

# Saarth

## E-Journal of Research

ISSN NO: 2395-339X

### An Eco-critical Perspective in the Poems of Ted Hughes

Dr. Nipam Chauhan\*

Life on the earth is always seen in context with living beings and natural phenomenon, two separate but incontrovertible entities. Since the dawn of human civilisation, as a self-centred and self-assertive consumer of the resources man has started interfering with the environment in the world, hence, displacement and depletion of resources are inevitable. With the mutilation of environmental and natural entities through rapid industrial growth, population explosion, sprouting up of large teeming cities has become acute and it has given birth to a premier perilous problem of the world - global environmental crisis. This paper tries to explore the allusions of 'Nature' and 'environment' concerning man. Environment sets up myriad corporeal, perceptual, social, spiritual, scholastic, pecuniary and logical aspects of entire civilisation when kept in fine, fettle and stimulating, it endorses the growth and evolution of mankind. The vast array of expressions has plunged into making people aware of the crisis and its prevention.

"Literature is a writing which expresses and communicates thoughts, feelings and attitudes towards life" (Rees 2). As literature reconnoitres the life of a human being, an inclusion of natural bodies and its impact on human life is inexorable. Although, literature and ecology and man are apparently divergent, they are innately interconnected. Eco-critic Lawrence Buell states that, "human beings [are] ecologically or environmentally embedded humanity.....for the most part, sees itself as separate from the environment and calls for a "remediation of humankind's alienation from the natural world (8). Literary texts, written under a particular ecological backdrop implicitly or explicitly tends to mirror reciprocal affiliation between man and environment. Literature can become a mouthpiece and torch bearer to the manifestation of the molested relationship between man and nature and can pave the way for the future bond. The roots of ecological traditions can be traced in Romantic Poetry, however, the poetic imagination and concern in the past and the present has perceived sundry changes, with the grass root principle "Back to Nature". Literature may not be the historical document of social facts but it is certainly, a synthesis of the interpretation of co-existing facts. Interdisciplinary but harmonious development of this two phenomenon has given ecology social and cultural stance.

An artist cannot remain alien and untouched to his ambiances. He is the representative of 'race, moment and milieu of his age' (Scott James 255). Apart from its physical and biological distinctiveness the artist emphasises on the social and cultural factors with respect to man. Emotional conceptualisation of the rationale issues has recently occupied an eminent place in the art form and it has succeeded in bringing awareness to certain crucial issues, of which green revolution has been noticeable. Poetry is the most animated and an implied mode of art, aiming at

---

\*Dr. Nipam Chauhan\*Dept of Eng Uka Tarsadia University Bardoli

# Saarth

## E-Journal of Research

**ISSN NO: 2395-339X**

manifold imagination and interpretation, which induce complementation irrespective of any logical consensus. The 19<sup>th</sup> century writers like Thoreau (*Walden*), Ralph Waldo Emerson's (*Nature*), William Cullen Bryant, James Kirke Paulding, James Fennimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman and many others portrayed a factual picture of human and non-human liaison in the context of survival. They interrogated the nature of relationship and issues between man and flora, fauna, animals, landscape and weather. Emphasising the function of a poet, Jonathan Bate states that:

What are poets for? They are not exactly philosophers, though they often try to explain the world and humankind's place within it. They are not exactly moralists, for at least since the nineteenth century, their primary concern has rarely been to tell us in homiletic fashion how to live. But they are often exceptionally lucid or provocative in their articulation of the relationship between internal and external worlds, between being and dwelling. (Jonathan Bate, 251-252.)

The term 'Eco-criticism' was first coined by William Rueckert in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Eco criticism*. (107). Attributing the ecological aspect to the poetry, Rueckert cogitates it as the propaganda for the green revolution. As a literary movement, Eco-criticism "...claims as its hermeneutic environment nothing short of the literal horizon itself, the finite environment that a reader or writer occupies thanks not just culturally coded determinants but also to natural determinants that antedate these and will outlast them" (Buell 505).

Delineation of environmental issues has not only added a new dimension in the poetry but also challenged and changed the perspective to look into the relationship between man and nature. Formally Eco-criticism has been noticed as an add-on perspective in the literature of later 20<sup>th</sup> century, but its practice has been observed in the other forms of expression since long. It's function is to analyse and interrogate the nature of relationship between nature and man. As it is stated "eco-criticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." (Glottfelty xviii). Another critic, Garrard in his book *Eco-criticism* defines eco criticism as "the study of the relationship of the human with the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself." (5)

Ted Hughes, the Noble laureate occupies an eminent place in 20<sup>th</sup> century literary firmament poets concerned about ecological issues. His poetry showcases that the abiotic component of environment influence biotic (living) ones and its wanton exploitation upshots discernible environmental disruptions threatening the life support system. He is eloquent about the exploitation as it deals with the most mundane problem of life where each individual matters, the whole humanity is at stake. He states:

# Saarth

## E-Journal of Research

**ISSN NO: 2395-339X**

“When something abandons Nature, or is abandoned by Nature, it has lost touch with its creator and is called an evolutionary dead-end. According to this, our civilisation is an evolutionary error.” (Hughes 129)

