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An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Ted Hughes's 'Hawk Roosting': A Posthumanist Perspective

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DOI: 10.53032/tcl.2018.3.2.10

Abstract

The entire body of Ted Hughes's poetry has enjoyed and is still enjoying a wide readership for the brilliant treatment of its theme which is at once unique and universal. The style with which he has graced his poems, mostly on birds and animals, also showcases his craftsmanship as a poet. Accordingly, much scholarship is available on the poet and his poetry. Ted Hughes is outwardly designated or commonly understood as an animal lover/poet. But this is not or ought not to be his only identity, for a recent reading of most of his poems unearths his another side—a side that is present within the thematic texture of these poems but has not been explored as such. Some of his poems robustly deal with his posthumanist thinking. Under the garb of symbol, the poems foreground, among other aspects, the poet's criticism of the humanist discourse of man as a distinguished and sublime creature occupying the centre of creation. One of these poems, which has been chosen for its relatively more poignant edge of such criticism, is 'Hawk Roosting', which tears asunder the veil over 'man' to display his greed, selfishness and brutality. The poem breaks the humanist bastion of man into pieces and locates him on the ground of reality by exposing his bleak characteristics which posthumanism tends to focus upon. This paper will, therefore, argue for the unfailing presence of Hughes's posthumanist facets in the given poem through a discourse-based qualitative methodology.

Keywords: Dignified Creature, Humanist Discourse, Posthumanism, Bleak Characteristics

Ted Hughes does not sing of human glory in his poetry. Nature also appears violent in most of his poems. In fact, he is rather cynical about human nature and Nature. Being exposed to the world devastated by the two World Wars (1914-18; 1939-45) especially the World War II, he could not feast his eyes with a scenic beauty of some idyllic landscape. Neither the music of flowing river nor the gleeful chirping of birds echoing in the azure sky could lull his ears. The world before him appeared disintegrated and chaotic. He could not fix the scheme of things that were made "out of joint" (*Hamlet*, I.v.189). Indeed, the post-war backdrop with all its brutality, arson, murder, killing, rape, looting breathed an uneasy climate over him. He seemed to smell the gun-powder everywhere. He felt suffocated. He perceived the world like W.B. Yeats—"Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" ("The Second Coming", L.4). He could only

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see cruelty around him. “His poetic mind felt a great revolt against all this man-made calamity.”¹ For that reason, standing on the post-war debris he could not think of the jovial aspect of life. Even he did not find it feasible to regain his trust in man and rebuild it upon the ashes of wars caused by the animal called man. Human selfishness, hard-heartedness and beastliness astonished him terribly. Ironically enough, he was failed to find humane aspect in man. The character of man seemed to him unpredictably violent and dangerous. Essential humanism became a far cry: one man killed or was made to murder another man for vested interest. The humanist portrayal of humans as kind, compassionate, simple, rational, logical, sympathetic, empathetic, completely different from jungle animal, etc. proved to be a myth. The poet, Ted Hughes, foregrounds the real nature of man as experienced by him in most of his poems, although through a symbolic cover. He seems to take on human being by painting him in his true colour. Hughes desires to expose him to his core which, according to the poet, inherently shares some animal characteristics and behaviour. In doing so in his poems, Hughes does not only overlook some rare aspects of human love, sympathy and compassion, but ignores the human subject as well in a studied manner. Even almost the complete casket of his poems contains poems on birds and animals for which he is commonly called an animal poet. Here, one may not be wrong if he or she states that almost the entire body of Ted Hughes’s poetry takes the titles, partly or fully, from the animal jungle: “Hawk in the Rain”, “The Thought Fox”, “The Jaguar”, “The Horses”, “Hawk Roosting”, “Cat and Mouse”, “View of a Pig”, “Thrushes”, “The Bear”, “The Howling of Wolves”, “Snake Hymn”, “Ravens”, “Sheep”, “And Owl”, etc. Some of his volumes of poems too are entitled after animals and birds like *Hawk in the Rain* (1957), *Crow: From the Life and the Songs of the Crow* (1970), *Wolfwatching* (1982), etc. Ted Hughes also plays with the meaning of such titles. On the literal level, these poems seem to celebrate the selfishness, cunningness and violence, which are the typical characteristics of animals and some birds. But at the symbolic level, they address the brutality and haughtiness of man and Nature. Such animals and birds seem to have provided him with the signifying metaphors he searched for as Keith Sagar, a famous scholar on Ted Hughes, points out, “The poet is engaged in finding metaphors for his own nature, his only touchstone for human nature” (“Hughes and His Landscape”, p.2)². Certainly, the poet uses such birds and animals as a vehicle to carry the connotation beyond the surface meaning of the poems. Again, the poet presents the animalistic behaviour in the poems mentioned above as per their nature with an end in view to reflecting the true nature of man signified by such metaphors. No animal or bird is, therefore, dealt with as something super-animal or super-bird. So, in Hughes’s opinion, the animals behave themselves. They go by their instinct. They are leading their life naturally, without any affectation. On the other side, human beings are not humane in the true sense of the term. They have also some straits of beastliness. They do share, as mentioned earlier, animalistic selfishness, cunningness, cruelty, which they tend to hide. The violence in animals and birds are outright. It is evident by their physical behaviour. On the contrary, the violence in human being gets unbridled from within. But the wars betrayed the inhumanity

