

## The Confluence of Mystic and Animalistic Constituents Problematizes Human Consciousness: A Study of Ted Hughes's Selected Poems

Aasma Irum<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>National University of Modern Languages – Pakistan

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### Abstract

*The study expounded upon “The Confluence of Mystic and Animalistic Constituents Problematizes Human Consciousness: A Study of Ted Hughes’s Selected Poems”. The impacts of the chaotic forces of the universe, lack of equilibrium between man’s material and mystic self, post-traumatic stress of World war I & II, dispersion of emotions, the dilemma of fear, doubt and uncertainty on the construct of individual’s socio psychic existence are the pivotal focus of this research. It explored those hurdles that obstacle the elevation of man’s actual self regardless of his multiple performative identities. This paper probed into the perpetuity of the contention between positive and negative energies of the World, necessary for the pacification of the wild instinctive self of man, and the quest for a singular identity were the core features that fabricate human consciousness. It was qualitative research undertaking psychoanalytical reading of Hughes’s poetry. Freudian theory of psychoanalysis, Jungian theory of individuation, Lacan’s concept of Lack, Gaze, Desire, and Mirror stage were the key concepts to explore the modern man’s socio psychic maladaptive attitude. The study may have further implications on the researchers studying advanced psychological and sociological theories related to the ruptured consciousness of the human mind in this dynamic World.*

**Key Words:** *Consciousness, Human Existence, Maladaptive Attitude, Quest for Identity, Socio-Psychic-Self*

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Author’s E-mail: [airam@numl.edu.pk](mailto:airam@numl.edu.pk)

### Introduction

Modern poetry targets the critical issue of human existence in the post-war era of socio-psychic

hazards. Many poets initiated to externalize the anarchy of that age according to their own perspectives. Some aimed at focusing the portrayal

of the chaos and the other had taken the modern man as the sheer victim of anarchy. But above all, Ted Hughes had tried to target modern man as a blank slate who was only in need of a mechanical therapeutic cure for his socio psychic maladies through delight, instruction, and elevation of soul. This research signifies the need for psychic unification without dividing humankind into the hard and fast categories of aestheticism, didacticism, and ultimately shamanism.

### **Significance of the Study**

Ted Hughes's poetry has earned a well-celebrated notion that it delights, instructs, and elevates the readers (Gifford 1981). Though, the delight factor in Ted Hughes's poetry conjures the vivid images, sensuous figurative language, and occult symbolism which offers postmodern man the very aesthetic pleasure necessary to lighten his Post Traumatic Stress Disorders (Bisson 2007) amidst the chaotic annihilation of the age yet the mere manifestation of aestheticism is insufficient to cure the psychic ruptures of the collective unconscious (Jung 1916) of the post-war mob. Likewise, the assumption about Hughes's poetry for composing the instructional poetry is erroneous because Hughes poeticizes the theory of the survival of the fittest originated by Darwin and rephrased by Herbert

Spencer. Whatever Ted Hughes targets to instruct is the utilization of instinctive powers to combat the rival forces of the universe.

### **Objectives**

1. To explore the contradictory images in Ted Hughes's poetry.
2. To analyze the effects of a few contrasting components of Hughes's poetry into the mind of modern readers.
3. To emphasize the need for socio psychic integration of man in the post-war era.
4. To focus on the unification of instinctive and spiritual sides of humankind.
5. To clarify the complications aroused by the amalgam of animalistic and mystic extremes in post-war man.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do the contradictory images in Ted Hughes's poems problematize the human consciousness?
2. What are the effects of the derogatory ideas on the mind of post-war readers?
3. Why is the socio psychic integration of the human mind essential to cope with the

modern dilemmas to live a better  
liable life?

4. How to harmonize the poles  
apart man's attitudes related to  
his instinctive and mystic  
behavior?

### **Delimitation**

The poetic work of Hughes is largely interpreted as a work of violence. He is considered by the critics as a poet of war and animals. This research attempts to explore the significant relationship between Hughes's perception of man's positive mystic and negative instinctive self with the help of his few selected poems

### **Literature Review**

Ted Hughes jeopardizes the human consciousness by separating the two interconnected entities of human instincts and spirit. The psychic unification can be sought by the harmonious assertion of these two contradictory forces. Man can neither adopt the law of the jungle to live his whole life nor can behave like a demigod throughout his life. As Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts (2006) have observed, "The subterranean world that Hughes's poems explore can never be completely projected into language, nor can anyone permanently live in it".

