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Dr. Tialila

Assistant Professor,
Department of English, Peren
Government College,
Nagaland, India

Ecocritical perspectives in the poetry of ted Hughes

Dr. Tialila

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Abstract

Ecocriticism aims to investigate the global ecological crisis through the intersection of literature, culture, and the physical environment. The environmental crisis of the recent times have upended the natural world and the comfortable nature tropes of the past no longer seem possible leading to the development of a new style of poetic expression that laments the loss of the natural world, while presenting a world plagued with environmental calamities. The interrelatedness of culture and nature in relation to the imperative connection of life and human environments is prominent in Hughes's eco poetics based on the exploration of the environment's influence on the poet's imagination in shaping an ethical vision. Hughes depicts human culture's detrimental impact on environment in order to re-evaluate human's ability to both protect and destroy nature in his poetic space, thus interweaving environmentalism and literary creativity. This paper attempts to explore Ted Hughes's poetry in relation to an emergent eco poetics and his ecological consciousness. Hughes's conception of a human relationship with external nature through the examination of poetic language reveals how environmental imagination can suggest social responsibility.

Keywords: Eco criticism, ted Hughes, biocentrism, deep ecology, social ecology

Introduction

Ecocriticism aims to investigate the global ecological crisis through the intersection of literature, culture, and the physical environment. Nature has always been the greatest source of inspiration for poetry from time immemorial. Starting with the ancient pastorals, the earliest poets used rural settings and vivid nature imagery to capture their surrounding world, thus presenting immense vistas and precise microcosms for the readers to enjoy, observe and reflect. However, the environmental crisis of the recent times have upended the natural world and the comfortable nature tropes of the past no longer seem possible leading to the development of a new style of poetic expression that laments the loss of the natural world, while presenting a world plagued with environmental calamities. Ecocriticism provides an insight into environmental consciousness and a new perspective to the idea of nature. His poetry often advocates issues of animal subjectivity, endangered species, wildlife extinction and environmental ethics. An ecocritical reading of his poetry ignites a fresh outlook that focuses to refine the idea of nature and address questions of ecological interconnectedness and environmentalism. As a poet aware of his significant social responsibility, Hughes showed interests in issues and concerns linked to human-nature relationship, self-destructive spirit of human beings, life and death, animals, unconscious life, and conscious decisions.

This paper attempts to explore Ted Hughes's poetry in relation to an emergent eco poetics and his ecological consciousness. Ted Hughes (1930-1998), Poet Laureate of England from 1984 until his death is one of the giants of 20th century British poetry. He was a prolific poet, translator, editor, and children's book author interested in extraordinary forms of knowledge, creative writing, environmental activism and national movements against agricultural and industrial contamination (Gifford 2009:1) ^[3]. His poetry often advocates issues of animal subjectivity, endangered species, wildlife extinction and environmental ethics. An ecocritical reading of his poetry ignites a fresh outlook that focuses to refine the idea of nature and address questions of ecological interconnectedness and environmentalism. As a poet aware of his significant social responsibility, Hughes showed interests in issues and concerns linked to human-nature relationship, self-destructive spirit of human beings, life and death, animals, unconscious life, and conscious decisions. He was a prominent public intellectual who co-founded the West Country Rivers Trust and supported organizations like

Corresponding Author:
Pinki Manhas
Govt. Degree College Paloura,
Jammu, Jammu and Kashmir,
India

the Torridge Action Group, the Countryside Commission and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

Scholars have researched Hughes's active engagement in environmental issues before, however the opening of the British Library's Ted Hughes archive in 2011, revealed a far greater breadth of material than had previously been accessible which transform our understanding of Hughes as an environmentalist and environmental writer by providing a far more detailed account of his activities. In 2010, Carol Ann Duffy inaugurated the Ted Hughes Award for New York in Poetry, the Ted Hughes Society was formed in 2011, and Jonathan Bate's major biography, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorized Life* (2015) was inspired by Hughes's environmentalism (Roberts 2015). Since then, a new Ted Hughes Project has been founded at the University of Huddersfield, headed by South Yorkshire poet, scholar and hunter Steve Ely. His passion for nature arises as a result of his early years in the rural areas of Yorkshire and his enchantment with animals, and his poetry developed from his childhood experiences, interrelating animal life and atrocities of human kind. Analyzing Hughes's war-poetry, Meyers finds a connection between animals and soldiers that both kill their own kind with fierce primitivism (2013: 32).

