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## Poems of Ted Hughes: Looking Back into the Ancient Indian Religion

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### **Abstract:**

The objective of this research paper is to find the imprints of ancient Indian religion in the poems of Ted Hughes. Religious aspects have been represented in literature and they found expression of sociocultural pictures through the intricate crafting of a poet's art. The present paper seeks to find the prehistoric religion of India with particular emphasis on the poetry of the post-fifties British poet Laureate, Ted Hughes (1930-1998). An attempt has been made to explore how the poems of Ted Hughes express a type of Upper Paleolithic religion that played a significant role in bringing out a balanced societal setup through a shamanic approach in ancient Indian cultural history. The poems of Ted Hughes address the question of speciesism as to the assumption of human superiority leading to the exploitation of animals to be the root cause of environmental and animal life degradation. Ecocide, referring to the destruction of the natural environment by deliberate or negligent human action and also a shift of focus from the environment to the animals by the application of more focus on the deplorable animal existence, have been extensively studied in this research paper with respect to the selected poems of Ted Hughes. The paper also focuses on representations of environmental degradation and animal mistreatment in literature by contrasting the pagan, prehistoric religion and animalistic features.

**Keywords: Primitivism, Speciesism, Environment, Animals, Paganism.**

### **Introduction:**

The International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) is yet to recognise officially the third epoch called the Anthropocene that follows the two other epochs namely the Pleistocene and the Holocene of the Quaternary Period and which is the current and latest of the three

periods of the Cenozoic Era. The Cenozoic Era, which is the earth's current geological era, follows the Mesozoic Era and the Paleozoic Era. While the Cenozoic Era is preoccupied with the current geological matters and the Mesozoic Era was struggling with tectonic, climatic and evolutionary activities, the Paleozoic Era dealt with the ancient and primitive life that witnessed the extinction event of the Phanerozoic Eon.

The Upper Paleolithic being the third and the last subdivision of the Old Stone Age dates back to the time before the beginning of the Holocene and the advent of the Neolithic Revolution and agriculture. It witnessed the commencement of behavioral modernity, technological innovations, cognitive and cultural foundations that continued through the evolutionary process as time passed by.

The Upper Paleolithic age bearing the evidence of having organized settlements in the form of campsites and artistic works with cave paintings, petroglyphs, engravings on bones, ivory and stones and the invention of stone tools testify to the skills of creations of diverse group identity and ethnic identity. The diverse groups and ethnic identification also catered to the varied cultural tastes of the new humans and this crossed the boundaries of Europe and Africa and dispersed in various parts of the globe including Asia in gradual pace.

### **Discussion:**

The Upper Paleolithic (40,00-8000 B.C) that witnessed a dominant blooming of culture, the emergence of sophisticated and elaborate art, jewelry, proper clothing and worldwide dispersal of human beings followed prehistoric religion involving the prehistoric cultures that dates back to more than two and a half million years and spanned the globe with multiple religious practices.

The Upper paleolithic religion is taken to be shamanic, animistic and ecstatic experiences, based on the concept of the practice of special spiritual leaders entering into a trance-like state to receive esoteric spiritual knowledge.

The instances of prehistoric religion can be strengthened by circumstantial evidence of archeological reasoning as the written records are not available. Extrapolation of the existing cave arts and the remains of art objects of the Paleolithic evinces the prehistoric religious facts. These religious practices of the prehistoric era trail behind even today by modern reconstructionists along with their pagan and Celtic faiths.

**Urge to look back:**

Bear worship as a popular myth of the prehistoric religion is found in the poems of Ted Hughes.

Paleolithic religious faith in worshipping of goddesses as deities of fertility persists in modern times as well as, in modes of feminist interpretations in the poems of Ted Hughes. They also worshiped half human and half animal figures crafted in stones. This intermixing of human and animal forms indicated a close attachment between the humans and the animals that transcends modern day human and animal otherness. This feature of animalism in the ancient Indian religious cultural development strengthened the religious ties of humans with animals. This also characterized the otherworldly and super worldly realm and practices where animals were thought to be manlike. It also expresses the belief of the concept that animals were regarded as to act like guardian spirits and alter egos of human beings. This theriomorphically envisioned higher beings in the unified forms of humans and animals developed a totemistic religious concept. This animalistic religious practice also signifies the resurrection of animals and the preservation of species just like the death -rebirth archetype of the female fertility goddess, worshiped during and after the period.

