

# Nature and Animal World: The Dominant Themes in Ted Hughes's Poetry

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**Abstract – Nature and animal world are the dominant themes in Ted Hughes's poetry, since nature manifests the elemental energy and the animals inherit those instinctive characteristics which impart them the power to accommodate with this. Hughes conceives that the whole of the universe is directed and regulated by the bigger energy that pervades like power circuit through it, he calls it - "elemental power circuit" (TCP, 103). He is convinced that it is the energy, very much real, that manifests in the various appearances of nature, and is, in itself the driving force to its manifestation. The universe is a complex web, where element, animal and human being exist with their characteristics yet form a complex - a unified whole, Hughes's vision of 'energy-circuit' parallels with the Indian concept of "Shakti", which recognizes 'Shakti' as the deity of energy and power and is reckoned as the root cause of creation as well as destruction of the universe. The "Shakti" is the essence of every element that sets it to life.**

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This concept reveals in the book *Shree Durga Saptshati* (canto. 5) where "Durga" has been regarded as the "shakti" permeating through every particle of the complex-web. It says : " Ya devi sarvabhuta nampranrupena sansthita". Hughes, as is evident in his poems, seems to acknowledge this notion of energy. Not only the elements and animals possess the intrinsic energy, human being has also been regarded as a reservoir of immense energy. Psychologists like Freud and Jung have elaborately worked out upon this line which puts forth the concept of energy suppressed in the unconscious. The notion of "id" is fundamental to Freud's theory. It has been conceptualized as the original aspect of personality. Freud<sup>47</sup> likened the "id" to a "seething cauldron" of ever-bubbling primitive urges and desires primarily of unconscious sexual and aggressive instincts. He maintains that the basic energy source contained in the "id" that propels behaviour is "libido", which consists of sexual desires. Later Jung put forth his concept of psychic energy. It tells that through the psyche, energy flows continuously in various direction from conscious to unconscious and back and from inner to outer reality and vice-versa. For Jung the terms psychic - energy and libido are interchangeable. According to this theory "libido" signifies a more general life - process energy of which sexual urges are only one aspect. Psychic energy is an abstraction representing something real that cannot be touched,

but its existence is proved through its effects. This energy is an outcome of the conflict between the forces within the personality. Once energy is created, it moves in a variety of directions and can be dissipated in outward behaviour or it can continue to move within psyche. Human being possesses the deepest, instinctual sources of energy in his own being. This concept of human energy combined with that of "energy - circuit" indicates that the whole of the universe is an enactment of energy and power. Ted Hughes stands for this view of the universe and energy. He acknowledges energy to be the life - force which manifests in the elemental power of nature, in the instinctive response of animals and in the garbed activity of human being. The life-force operates upon animals most clearly and is distinctively non-human or even non-rational in its source of power.

It has been already stated that Ted Hughes acknowledges the influence of Schopenhauer's philosophy, who recognizes 'will' as the driving force of all the activity of the universe, human or non-human. Frederick Mayer writes, "the will, wrote Schopenhauer, is the force which acts in the plants and, indeed the force through which the crystal is formed and by which the man get turns to the North Pole" (387). Schopenhauer refers the concept of force to that of 'will' finds it extending to the whole sphere of nature and to the animal world too. Will is the thing - in - itself, the essence of the world. Life, the visible world," the phenomenon, is only the mirror of the will, therefore life accompanies the will as

<sup>47</sup>Discussion related to Freud and Jung's theory is based on the book *Theories of Personality*, Richard M. Ryckman, 1978, D. Van Nostrend Company, New York.

inseparably as the shadow accompanies the body ; and if 'will' exists, so will life, the world exists. Life is, therefore, assured to the 'will to live', struggle for existence, i.e., will to live is perceived everywhere, especially in the animal world. The higher forms of existence are evolved through victory over the lower forms. Nietzsche transformed the concept of will into a concrete struggle for power. According to his theory, 'will to power' is the life - force that inspires the activity of the universe and art is the subject in which the essence of the struggle for power can be comprehended. Nietzsche's superman is an emblem of the concept of will to power, he is the meaning of earth, he is that sea. Bergson also maintained that the evolution is guided by a vital force (elan vital). Ted Hughes is the poet of this vital energy, life - force that pervades through the complex web of the universe. Elemental energy appears in both ways evil as well as good. Generally it is the good, the pleasant aspect of the nature that attracts the poets, all the more. Beauty of nature in its -tender form has always been much stressed, poets celebrate the "seasons of mists and mellow fruitfulness" (Keats, "To Autumn"), "the mountain and the deep gloomy wood", "their colours and their forms" have been the centre of "a feeling and a love " (Wordsworth, "Lines Composed Above Tintern Abbey"). Although Shelley addresses 'West Wind' as 'O Wild Wind' and entertains it's that appearance which seems to command the seasons, yet it is not the source of evil or good. The concept that nature is the source of evil or suffering as well as good gains ascendancy in the later period of Romanticism (Frye, 1963, 21). Ted Hughes observes of course in the context of wind ; "Almost every poet, when he mentions the wind touches one of his good moments of poetry" (1967 : 33). Not only for wind, Hughes's observation is also true for other manifestations of nature, where the poets select only the beautiful features.