Environmental criticism, also known as eco criticism, ecopoetics and 'green' studies, is a rapidly emerging field of literary study that considers the relationship of literature and environment from an interdisciplinary point of view, so as to analyze the contemporary environmental crisis and find possible solutions. Ecocriticism was officially heralded by the publication of two seminal works in the 1990s: *The Ecocriticism Reader* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and *The Environmental Imagination* by Lawrence Buell. Ecocriticism investigates the relationship between human and the natural/non-human world in literature and deals with how environmental issues, cultural issues concerning the environment, and human attitude towards nature are presented and analyzed.

Glotfelty describes eco criticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and physical environment" (1996: xviii) and as a discipline, eco criticism is established on the reciprocal connection between humanities and the natural world. The emergence of the theory is possibly derived from the characteristics of "the century of environment" that comprises literary-environmental interrelations; ecology and population based difficulties which inescapably and progressively advocates the necessity of including environmental considerations for any kind of literary criticism, handling social and physical reality (Love 2003:1) ^[10]. While Rudd defines origins of the perspective as having "roots in the ethical and political concerns of ecology and environmentalism" (2010:8), Serpil Oppermann explains that the aim of the theory is "to bring transformation of literary studies by linking literary criticism and theory with the ecological issues at large - the environmental issues related with both nature, landscape and urban as a result of destructive alterations on Earth which endangers not only human species but also all other living creatures" (1999:29-30).

Literature has a crucial role in an enormously complicated global system in which thoughts, matter and energy interact, and eco criticism expands "the world" as a concept by actually including the whole ecosphere (Glotfelty & Fromm 1996: xix) ^[4]. The theory also functions as a response to

environmental destruction, natural and man-made disasters, as it is necessary to grasp the link between human and the natural world. Historian Donald Worster observes that global crisis occurs as a result of the dysfunctional moral system of society rather than ecosystem and proposes that in order to overcome the crisis, human beings ought to realize their impact on nature and recognize those moral systems to restructure them accordingly. He further underlines that "historians, scholars, anthropologists and philosophers cannot reform but they can help with understanding" (1993:27).

The idea that nature is meant for serving human need has often incited a selfish utilitarian attitude towards nature. However, after the 18th century several voices emerged seeking a reevaluation of the relationship between man and environment, and man's view of nature. Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher, developed the notion of "Deep Ecology" which emphasizes the basic interconnectedness of all life forms and nature, and presents a symbiotic and holistic world-view rather than an anthropocentric one. The late 20th century saw a new threat in the form of ecological disaster as a result of nuclear war, depletion of natural resources, population explosion, exploitative technologies, pollution, and extinction of species etc. In such a context, literary and cultural theories has begun to address the issues as part of academic discourse. During the recent years, ecocriticism has gained a lot of attention owing to the higher social emphasis laid on environmental destruction, thereby, opening more avenues for analyzing and interpreting literary texts.

Kerridge aligns Hughes with the more fundamental thinking of Arne Naess, who defined deep ecology against what he saw as the 'shallow' environmentalism concerned only with pollution, damage and depletion as specific problems. Shallow environmentalism sought particular solutions without making a general challenge to industrialization and consumerism. Naess saw this as inadequate and stressed that the environmental movement had to be concerned with philosophy, morality, psychology and spirituality, as well as ecological science and tactical politics. It had to envision a transformed culture. Hughes comes at environmentalism from a particular set of literary and anthropological preoccupations, but his vision is one of the same radical kind. Kerridge bases this argument on an analogy between the ideas of Naess and the views Hughes expressed in "The Environmental Revolution." However, Hughes's desire for a fundamental change in values was profoundly radical, and his activities cannot all be aligned with the values of deep ecology. According to Reddick, Hughes's environmentalism was ideologically committed and responsive to contemporary politics; Naess would no doubt dismiss societal and political engagement as 'shallow environmentalism'. However, Hughes, who argued that farm pesticides poisoned people as well as otters, and that sewage ruined a river for both salmon and fishermen, would see 'social ecology' as of equal importance to deep ecology (22).