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lurking within them. Therefore, there is a gap between the way man shows himself and the manner in which he accomplishes his pursuits.

The metaphorical layer of meaning of Hughes's poetry beyond the literal level is more engaging as it relates to humans, although some scholars overlook such strands of the poem. According to Edward Albert, the poet "sees the certainties, the pointlessness, and violence that are part of man's life" (*History of English Literature*, p. 641). "Hughes often used the brutality and nature of animals as a metaphor for life itself."³ If the symbolic garb of his poems are lifted, then animals and birds do no longer speak the parlance of the jungle. The speaker, hawk, a predatory bird, in the poem under consideration, "Hawk Roosting", metaphorically represents a dangerously powerful human agent of war. The hawk's language and voice sound bitter, hoarse and coarse with a clear resemblance to human haughtiness and cruelty. He seems to speak the language of a dictator. Elsewhere, the bird is compared to a fascist, "the bird is symbolically a fascist"⁴. Since hawk is a bird of prey, it does not care of others' suffering. Similarly, a warmonger is indifferent to the pain and afflictions of others who get hurt by such fascist ruler. Sympathy cannot be drawn from the fascist dictators. Such emotion is a foreign to them, and the expectation of such humane feeling is consciously thwarted by the poet by negating such claim in the poem- "no falsifying dream" (L.2). Again, the dictator who thinks himself to be placed on a high position to spy on everything and regulate his subjects or victims or enemies or subordinates just because of his position informs the same attitude of the bird of prey i.e. the hawk as expressed in the very first line of the poem under discussion- "I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed." Here, the second part of the line, "my eyes closed" does not mean that he has taken his face away from what are happening around him and is indifferent to the worldly affairs. But it shows the degree of his confidence over his perfect surveillance as it happens in contemporary time, which is beautifully dealt with in W.H. Auden's "The Unknown Citizen" (1939). Ted Hughes here might have been influenced by Auden. In the second stanza of "Hawk Roosting", the speaker's egocentric disposition is revealed in a more pronounced manner:

The convenience of the high tree!
The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray
Are of advantage to me;
And the earth's face upward for my inspection. (LL.4-8)

Indeed, the above stanza perfectly captures the possessive instinct of the hawk. A sense of being secured in his position is evoked in the title of the poem in which the word, "Roosting", asserts the firm hold of his existence. The speaker is also well aware of this. Expressions like "my hooked head and hooked feet" (L.3), "My feet are locked upon the rough bark" (L.9), etc. point to his self-consciousness-the consciousness that is not innocent, but is full of arrogance, pride and instinctive primitivism. The speaker's addressing to his self-importance/-estimation scales another height in the following lines:

It took the whole of Creation

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To produce my foot, my each feather:

Now I hold Creation in my foot. (LL.10-12)