Keith Sagar(1980) in *Hughes and His Landscape* states:

"In a radio interview in 1961(Hughes talked) that the move to Mexborough when he was eight 'really sealed off my first seven years so that now my first seven years seems almost half my life. The geography of his childhood world became his map of heaven and hell; the distinctive interplay of the elements in that place gave him his sense of the creating and destroying powers, the landscape was imprinted on his soul"(Sagar).

Jongwhee, in his research *Distribution of Environmental Awareness Applying an Ecological Theory of Ted Hughes*, denotes that Hughes's poetry inspires so many young people to have a positive energy impact on the environment. Hughes's poetry and his cultural way of living have brought positive responses to the environment. His poems deal with the innovation of environmental problems and policies... (Jongwhee 2021).

Mathewman (2018), in his article *But what about the fish? Teaching Ted Hughes' Pike* denotes the potential of a creative connection between *ecocriticism* and nature poetry by Hughes. The depiction of violence, the fierce destructive nature of Pike and its grotesque motherhood enlarges these little fish larger than life. The environmental ferocity is

portrayed for the comprehension of this beautiful short poem.

*Nature, environment, and poetry: ecocriticism and the poetics of Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes*, by Susanna Lidstrom (2015) projects the poems by Hughes as “a well-trod ground for ecocritics”. Lidstrom argues that the artistic exploration of the link between religion and exploitative environmental attitudes is the prime focus of Hughes’s collection. Though he does not bring into account the religious parameters to gauge the energies of nature yet develops a strong relationship between external forces of the universe and the transcendental elements of the world.

Terry Gifford (2009) has provided richness, complexity, and new contexts to his interpretations of Hughes's writing. Gifford is also one of the few critics to offer a provocative yet reasonable assessment of Hughes's controversial reputation in the United States resulting from the suicide of his first wife, the poet Sylvia Plath, and his subsequent editing of her writing. He personalizes the poetry of Hughes to comment upon his personal life as well.

## Methodology

### Research Paradigm

This research is qualitative in nature. The methodical approach employed for the research would be “Content analysis”.

### Sample

The selected poems by Ted Hughes have been taken as content samples for this research.

### Theoretical Framework

The psychoanalytical theory of Freud, Jung, and Lacan would serve as a tool to carry out this research.

### Content Analysis

Modern poetry philosophizes human existence. Modern man confronts multiple socio-political, geo religious, and psycho moral dilemmas. The schisms in his psychic construct disintegrate the overall strata of his harmonious existence in this universe. He, on the one hand, is victimized by the uncontrollable forces of the universe like doubt, fear, and uncertainty, while on the other hand exhibits his fugitive capacities to ameliorate his fragmented psyche. These diverse reactions have not only been projected by the early sufferers of World War II. Rather the later generation of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century has

also gone through this predicament with the same intensity. The human struggle to fight back against the aforementioned universal forces is considered a shadow of his instinctive animalistic behavior (Jung1912). At the same time, the escape from the quandaries of life expels man from the humane level and may transform him into a spiritual shamanistic mystic. These two extreme tendencies are the hallmark of the post-war population and likewise have been explicitly depicted in the poetry of Ted Hughes, who is singular for the amalgam of positive (mystic) and negative (animalistic) energies responsible for planting the inner conflict in modern man.

He asserts in an interview with Drue Heinz as follows:

“Any form of violence—any form of vehement activity—invokes the bigger energy. To accept the energy, and find method of turning it to good, the old method is the only one. My poems are not about violence but vitality. Animals are not violent; they are so much more completely controlled than me.”