Robert Bruce Foote first discovered a Palaeolithic Stone in India in the year 1863. List of the Upper Palaeolithic sites in India corresponds to present day locations and sites in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Pakistan, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Kashmir and Rajasthan. Ancient people in these places relied on hunting and were dependent on weapons and tools made from stone and they sustained totally on the food and shelter derived from nature only. The Palaeolithic age (or the Old Stone Age) in India spanned between 2 million B.C to 10,000 B.C., Mesolithic (or the Middle Stone Age) between 10,000 B.C to 8,000 B.C and Neolithic (or New Stone Age) between 8000 B.C to 4,000 B.C and the three along with Chalcolithic (Copper) age spanning from 4000 B.C to 1,500 B.C together form the Ancient India based on the type of stone and metal tools used by people. The first inhabitants of Indian subcontinent believed to be tribals like Nagas (North-East), Santhals (East-India), Bhils (Central India), Gonds (Central India), Todas (South India)- all depended on nature for sustenance and shelter. Though the Dravidians and Aryans, called immigrants came later to the sub-continent they also worshiped nature and fire like the Paleoliths.

The tools and implements used during these ages conformed to the basic needs and climate changing conditions of the time. The Paleolithic Indian people relied on hunting, fishing, food gathering and domestication of animals as witnessed from Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. In all human culture there is the culture of religion and the people of the age as

well, developed religious practices. Indian people in the Paleolithic age, like other places, worshiped fire. Worship of the female as a feminine power was practiced using a triangle as a representation in Baghor in Madhya Pradesh.

### **Ancient Cultures in Ted Hughes's Poems:**

The post-fifties British poet Laureate, Ted Hughes (1930-1998) in his poems celebrates the dominance and cult of nature and natural forces. Concept of pagan religion is infused in his poems and the central force behind all creation is taken to have originated from nature as per his poems. Animals, in his poems appear as totems and are believed to possess shamanistic and esoteric control. Nature worship in different forms as sun, stone, fire and earth are abundant in his poems and it bears similarities with the pagan religion traced in Paleolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic ages. The concept of bear worship as prevalent in ancient Indian religion is also found in the poems of Ted Hughes. Worship of the female as the goddess of fertility is recurrent in his poems. The human-animal solidarity as found in the poems of Ted Hughes quite conforms to the reverential position of the mingled figures of half human and half animal of the Paleologic age.

The poems of Ted Hughes show an aversion towards the religious spirit of Christianity as prevalent in his times and the past. Poems like "Theology", "Gog" and "Crow's Fall" amply express this attitude of the poet with regard to his notion of Christian religion. An explicit looking away from the domain of Christian religious concepts is the unique feature of these poems. Decentering the position of Christian God from the supreme high altar and establishing a posthuman outlook that brings to the fore rationalistic attitude and subsequent equal status of living among all living beings along with a compact system of evenly distributed power strata including everything present on the earth so that the threats to biodiversity conservation is countered. Joanny Moulin in "History & Reason in the Work of Ted Hughes" observed:

A clear-sighted effort to try and explain his Anti-Christian views must lead to taking into account his approach to rationalism, and to show how those two notions are, rather paradoxically, related. This amounts to an idiosyncratic version of history, since Hughes, to put it *cum grano sails*, considers Christianity and rationalism as a dark period of the religious history of mankind, to be overcome as soon as possible. In the history of art and literature, this for him corresponds to tragedy, from ancient Greece to Shakespeare's England, of which the history of the 20th century has been giving an apocalyptic off-stage happening version.

(Moulin,67-83).

In the midst of environmental threats in this imperiled globe, Ted Hughes embarks on a spiritual quest in his poetry to have a unified vision of nature as it prevailed in the ancient times. Each volume of his poetry, “The Hawk in the Rain” (1957 ), “Lupercal” (1960 ), “Wodwo” (1967 ), “Gaudete” (1977 ), “River” (1983 ), “Cave Birds” (1978 ) to name only a few, is a step forward in offering thematic insights to achieving self-realization and living harmoniously with and in nature. The poems of Ted Hughes ordains a reverential fear towards nature as some mysterious power, superior to the powers of human beings. This reverential fear towards nature as the supreme and superior force is similar to what the Paleolithic people considered fire and the other elemental forces of nature to be. On his poetic journey, Ted Hughes continuously encounters the cultural and psychological demons that hamper his holistic attempt to establish some kind of negotiation with nature.