The speaker's opinion about the creation of his body is, it goes without saying, egoistic and self-centred. Here the bird of prey seems to state that he has been created with the utmost care and craftsmanship which no other creatures have been created with. This thought buttresses his feeling of being the centre of creation. Literally, the hawk's thinking in this vein reveals that he considers himself to be the best of all creatures, which is why, he holds, he has the mastery over all other beings on earth. He believes in his supremacy over others so much so that he thinks he got the right to kill anyone he chooses; he is omniscient too: "I kill where I please because it is all mine" (L.14). The use of two "I's" (first person pronoun) and a possessive pronoun, "mine", within a single line of ten words out of which nine are monosyllabic and one is disyllabic underscores the possessiveness of the speaker. Moreover, the line is Iambic pentameter save the second foot which is anapaestic: I kí ll/ where I plé ase/ be-ca' use/ it í s/ all mí ne. Here, one thing is noticeable: the poet has not used any specific rhyme scheme or metre throughout the poem. He deliberately disrupts the metrical pattern of the poem right from the beginning to the end in order to reflect the recklessness and roughness of the hawk and to represent, at the symbolic level, the chaos and disorder of the post-war life in a post-humanist setting. But this line under operation has a rare beauty of the musical rhythm of the almost regular Iambic beat. Hughes endows the line with rhythmical quality to highlight the behavioural rhythm of animals and birds which follow their characteristic traits and do not deviate from their instinct throughout their life. Here the poet seems to show his fondness for birds and animals in general by applying rhythm to the line, for "It [rhythm] has an important role in establishing the "form" of a poem. Rhythm is also associated with the emotional effect of a poem" (Seturaman, p.29). Again, the dominant foot of the line is composed of Iamb, which is the most natural foot. To Quote M.H. Abrams, "It should be noted that the iamb is by far the commonest English foot" (p.161). So the poet, Ted Hughes, makes use of this "commonest" foot in the given line to indicate the commonest or most natural aspect of the bird of prey, the hawk, and that is the instinctive ferocity as conveyed by the word, "kill". Furthermore, the anapaestic variation in the second foot of the line—"where I plé ase"—imparts a contrasting force to the line because the first two unaccented or unstressed words of the three words in the foot are required to be pronounced quickly so that emphasis can be laid on the third content word, "please", as it is a monosyllabic word as well as a stressed one. The word, "please", is made strong with a stress because it foregrounds the speaker's choice. Moreover, the poem consists of six stanzas of four line each. Most of the stanzas, more precisely four stanzas, have at least one set of run-on line i.e. enjambement in each of them. However, there no enjambement is used in the fourth stanza to which the line under study belongs. Again, the line is an end-stopped line i.e. there is a full stop (.) at the end of it. The use of full stop unlike enjambement is more natural and lacks the special design of an enjambement by the poet. Nevertheless, an end-stopped line also results in the desired effect since it is also well wrought

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by the poet. Here, Ted Hughes textures such an end-stopped line to make it sound like a statement marked with a full stop at the end so as to accentuate the strong, instinctive and decisive authoritativeness of the hawk.

The characteristics of the hawk that are revealed by the above discussion so far reverberate the anthropocentric discourse of man at the level of metaphor. Anthropocentric thought places human being or man in a central position among the creatures. It also claims the supremacy and right of man over everything: man is permitted to do anything to survive without taking others' pain and misery into account. "Anthropocentrism is a theory that believes humans are the center of the universe. Its essence is that everything is centered on humans or evaluated by human measures and serves human interests, and starts from human interests." (Yu and Lei). In his *New World Dictionary*, Webster defines anthropocentrism as the following: "1. considering man to be the central or most significant fact of the universe; 2. assuming man to be the measure of all things; 3. interpreting or regarding the world in terms of human values and experience." To sum up, anthropocentric doctrine lays more importance on man or any importance only on man. The following quotation can clarify the concept in a nut-shell: "When it comes to anthropocentric policies, intrinsic value presumably affords humanity existential rights, privileges, and protections that are denied to Earth's less fortunate nonhumanity." (Burchett, p.122). However, the British poet, Francis Meynell (1891-1975), acknowledges not-so-sublime stature of man in his poem, "Man and Beast". The first two of the stanzas of the poem reveal man's recognition of his bleakness:

I am less patient than this horse
And it is fleeter far than I.
Its hair is silky, mine is coarse;
Grasses have shaped that larger eye,
While to feed me, live things must die.
The birds make little darts in air,
And fishes little darts in water,
Old sheep a silver glory share,
Peacocks are peacocks, everywhere...
Man lives awake, planning slaughter. (LL.1-10)

While the above poem tries to present man as he is, humanism, "the human being occupies a natural and eternal place at the very centre of things, where it is distinguished absolutely from machines, animals and other nonhuman entities; ...where it is the origin of meaning and the sovereign subject of history" (Badmington, Chapter 32). Human being thinks he is rational. He can think. Thinking is his essential quality: he thinks, therefore he is as the French philosopher, Rene Descartes (1596-1650) says, "I am thinking, therefore I exist" or "I think therefore I am" (p.28). The humanist philosophers like Rene Descarte believe that man's thinking capability and rationality make him different from the rest of others living and non-living bodies, and that

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man is the most intelligent being; he is the crest of creation. Here, Hamlet's concept of man is relevant:

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals - and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me... (*Hamlet*, II.ii.286-291)

Partly the last line of the excerpt quoted above captures Hamlet's frustration with man, which gets magnified in Ted Hughes's posthumanist lens. The following excerpt may briefly embody the posthumanist discourse:

Posthumanism marks a careful, ongoing, overdue rethinking of the dominant humanist (or anthropocentric) account of who "we" are as human beings. In the light of posthumanist theory and culture, "we" are not "we" once believed ourselves to be.