As Sigmund Freud regards the first five years of a child’s life as vital for the building up of his overall personality so the acquaintance to the nude natural World never harnessed by any law, in its most raw form was the source of Ted Hughes’s keen fascination for the wild and the

wilderness. He had taken the violence in animals as a manifestation of negative energy always at war with the mystic energy referred to in his later shamanistic poems, which really adds to complicate the human perception of himself and that of his universe

Here Ted Hughes projects violence as a vehicle to transform the meek peevish side of human personality into a ferocious animal whose “...manners are tearing off heads” (Hawk Roosting 1960). But contrary to that, the horror-struck post-war humankind cannot afford this transformation after witnessing the macabre massacre and genocide. The conformist attitude of the readers towards this stance of his poetry may lead them to abandon their humane level and to embrace the primitive Stone Age behavior to be governed by the hegemonic rule of “might is right” without any regard for socio-moral correlation among themselves but overall the holocaust which victimized them in such a great capacity that they may not sustain an equilibrium between their shredded self and a call from the past primitive practices after reading his poetic instructions.

The third level, in which Ted Hughes’s poetry is embarked, is called elevating poetry. Ted Hughes was maltreated by (or he might have maltreated) his familial relations, who

left him alone at the peak of his professional fame by attempting suicide. Hughes's guilty conscience for letting his two wives and two kids to commit suicide cast nihilism in his life, which resulted in his poetic transformation from being a poet of nature, of animals, of violence, and of war into the poet of Shamanism. Ted Hughes, who was initially commemorated as "an eco-poet" by H. Malik in his article *Ted Hughes Poetry: A Celebration of Negative Aspect of Nature*, had later been addressed as a shamanistic poet and a mystic saint towards the declining years of his life. The exposure of these two diversified poetic pictures complicates the consciousness of modern man that whether he should take refuge in the lap of savage nature or to soar high to achieve spiritual elevation.

"Jaguar", "Crow" and "Hawk Roosting" are the best poems to reveal Ted Hughes's fondness for the World of violence. His animalistic violence compliments the instinctive behavior of man. The poem "Wodwo" denotes the identity crisis of the modern man who is thwarted between his reason and instinct. Ted Hughes (1967), in *Poetry in the Making* states, "It has a whole string of thoughts, but at the center of them... is this creature and its bewilderment... a Wodwo is a sort of half man half animal spirit of the

forest"(Faber,1962, P62). These lines seem to propagate that in the modern age it is impossible to live a life of a human being. Modern man is compelled to disguise himself either as a beast or an instinct-oriented entity to enjoy the real meaning of survival.

Ted Hughes mirrors the leashed power of the zoo animals that seem to compromise their state of slavery in contrast to the Jaguar in the poem entitled as "Jaguar" (1954). "His stride is the wilderness of freedom" (Hughes) depicts the rebellious attitude of the jaguar as "The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel" (Hughes 1957). Jacques Lacan (1964) theorizes the concept of gaze that how the sense of mastery by seeing oneself as an ideal ego marks one's perception towards self-recognition and societal comprehension. In "Jaguar", the gaze of the visitors to look at the lethargic animals reflects their own passivity and their discovery of the Jaguar "Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes/On a short fierce fuse." suggests the Lacanian intertwined concepts of Lack and desire that whatsoever spark of life is absent from their lives (Lack) they are yearning for it to be possessed by others through their uncanny looks (Desire &Gaze). The unmitigated force of one caged creature has been juxtaposed to the fatigued expression

of the apes, parrots, and snakes to reveal the absence of any healthy activity from the life of the poet before indulging in any conjugal relation. It might be the poetic power of the poet Laureate who thought of his works enthralling in comparison with his other literary fellows. The multiple layers of meanings beneath the surface expression suggest that “Jaguar” as an allegory of human existence does not offer an ultimate solution to live a standard life. “Over the cage floor, the horizons come” signifies the plurality of the unapproached distant heights humankind aspires while living life as an eternal captive of sound and fury (Shakespeare).