The poetry written between 1957 to 1989 records a change in the standpoint of Hughes; from anthropocentric perspective to ecological outlook. His implied environmentalist agenda is evident through his use of vivid imagery, allegory and myth in his collections and so it can be scrutinised through ‘eco-critical lens’. Since the poet’s work embody his culture scrutiny of his poems exposes his worldview about his culture, environment and ecology, hence a reading of his poems becomes a comprehension of the liaison between poetry, ecology and environment. His imaginations, animals, natural phenomenon and perspective induces awareness to the fundamental environmental issues as well as prompts our accountability towards its conservation. He frowns at the negligence, mutilation and the annihilation of environment by men. They express his perception of the primordial vitalities of the natural world, their distinctiveness, and the nature of the relationship between these energies and subjective attitude of man. The joy of primeval energy of the protagonists of the poetry affirms them with true life. Hughes opines that the puritanical despotism has isolated man from his natural predispositions and laments that modern man, in the contemporary cultural crisis, has lost his moorings and demeanours in nature.

Deviating from the realistic and logical backdrop, Ted Hughes preferred to explore the human and non-human liaison in the context of ecology which certainly terms him eco-critic. The poetic legacy of Ted Hughes can be analysed in the context of the above concept, to spread the message regarding the environmental threats prevalent in the recent era. The poems exemplify the ferocity, superiority of nature - animals, birds, weather and landscape over human beings. The evolution of human being has fixed man as predator and non-human phenomenon as his prey, but still, they have retained their vitality and spirit for existence. The poetry of Ted Hughes is termed anti-human, but in fact, they are a critique of self-interested nature of human beings contrary to the natural world and instinctual behaviour of animals. Ferocious animals are the representative of nature and wilderness an anti-thesis to the socio-cultural tendencies of the human world.

His poem *Hawk Roosting* is a text having multiple connotations, and hence it can be analysed from eco-critical approach. The actions and monologue of the protagonist Hawk as a natural phenomenon platform its instinctive qualities contrary to the human realm engrossed with self-centeredness and cogent attitude. The efforts of man to hold the world are useless, an imprudent ‘hubris’ of him, which will lead him to the elimination of own existence. Rationalisations of modern mind and sluggish intellectuality have caused an oblivion of mutual association between nature and man. Man’s efforts to tame Nature, a genuine life force is denigrated by Hughes by making hawk superior to him.

# Saarth

## E-Journal of Research

ISSN NO: 2395-339X

'There is no sophistry in my body:  
My manners are tearing off heads'.

When the Hawk in the poem is accused of having totalitarian characteristics, Ted Hughes remarked:

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 a job what they actually kicked out was Nature... and Nature became the devil. (London Magazine Interview)

Ted Hughes' eco-critical attitude in his treatment of the Hawk, as a symbol of nature, assigns him both unvarying, unvanquished and hostile qualities to degenerate man who is devoid of his instincts and involved in falsifying dreams.

In *Thrushes* the poet outlines the same approach. 'Thrushes' is a common bird attributed with exceptional qualities juxtaposes efficient animal and the ruminating man. Thrushes act instinctively;

'....single- minded-sized skulls'...  
.....Mozart's brain had it, and the shark's mouth  
That hungers down the blood-smell even to a leak of its own  
Side and devouring of itself; efficiency which  
Strikes too streamlined for any doubt to pluck at it  
Or obstruction deflect..... (52 )

Hughes ridicules man's 'indolent procrastinations and yawning stares, sighs or stretching heads'. The fierceness of Thrushes echoes the *The Tyger* by William Black, the great nature poet. He advocates fierce tiger instead of guided man, who is kept away from his instinct by distracting devils 'Orgy and hosannah'.

The significant eco-critical subtext is perceptible in *The hawk in the rain* Here, he has adored fierceness as represented by the hawk a nature incarnated phenomenon.

I drown in the drumming plough land, I drag up  
Heel after heel from the swallowing of the earth's mouth,  
From clay that clutches my each step to the ankle  
With the habit of the dogged grave, but  
the hawk Effortlessly at height hangs his still eye. (50)

The stability, solidity and strength of the hawk is contrasted with tremulousness and vulnerability of a human being at a natural catastrophe. The

# Saarth

## E-Journal of Research

ISSN NO: 2395-339X

hawk maintains equilibrium, poise and remains unperturbed by the heavy rain but the man cannot. Here poet emphasises the strength of natural abilities. Hughes believed that animals are not violent, they are so much more completely controlled than men, so much more adapted to their environment. Even his nature poem 'Wind' illustrates a striking note of nature's superiority over so-called superior man, who feels helpless inside his house due to the vicious world outside.

The animals and nature in the poems of Ted Hughes occupy instinctive characteristics to take over the cognizant attitude of human beings. The use of non-human entities in his work strengthens the ecological concerns affecting the world. Hughes personification of intuitiveness in animals and nature showcases the adaptation of the same by human beings to stop the molestation of ecology.