Posthumanism, by way of contrast [to humanism], emerges from a recognition that "Man" is not the privileged and protected centre, because humans are no longer – and perhaps never were – utterly distinct from animals, machines, and other forms of the "inhuman". (Badmington)

In tune with the posthumanist reflection, the poet shows that human being also harbours the sentiments of the hawk. If the hawk is given a human tongue, there will be no difference between the languages of hawk and human being. Like the bird, man also tends to place himself at the centre of all creatures. The cycle of beings as if moves round him. He is holding and regulating everything from the centre. He also thinks he has every right and authority to behave with his fellow creatures the way he desires in order to please himself as well as to sustain. He does not even hesitate to kill any other beings to secure his position and existence. Moreover, man looks beyond the horizon of anthropocentric creed. Apart from his inhuman treatment meted out to other species for its ease and existence, he can be too ruthless and violent to kill his own race or species—other human beings. Here, man's mentality or character becomes more selfish, crueller, machine like and destructive or somewhat self-destructive, for he too belongs to the human race. This is another point for which the poet indulges in taking on man through the symbolic pall.

Truly, if the hawk is taken as a personified representative of man, then human being is no longer humanitarian. Speaking the language of violence, man cannot be the crown of creation. Consequently, his claim to be positive, sophisticated, reasonable becomes weak. The line—"There is no sophistry in my body" (L.15)—betrays the ugly aspect of man. The shameless utterance—"no sophistry"—thwarts his right to be called "the beauty of the world." Again, a more ferocious mind-set finds expression in the lines that follow:

My manners are tearing off heads—
The allotment of death.
For the one path of my flight is direct
Through the bones of the living. (LL.16-20)

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As the terrible attitude lurking within man is unfolding itself, the so called noble qualities of man seems to be deserting him. They are fading away past his body and mind. His central position gets, therefore, decentralized in the process. Here, Ted Hughes very purposefully pushes man towards the margin. Certainly, man's position in the "great chain of being" goes downwards and is conspicuously degraded for his unmanly dealing with other beings or even other human beings. So, human being's both anthropocentric and humanistic arguments appear illogic and practically invalid. Man is not governed by his "divine" disposition always. He is more often driven by his earthly spirit—by his animal like selfish and wild traits.

It may seem wrong to interpret the speaker of the poem, hawk, as an agent of war. Ted Hughes himself rejected such analysis of the poem. According to him Nature is speaking through the hawk:

The poem of mine usually cited for violence is the one about 'Hawk Roosting', this drowsy hawk sitting in a wood and talking to itself. That bird is accused of being a fascist...the symbol of some horrible totalitarian genocidal dictator. Actually what I had in mind was that in this hawk Nature is thinking. Simply Nature. It's not so simple may be because Nature is no longer simple. I intended some Creator like the Jehovah 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 sounds like Hitler's familiar spirit.

—London Magazine Interview, 1971.

The above view on the poem is also endorsed by the quotation that follows: "In "Hawk Roosting"... the hawk is symbolic of the thinking of Nature itself, which treats everything as a means to its end."⁴ But, according to Keith Sagar, the external Nature is symbolic of the violence that lies inside man, deep rooted in his sub-consciousness. In their jointly published book, *A History of English Literature: Traversing the Centuries*, Aditi Chowdhuri and Rita Goswami also acknowledge the symbolic representation of a dictator through the hawk by saying—

...there is always the awareness of the close kinship between animal and human life, between the eternal human longing for liberty and power and the unforced animal achievement of both. Birds and animals are elevated from their ordinariness, to a level of mythic grandeur. Hence, the hawk attains the power of a dictator" (pp.336-37).

Scholar like Fateh Khan records the same observation about the poem: "Here Ted Hughes has adopted the portrait of a hawk in "Hawk Roosting" who personifies him as a human and shows us the dictatorship of those who gain absolute power." (p.1)⁵ He further adds

Ted Hughes humanizes the hawk to underline the negative qualities which exist almost in every human. The hawk is attributed with human characteristics, behavior, and even motivation. These aspects are presented in the poem quite clearly to ensure that the reader comprehends that the hawk is a symbol of man.