“Hawk Roosting” (1960) begins with the omnipotent “I” pronoun, which seems symbolic on many grounds. The employment of imagism suggests the upper hand of the authority with all the archetypal strains necessary for the dictatorial expression of power (Jung 1947). M.G. Ramanan (2020) has expressed the view that violent imagery in this poem is Hughes’ imperialistic sense of power and authoritarian politics. Hughes himself denies such accusations of fascism, dictatorial and the bloodthirstiness which prevails in nature. At times, Hughes appears to promote the essential role of violence for the cause of survival but at the same time disowns his humane prospects when he refuses to be

associated with the gruesome malpractices of the Nazis. Such contradictions confuse the readers for what they are instructed to own from his poetry and what only to read for the sake of aesthetic pleasure.

The supreme arrogance of the Hawk for “It took the whole of creation/ To produce my foot, my every feather/ Now I hold creation in my foot” fascinates the human beings to behave likewise because man is the crown of the whole creation and has been allegorically named as Hawk. But “The allotment of death” is never an appreciable idea for the post-war people who developed nausea for the slightest exposure to blood or physical mutilation. Hughes attempts to desensitize the readers when he claims, “My eye has permitted no change/I am going to keep things like this”. It depicts the close world view where no dynamic action is allowed to be performed to herald the better future of mankind. The poem hinders the human endeavors for prosperity and concludes on the stationary existence of man amid the chaotic universal forces. It adds nothing for the instruction or elevation of human beings rather than reveals Hughes's passionate attachment with the violent World of monstrous animals.

The poem “Crow”(1970) documents the clash between divinity and humanity. The crow appears larger than life when it offers the

remedial ideas to reconcile these two poles apart. Crow's efforts to "nail[ed] them together/nailing heaven and earth together" prove futile because the poet progresses that the attempt to unify the vaults of earth and heaven "became gangrenous and stank/A horror beyond redemption. In his article "Hughes and Shamanism", Michael Sweeting writes that instead of leading to integration, the ordeal (in *Crow*) speaks only of dislocation. In the closing line of "Crow", Hughes exemplifies this statement true "Man could not be man nor God". The sheer pessimism Hughes has extended in these lines confounds the human consciousness by thwarting the generations-old identities of the birds, men and God. Michael Sweeting continues that collection of crow poems unmasks the metamorphic role of the Crow. He expresses that "Suddenly the crow's sufferings explicitly transform him, tear him to bits, put him together again and produce him a little bit changed. This should bring about crow's initiation into humanity, but it is not the fourth coming of Hughes as Shamanism. The suffering can neither elevate man nor manipulate instincts guarantee the safe survival in this "world of fret and fever".

Ted Hughes's poetry embodies the "Psychophysical process of imaginative projection (Ekbert Faas, P60). The poem "Her

Husband" is rich with the domestic violence forcing the husband to behave like an animal while treating his wife. Ted Hughes states that the husband desires to "let her/Learn with scrubbing brush and scrubbing board/The stubborn character of money". His tyrant attitude is further revealed through this remark that "And let her learn through what kind of dust /He has earned his thirst and the right to quench it".Lacan when conceptualizes his Mirror Stage of human development discusses that man externalizes whatever he behaves. Ted Hughes himself had ruined the lives of the women whom he met in his life. "In reality, he was a selfish and ruthless man who was a savage lover and a domestic tyrant. The poem further adds that "he'll humble her/ With new light on her obligations...Her back has bunched into a hump as an insult". The poet employs the notion of the "law of the jungle where the subjugated creatures are at the mercy of the hegemonic entity. The oppressed wife plays the role of a shaman when her "brief/Goes straight up to heaven, and nothing more is heard of it". She is shown as a superhuman or an incarnation of mysticism when she does not respond against the husband's maltreatment. At the same time, the husband appears as a faithful picture of a murderous animal red in tooth and claw for killing not



physically but psychologically and ethically.

Ted Hughes, the mystic quester, also propagates himself as a modest human being aspiring for his soul to be elevated for the companionship with the positive forces of the World like intuition and shamanism. After getting married to Carol Orchard in 1970, he met with the long-lost peace of heart and soul. He contemplated his role in undertaking the suicide attempts by Sylvia Plath, his first wife, and Assia Wevil, his mistress. Such meditative expressions are tagged as his shamanistic poems. The poem "That Morning" (1983) paints his solace that "Solemn to stand there in the pollen light/Waist-deep in wild salmon swaying massed/As from the hand of God". He develops the commune to God through the tiny salmons. He portrays the soul's ecstasy when describing that the salmons are responsible for taking Ted Hughes from the perishable World of matter into another domain where, "There the body/Separated, golden and imperishable". The physical elevation into the metaphysical by purging impurities like gold makes man immortalized. Such philosophical assertion can be discernable only by those above the level of a human being just like his animism, which targets adapting instinctive behavior to live a life. He does not suggest the moderate way to

walk on but rather bewilders man by putting two extremes.