#### **Attitude towards modern world relating to poems of Ted Hughes and the Environment:**

Ted Hughes’s attitude towards the modern world reflects fear and self-division and his poems express symptoms of an illness that modern men cannot heal. Ted Hughes’s poetic vision derives thematic and religious coherence from the primitive Oriental societies where man used to live happily in close conformity with nature. Ekbert Faas’s *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (1980) emphatically expresses the views that the mystic adventures of Ted Hughes’s works in the context of Buddhist philosophies. Faas traces “ Hughes’s transformation from an empathetic miniaturist of plants, animals and men into a visionary spellmaker of polyhistoric dimensions" through the adoption of a “multicultural aesthetics" and “ oriental flash-vision” (50). The concepts in the early poetry of Ted Hughes like, “The Hawk in the Rain” (1957), “Lupercal” (1960) that are a perfect demonstration of the frightening and insoluble paradox that the forces which are the source of life and everything else that is, if denied or suppressed, can also kill man correspond to the ideas of ancient religion where ancient people feared fire and the elements of nature.

Daniel Xerri in his book “Ted Hughes’s Art of Healing " observes, “ An investigation of the mythopoeic quality of Hughes’ work is tied to an analysis of the influence exerted by Robert Graves’ *The White Goddess* upon Hughes’ poetic method. This is partly composed of a review of the intertextual echoes yielded by the poet’s reworking of the myths of ancient civilizations and primitive religions for his own specific purposes.” (xviii, Ted Hughes’s *Art of Healing*). Ted Hughes identifies poetry with religious or mystical rituals. For Hughes, the most enriching aspect of shamanism is the idea that the universe is a holistic phenomenon

infused with life and energy, within which every individual has a role. The idea of wholeness conforms to the ancient holistic attitude of nature that existed in the ancient world that was devoid of selfish intentions and societal segregation. Ted Hughes's reliance upon psychoanalytic ideas and his conception of the poet as some kind of shamanic figures takes the readers back to the ancient cultural history of India where shamanic practices continued. The idea of Ted Hughes' poetry to bear a kind of spiritual curative energy and the attempt to uphold poetry's restorative energies links him to the ancient cultures of shamanistic traditions, animism and totemism. Instances of bear worship, female worship in the form of white goddess and worship of earth goddess are found in his poetry that taints his poetry in the colours of religious practices of ancient history. The poem "The Thought Fox" implicitly registers Ted Hughes's opposition to the conception of poetry as a conscious construction of the human intellect" observes Pawan Kumar Sharma in *Ted Hughes: An Ecocritical Study* (Sharma, 46).

### **Conclusion:**

Charles Darwin in *The Origin of Species: By Means of Natural Selection* contends, "Nothing at first can appear more difficult to believe than that the more complex organs and instincts should have been perfected, not by means superior to, though analogous with, human reason, but by the accumulation of innumerable slight variations, each good for the individual possessor. Nevertheless, this difficulty, though appearing to our imagination insuperably great, cannot be considered real if we admit the following propositions, namely- that gradations in the perfection of any organ or instinct, which we may consider, either do now exist or could have existed, each good of its kind- that all organs and instincts are, in ever so slight a degree, variable- and, lastly, that there is a struggle for existence leading to the preservation of each profitable deviation of structure or instinct. The truth of these propositions cannot, I think, be disputed" (Darwin, 366-67). Instinctive urges in human beings be it ancient or modern lead them towards the creation of culture and observance of religious rites. Wendy Woodward records, "In his essay, Derrida reframes the Genesis myth so that the animal embodies a moral agent who brings the human to awareness of good and evil rather than an unthinking creature who is ultimately responsible, like the Edenic serpent, for human shame.....Literally, then, a cat can look at a philosopher which *stimulates* his questions about (human) being in the gaze of the animal" (Woodward, 2-3).

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