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Another scholar, Bida Sinha in his article entitled “War, Violence and the Poetry of Ted Hughes: A Reflection”, registers his symbolic connotation of the poetic persona as: “His [Hughes’s] hawk in “Hawk Roosting” is taken as a symbol of fascism” (p.4). Therefore, there is a good deal of literature that subscribes to the prospect of such interpretation of the poem. Again, “Poems... are partly the reader’s also.” (O’Malley and Thompson, p.23). Therefore, the poem can be approached through the *new critical* perspective. New criticism focuses solely on, as F.R. Leavis says, “the words on the page” without considering anything outside the text be it, among other things, the historical context or comments by the poet-author. So the comment on the poem made by the poet himself does not fix the single meaning—the hawk is Nature. Rather it becomes indeterminate and ambiguous paving more ways of interpreting the poem than one. And according to William Empson, ambiguity in a poem is positive rather than negative. The hawk’s voice may, therefore, metaphorically be understood as man’s voice expressing his solipsist and ruthless temperament in a post-war void. In this context, the point raised by V.S. Seturaman, C.T. Indra and T. Sriraman in their book, *Practical Criticism*, is quite important. To quote them, “This poem may be read at more than one level. At a simple level it may be looked upon as one of the animal poems which are common in all literatures. It is also a symbolic poem.” (p.72). They add, “On a closer reading the poem appears to be more about man than about the hawk, rather about the inferiority of man to the hawk and the other creatures of Nature.” (p.73) So, Ted Hughes carefully and through the symbolic way belittles man whose vanity is targeted by the poet in the last stanza:

The sun is behind me.
Nothing has changed since I began.
My eye has permitted no change.
I am going to keep things like this. (LL.21-24)

He thinks “...that he is the height of evolution and nothing has changed since then. This is unscientific...” (Seturaman et al, p.72). The above stanza of the poem also reflects his ego over his supremacy in the world. But he is no longer the heroic being. So many things have changed. Now, if we consider the case in contemporary scenario, there is artificial intelligence (AI), cyborg, etc. which claim to be more accurately functioning than human being. So, man’s plan for “going to keep things like this” with “no change” cuts an irony upon himself. Thus, the poet disestablishes the very foundation of man’s humanist castle and pulls him down to the ground of his posthumanist reality.

Another level of Ted Hughes’s posthumanist discourse can be extracted if, as discussed above, the poem is considered a Nature poem. The speaker, as the poet suggests, is Nature. Then again, Hughes seems successful in destroying man’s pride by projecting him as a victim of Nature which does not abide by rules set up by human beings but its own. Nature appears both as an omniscient and an omnipotent agent who can regulate anything from anywhere. Human being remains no longer a master here. He is rather a slave of Nature. He is rendered helpless, a puppet at the hands of Nature. It is like the Tennysonian Nature: “red in tooth and

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claw” (*In Memoriam*, Canto 56). It rules over the animal kingdom and often treats human being with cruelty. Truly, man is mere the prey of Nature’s fury and whimsicality. Nature knows no anthropocentric doctrine. It ushers as the major player in the universe and pushes man off the periphery to which, he claims, to be belonging earlier. Man is thus shown disoriented. Nature’s authority coupled with confidence is manifested in the shortest sentence of the poem, “The sun is behind me.” Here, the tone is immensely solipsist.

Ted Hughes’s comment on the poem in favour of the analysis of the poetic persona as the Nature may also be meant to negate the human subject on the surface level. But metaphorically, he puts a human tongue to the hawk to criticize *humanist* heroism of man. So, in both ways Hughes dismantles man of his “cloak of manliness” (Brooks, p.197)–the manliness that humanist view of man believes in–in order to display his naked reality.

To conclude, Ted Hughes unfailingly exposes the ugly aspect of human nature by deliberately focusing on man’s beastliness and vanity through the cloak of symbol in the poem under discussion. He makes the reader realize the true spirit of man, which collides the portrayal of man with a humanist brushwork. His resentment at human being and the subsequent treatment of man under the mask of symbol account for his strong condemnation on any philosophy that advocates for man’s loftiness and sublimity. He does not value humanism. As Alvarez has rightly said, “Hughes gives the compression of a being congenitally indifferent to humanism, a mind on the outskirts of civilization” (p.194.) Hughes’s mind is rather preoccupied by posthumanist thinking. As a result, the present poem foregrounds his indictment on humanism. The cruelty, the moral hollowness, meaninglessness, the arrogance, machine like dictatorial disposition together with his own marginalization and helplessness at the hands of Nature define the image of a postmodern man in the posthumanist world of reality shaped by the post-war void. Undeniably, the poet breaks down the humanist bastion of man and deconstructs his identity as blood-thirsty, instinctive, ruthless and animal like. Such disillusioned treatment of man and the way he delineates him promulgate the posthumanist discourse of the poet quite effectively.

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