*An Otter* describes man's procurer attitude. It begins with several natural knacks of the otter, but concludes with the gloomy depiction when it, 'reverts to nothing at all To this long pelt over the hack of chair (30) A pathetic note is apparent in the dispossession of the life of an animal just for the decoration of a chair in a house is certainly a repulsive and devilish attitude of man. Contrary to hawk poems, *An Otter* depicts the helplessness of animal world to man.

The ecological issue of crowded cities is pictured in the poem *Horses*. Deforestation on a massive scale for getting a room for a large number of people has given birth to crowded cities. The loss of serene nature has affected human life greatly resulting into global environmental crisis. The still, silent and lonely natural landscape with horses is contrasted with "din of the crowded streets", human abode which suggests chaos, clamour, rush of the busy people, and the confusion of the sets. The concluding stanza shows the speaker's longing for the serene nature which sequentially grows into the longing of every human being. His craving for the brooks, the red clouds, the curlews voicing their low cries, and the horizon with infinity has a deep ecological context.

The profound concern for the modern man led Hughes to seek the solution of the blunders committed by modern man. *Crow poems* illustrated the poet's displeasure to mechanised modernity. The way contemporary man looks at the progress in life is, in fact, nothing but his futile effort as it draws him away from a true culture, self and compassion. His callous behaviour disregards him to his inner evil. His detachment with nature has to lead him to loss of sensitivity and lies within Mythological portrayal of the bird crow as wicked and malicious ties up him with malevolent human nature. The pessimistic note of crow can be seen in empty and desolate and absurd life of man. Crow's failure to learn the word 'love' from God suggests man's inability to love the entities of nature.

Segregation of human being from nature has resulted into natural imbalance. The physical as well as instinctive features of natural phenomenon make them more

# Saarth

## E-Journal of Research

ISSN NO: 2395-339X

distinctive than the human being. For instance *Jaguar*. Man can enslave Jaguar, embodying 'nature' physically, harness him to his pleasure, but his basic nature and primeval energy cannot be, "More than to the visionary his cell: His stride is wilderness of freedom" (12)

Quite the opposite, the human being is more confined in his world than nature. G. Thurley states, "...the cages of Hughes's jaguars and macaws are doubly ironical: man is so much more caged and imprisoned than the animals, and it is the in virtue of his 'single vision' that he confines instinctive vitality behind bars (181)

Mr. Jeffers particularizes that:

"...the core of in-humanism is the principled rejection of anthropocentrism, and the pursuit of what might as well be called an eco-centric standpoint: one in which nature takes centre stage, not as a receptacle for human activities, emotions, or narratives, but as itself, on its own inhuman terms (Greer, "The Falling Years.")

By adopting eco-critical stance Ted Hughes practices Ecological literacy through his poetry is evident here. Exhaustion of natural assets has given birth to socio-economic problems. Extensive and exhaustive efforts must be made for the human survival and benefit. The thoughtless exploitation is due to ignorance as well as a lack of concern for mankind will bring about a damage beyond repair not only in the context of nature but also man. Prevention of environmental pollution and hacking of environmental resources on a large scale, may keep the end of the life on earth at bay. It is our duty to debar such a monstrous disaster. William Rueckert very rightly says, "The conceptual and practical problem is to find the grounds upon which the two communities-the human, the natural can co-exist, cooperate, and flourish in the biosphere." A Chinese proverb says: "If you plan for one year, plant rice if you plan for ten years plant trees and if you plan for hundred years, educate people. And literature as a mouthpiece to society can certainly lead people to the right path. When humans have gained the enormous capacity to alter the Earth and its support systems, and at the verge of new epoch called Anthropocene when human activities will largely determine the condition of the planet, literature can become a vital tool for the change. The future of the pattern of praxis by human world had endangered not only the ecology of the planet, but his own species also as its survival be contingent with it.

### Works Cited

- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge:Belknap Press-Hardvard University Press, 1995.
- G.Thurley, *Beyond Positive Values: Ted Hughes*. The Ironic Harvest. London,:Edward Arnold, 1974
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Glottfety Cheryll and Harold Fromm (eds.) *The Eco criticism Reader*:

# Saarth

## E-Journal of Research

**ISSN NO: 2395-339X**

*Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens GA and London: University of Georgia Press. 1996

Hughes, Ted. *Collected Poems* (ed.) Keegan Paul London: Macmillan Publishers, 2003

Hughes, Ted. *The Environmental Revolution*. London: Hodder and Stoutghton, 1994

Jonathan, Bate. *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2001), 251, 252.)

Quote from Greer John M. *The Felling Years: An Inhumanist Vision in Dark Mountain: Issue 1 (2010)* ed. Dougald Hine and PaulKingsnorth. Appeared 6 November 2014. <http://darkmountainnet>

Rees, R. J. *English Literature: An Introduction for Foreign Readers*. New Delhi: Macmillan Publications, 1973.

Rueckert, William. "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." *Iowa Review* 9.1 (1978)

Scott-James, R. A. *The Making of Literature*. Mumbai: Allied Publishers Private Ltd. 2009.