Ted Hughes entertains both the aspects of nature, destructive and constructive. In his poems, nature appears in its elemental form, e.g., rain, wind and enforces its 'otherness' to be realized, besides it makes its presence to be felt in the blossom of spring season, in the mesmerizing beauty of the 'Harvest Moon' and in the heavy downpour as well. Hughes has written a poem "Hawk Roosting" (*Lupercal*). He, about the hawk of the poem, says : "Actually what I had in mind was that in this hawk nature is thinking" (TCP,102). If the poet's statement is taken to be authentic, then this is for the first time that a poet expresses nature's thinking. Hughes presents nature as an entity that is quite other than the rest of the objects of the universe which can think and act independently. If the hawk stands for nature, by implication it means that the nature possesses hawk - like tendencies. If the words of the hawk are reckoned to be the assertive voice of the nature, then it can be said that Hughes' vision centres upon the energetic and barely raw aspect of the nature. He mentions the nature as a supreme power and the focus of creation, the hawk speaks ; "It took the whole of creation, to produce my foot and each feather", i.e., he is at the

centre of the universe and rules over it, "Now I hold creation in my foot." The manners of the hawk revealed in the poem indicate his dictator - like mentality. Does Hughes intend to suggest that the nature manifests its power in the same manner, that of the hawk. If this vision is to be taken true then what about the 'Mother Nature' whom Ted Hughes adorns so much? It seems that whatever he alludes to the hawk of this poem is an afterthought of the critic Hughes, not that of his poet. Fascinated by the drowsy majestic posture of a roosting hawk, he transplants himself into hawk's mentality and imagines how the hawk would explain his own activity, tell about himself, if at all he has to do that. It seems, Hughes desires to hint at the barbaric aspect of the nature and equates it to the instinctually barbaric nature of the hawk. For Ted Hughes nature is the entity that stands eternal, man and animal may go, nature still remains, the hawk says : "Nothing has changed since I began. I am going to keep things like this."

Ted Hughes, evidently, perceives the powerful enactment of elemental energy in rain and wind, he also mentions the sun who manifests energy in the form of warmth—fire. The poem at the threshold of the book *The Hawk in the Rain*, presents the rain in its most elemental potentiality. Rain, that not only hacks human being but turns the earth into a muddy land, when wind accompanies rain its power knows no measure. The Rain and the wind both are as real as the man and the hawk and manifest their identity. This perhaps, is the real 'otherness' of nature. There are three participants - man, animal and the nature, and the last one seems more powerful than the first two. The poem "November" (*HIR*) describes yet another aspect of the rain. After the rain stops whole of the nature looks a new, a fresh, 'mist silvering the droplets on the bare thorns', 'rain plastered the land till it was shining like hammered lead'. The two poems referred here, present two different aspects of nature - destructive and creative.

The nature as it appears in winter season manifests in the poem "October Dawn" (*HIR*). Ted Hughes describes right from its first clue of arrival, i.e., a thin layer of ice that forms on a glass half-full of wine left out to the dark heaven all night, as if the glass dreams a premonition of ice across its eye, as if the 'ice-age had begun its heave':

A glass half-full of wine left out

To the dark heaven all night, by dawn

Has dreamed a premonition

Of ice across its eye as if

The ice-age had begun its heave. (*HIR*: 14)

Then arrives the actual winter, its overriding effect is evidenced by the doomed shrubbery which was whistling green before its beginning. Gradually winter intensifies its impact, air becomes still, river - water

freezes as if the winter imprisons the other elements of the nature:

First a skin, delicately here

Restraining a ripple from the air ;

Soon plate and rivet on pond and brook

Then tons of chain and massive lock

To hold rivers.(*HIR* : 14)

Winter transcends into a tyrant invader, who comes, attacks and enslaves the innocent people. Cold is the first of winter, so strong is the grip that it squeezes the fire at the core of the world and at the core of the heart of human being. Ted Hughes does not address winter in second person as Shelley does to west wind, "O Thou" or Wordsworth says, 'O Sylvan Wye !Thou wanderer through the wood." Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats establish an informal relation with the entity of nature, Hughes does not. For him the elements of the universe are realities and should be put as such without any emotional attachment what so ever.

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