The Post War British Poet Laureate is victimized by his doubts and fears. He refers to the divine persecution of the Highest Order of the World, which suffered Adam to fall from immortality to mortal life. He narrates that "we flew slowly, their (salmons) formations/ Lifting us toward some dazzle of blessing/One wrong thought might darken. As if the fallen/World and salmon were over". Hughes himself fails to keep irresolute faith in God and betrays his readers too to adapt the path of ultimate glory of the soul by the projection of his incomplete spiritual knowledge. Even in his most mystic poems, Ted Hughes's urge to depict violence seeks its way. As here in this poem, the mystic World was sabotaged by the inevitable arrival of the violent animals; the two gold bears. He verifies that "Then for a sign that we were where we were/ Two gold bears came down and swam like men". The instinctive behavior of man is manifested by the killing instinct of the bears. The poet and his son Nicholas experience that the bears stood in deep water as on a throne/Eating pierced salmon off their talons. The insatiable hunger of human beings has been pointed out by the devouring attitude of the bears. Gold symbolizes the spark, the light, and knowledge. This symbol is associated with bears to denote that

the beast has spiritual connotations or the mystic has instinctive behavior. Such contradictions are all-pervasive in the poetry of Ted Hughes, who ends the poem with the verse "Among the creatures of light, creatures of light". He equated the human beings, animals and the mystic quester to further confuse his reader by initiating the idea of hybrid identity.

Therefore, the poetry of Ted Hughes amalgamates animism and mysticism to unearth his own childhood experiences, excavate his distorted familial relations, and pave the way for spiritual elevation for the solace of his soul equal to an escape to conceal the gap between his performative personality and the actual self. His poetry has a deep aesthetic appeal, but it does not come up to the mark of modern man's requirements to let him sustain and progress in post-war times. It neither polishes the socio-ethical concerns of human beings nor undertakes the philosophical queries about human existence, man's relation to the universe and to God. His poetry is better categorized as the intense expressions of a bereft man at the hands of land, nature, relations, and a short-timed ailment. His animal symbols and images are rich in variety but point only to reveal the magnitude of the World of forest in specific and of nature in general.

Other than this, he displays his fervor to try his pen on the supernatural and the metaphysical where again mingle the violence with the sublime and muddles the readers for what they ought to take up and what ought to avoid to avert the post-war ruptures threatening the day to day life of every human being.

### **Conclusions**

This study finds Ted Hughes as a poet of mystic and animalistic inclinations in the majority of his poems. This confluence of both positive and negative utterances somehow creates confusion in the minds of readers to comprehend his poetic work with contradictory images. The post-war era essentially demands the socio psychic integration of modern man. To attain this unification of the intuitive and spiritual sides of mankind, the amalgamation of Hughes's diverse images is significant. The two extremes of mystic and animalist constituents have been exhibited for the modern man to observe a modest and balanced approach to living life as a liable citizen in this chaotic war era.

### **Recommendations**

Hughes's poetry should be studied as a healing force for modern man's post-war ruptured psyche.

His poetry should be studied to create an equilibrium between Man's performative and actual self

The contrasting images in his poetry should be taken to bring pacification between man's wild, instinctive side and the mystic spiritual side.

### Concluding Remarks

Ted Hughes is a modern poet of violence, war, and Shamanism. His poems are primarily a confluence of mystic and animalistic constituents. This amalgamation sometimes conjures confusion that leads to psychic fragmentation but actually, it is an exhibition of two extremes of human existence. The contradictory images of the mystic and animalistic domain positively contribute to the construction of the human mind. His poems help to harmonize the poles apart attitudes of man related to his instinctive and mystic behavior.

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