Hughes poetry depicts animals and rural landscapes with a sensitivity to changes in human and non-human environments which can be understood in relation to eco criticism, particularly when humans use nature for utilitarian purposes. His poetry often critiques anthropocentric ideologies which affects external nature leading to

ecological disaster and disintegration. As suggested by Louise Westling, “ecocriticism turns toward the life sciences to restore literary culture to the fabric of biological being” (2) and this is true to Hughes’s representation of species’ extinction and industrial ruin which reveals his environmental consciousness, and at the same time his poetic creativity. The poet’s cultural and responsible act for other creatures and the environment contributes to the social function of poetry by raising environmental awareness.

I imagine this midnight moment’s forest:

Something else is alive

Beside the clock’s loneliness

And this blank page where my fingers move. (“The Thought-Fox”, 21)

These lines from his poem, “The Thought-Fox” suggests how his writing process and poetic imagination are influenced by his external environment. The midnight forest creates an immediate lonely environment of which the poetic speaker is conscious and reveals clues about poetic creativity and its relation to the natural world, thus bringing together the creative act of writing with an idea of the wilderness allowing poetic imagination and external nature to merge. Hughes’s poetry explores the interaction of other creatures, plants, and natural elements in relation to human intervention, construction, and destruction of external environment. The use of poetry to raise awareness shows how human culture can transform the environment and hence, the social function of Hughes’s poetry is significant.

With the rise in environmental crisis, protection of the environment and the concept of ecosystem has become an essential part of various disciplines in humanities such as art, culture, literature, philosophy, morals, politics etc. As a result of this, ecology is a universal matter that people should face and cope with (Xu and Nangong 2012:88) ^[22], and in literary criticism too, ecocriticism has its favorable place as a method of analyzing literary works with considerations of nature, human, nonhuman. Environment, and interconnections among them by providing insight into environmental consciousness and a refined taste to the idea of nature.

The interrelatedness of culture and nature in relation to the imperative connection of life and human environments is prominent in Hughes’s ecopoetics based on the exploration of the environment’s influence on the poet’s imagination in shaping an ethical vision. Hughes’s poetic responses to socio-cultural changes can be noticed in his poetry after the 1950s, which reflects the literary anxiety of the post-war period. Representations of animal aggression and different forms of environmental violence in his poetry collections such as, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), *Lupercal* (1960), and *Wodwo* (1967) ^[5] epitomizes his scrutiny of cultural disintegration. In these collections, he engages extensively with imagery of nihilism and the experience of war, and environmental destruction. In *Crow* (1970), Hughes addresses cultural anxiety by using myth to critique the decline of Christianity and considers the role of religion as a means to revitalize faith in human communities.

In *English Poetry Since 1940*, Neil Corcoran argues that Hughes’s recreation of myth articulates the decline of religion and works towards finding sustainable myths as an alternative to irretrievable corruption and barrenness of English Christianity (114). This suggests the degree of anxiety in Hughes’s poetry which responds to the transformation of religion within social history. Along with

cultural degradation and religious barrenness, political nihilism is also explored through the representation of the ugly remnants of war in *Crow* where Hughes depicts wild animals with aggression, violence, and an innate survival instinct in order to reflect how the cultural construction of wilderness moves between the human and the non-human world.

According to Keith Sagar, Hughes influenced by Robert Graves’s *The White Goddess*, draws on myth to critique man’s alienation from nature with an aim to heal the wounded world. Sagar is of the opinion that Hughes’s poetry functions as a means to revitalize the natural environment which reveals the poet’s orientation towards external nature. Sagar further states that Hughes’s use of the image of stone returning to earth is tantamount to the concept of interconnectedness that has risen from the ecocritical perspective (246). Corcoran observes that Hughes’s mythic imagination and focus extends to questions of ecological consciousness and environmentalism and states that Hughes has “a still, quiet intensity of scrutiny, reverential and amazed before the recognition of ‘otherness’ and that one ought to notice that Hughes’s celebration of natural vitality is crossed with his appalled, fascinated, occasionally apparently near-fetishistic sense of morality” (117).

