the poetry of Hughes, myths and folktales, as it has been pointed out, serve to mould the technical approach and the literary output. If Blake felt that he must create a system or he would be enslaved by those created by other men, Hughes also realized that to be different, he must create something original, something different. The quest for originality and the truth made him dive deep into the psyche of man, into the forging place of myths and the result is the production of a first class mythic-epic. To consider him as a whole, we may rightfully say that “through myth he had access to the intensity and drama of life and death, to the powerful energies of good and evil” (Skea). His use of rituals in patterns is the indication that the charms that have been used for centuries to contain the energies may be used in

poetry also. Poetry was to Hughes another magical charm, a spiritual tool. Yet, for him the myths were not merely the source of power, they were the tools to control energies whether they were conscious or unconscious, sacred or profane, good or bad. We must not forget the fact that he had a totally new perception. For him the world was new, as was the life. So to explain these or to find meaning of seemingly meaningless life, Hughes deftly used the myths with a fresher shade of suggestion and used folktales for their original and intrinsic association with the passionate and unspoiled life of the ground to earth aboriginals.

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