Sagar’s book *Ted Hughes and Nature: Terror and Exultation* (2009) argues that the centrality of nature in Hughes’s work has been obvious from the publication of *The Hawk in the Rain* (xi) and thinks of Hughes’s work as a struggle to get into a right relation with the source, that is, with Nature and the female (xiv) – hence the religious tenor of many of Hughes’s River-poems. Sagar writes that “in *River* Hughes found the end of his poetic journey, from a world made of blood to a world made of light” (2006: 168). Yet poems about extinction and predatory violence come after *River*. Violence inflicted on vanishing species is especially visible in *Wolf watching*, and the poems examining it bring us back to the ‘world of blood’. Hughes’s protest poems evoke not a ‘world of light’, but an environment that is irreversibly damaged and polluted. Reddick opines that Sagar’s progression from ‘blood’ to ‘light’ is unrealistically neat and the environmental dimension of Hughes’s poetry after *River* should not be dismissed (23).

Hughes places increasing emphasis on how humans are linked to other organisms and take their place in ecosystemic processes from *Wodwo* onwards, and this mode of thinking begins to introduce important new dimensions to the presentation of nature in *Crow* and paves the way for the ecstatic poems of union with nature in *Gaudete*, and the more grounded, realistic poems of human beings’ place in the ecosystem in *Moortown Diary* and *River*. In his earlier career, his imagination creates hybrid thought – animals and mythical creatures where the fox-man confounds the traditional boundaries between species, the jaguar functions as a symbol of humankind’s baser nature, while the *Wodwo* cannot decide whether he is earth, animal or wild man, “What am I? Nosing here, turning leaves over... But what shall I be called” (*Wodwo* 1967) ^[5]. *Wodwo* devotes less space to the mythic poetry of *Gaudete* than to the more realistic eco poetry of *Moortown Diary* and *River*. *Gaudete* is the story of Nicholas Lumb, an Anglican minister in a Devon village, who is abducted by spirits and taken to the underworld, where he is asked to heal a beautiful, half-

animal woman, who seems to be dying. Later it transpires that she is the goddess, Nature herself and saving her would also symbolize saving a blighted world. *Gaudete* particularly illustrates how the Hughes of the 1970s, fascinated by non-Western views of nature, strives towards complete unity with the nonhuman:

I watch a wise beetle

Walking about inside my body

I saw a tree

Grow inward my navel (*Collected Poems* 2003: 359)^[7]

In 1994, one of the first studies of Hughes's biocentrism, "Ted Hughes and Ecology: A Biocentric Vision" was published by Leonard Scigaj. Biocentrism is 'the view or belief that the rights and needs of humans are not more important than those of other living things' (*Oxford English Dictionary*); the antonym of which is anthropocentrism or human-centred thinking. Scigaj opines that "the early animal poems of the confident young adult are nevertheless anthropocentric" (165), however an emphasis upon kinship with animals and a longing to fuse with Nature's vital energy can also be noticed – in *Wodwo* a questioning of anthropocentrism, in *Crow* a comprehensive critique of anthropocentrism, and from *Gaudete* through *Wolfwatching*, a gradual development of a biocentric vision that often incorporates a mystical grasp of the 'inner spiritual unity of Nature' that he admired in Nicholson (164). Hughes's nascent desire to fuse with 'Nature's vital energy' can be glimpsed in poetry from his juvenilia onwards. Scigaj assesses that Hughes writes elegies for extinct species, and protest pieces about polluted landscapes and that his poetry shares a basic premise with ecologists and environmentalists that the only way to save this planet is to change the perceptions of its human inhabitants about nature (160).

Hughes depicts human culture's detrimental impact on environment in order to re-evaluate human's ability to both protect and destroy nature in his poetic space, thus interweaving environmentalism and literary creativity as "ecocriticism is closely related to environmentally oriented developments in philosophy and political theory" (Garrard 3). In *Remains of Elmet* (1979), Hughes talks about the changed environments and blames the anthropocentric culture which sometimes unjustly exploits nature as a commodity. Hughes has long been recognized as a prominent environmental poet. Jonathan Bate finds in his poetry 'the hot stink of animal flesh' (2000: 203). When Seamus Heaney calls him 'a guardian spirit of the land and language', a view quoted on the back cover of the hardback edition of Hughes's *Collected Poems*, he evokes Hughes's roles as national bard, preserver of ancient rhythms, and defender of wild places. In a 2009 newspaper article and radio broadcast, Simon Armitage pays tribute to Hughes as a 'poet and eco warrior' (Reddick 20). Hughes's conception of a human relationship with external nature through the examination of poetic language reveals how environmental imagination can suggest social responsibility. In his poetry, Ted Hughes tries to ingrain an ecocentric perspective into the anthropocentric attitude of man to address the urgent contemporary environmental crisis.

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