

CHAPTER - II

A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE ANIMAL POEMS OF TED HUGHES

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Ted Hughes is widely recognized as a distinguished poet for his 'Fierce Power' of expression. He has written thirty volumes within the last four decades. His poems show an inventiveness, a joy in the exercise of his art. He creates powerful pictures with world of the birds and beasts that became new mythological figures. W.S. Merwin calls him 'a heavily anthologized poet'.¹

The Hawk in the Rain labeled him as animal poet. The Fox, Jaguar, Pike, Hawk, Fish, Owls, Rabbits, and Rats are frequent visitors throughout the volumes. A critic of Hughes, Neil Roberts made two divisions of animal poems. "First predatory life or destructive characters like "The Thought Fox", "The Jaguar", "The Hawk in the Rain" and "Macaw and Little Miss". Another kind of animal poems are domestic : "The Horses" and "Meeting".² They are gentle and simple creatures without ferocity. Ted got inspiration and guidance from the unlabeled, unsocial world of these animals.

The "Thought Fox" is the most striking animal poem which has a background of Ted's past memories. When he was studying at Cambridge, he had experienced how he was struggling with incompleteness of an essay. His struggling for writing was hampered at night and he suddenly dreamt and saw a fox. The fox had escaped from fire. The bleeding fox came in the room with his blood-print on the page. His academic work disturbed by the dream of such fox. He

created the most valuable poem on fox. The fox become the great source of writing poetry.

Ted Hughes had a first-hand information of animals. When he visited at a zoo, he observed the birds and animal cages. He was thrilled by their wild nature and their ferocity. As a result, the poem "The Jaguar" emerged. The caged beast Jaguar enraged through prison and was moving in the cage. He tried to come out by thrusting of his heel over the cage floor. The zoo crowd got mesmerized by its wilderness of freedom. The crowd watched the Jaguar as a child at dream. The poem dealt with the contrast between the animal and the crowd. The fear and the attraction of trapped zoo crowd contrasted with the caged Jaguar.

Hughes not only immortalized animals but also the birds. The hawk is one of the major bird which has vital energy in the natural world. The hawk, appeared in the title poem, "The Hawk in the Rain" as a symbol of the vital powers of nature. It indicates that mankind is weaker than bird. Man tries to face the natural ferocity and violence struggling hard.

"I drawn in the drumming plough land, I drag up
Heel after heel, from the swallowing of the earth's
mouth"

At every step in a heavy rain man tries to get ride of the swallowing of the earth's mouth. But hawk, hanging without any sort of effort flies with his wings;

"Effortlessly at height hangs his still eye
His wings hold all creation in a weightless quite"

Hawk fights against the natural forces violently. He tries to overcome the situation but at the end of the poem Hawk's sudden death is alarming. The bird meets a violent and unexpected death. Hughes writes;

"Coming the wrong way, suffers the air, hurled
Upside and down fall from his eye,
The ponderous shires crash on him
The horizon trap him; the round angelic eye
Smashed, mix his heart's blood with mire of the
land."

Though the hawk got smashed and mixed with mire of the land, his fighting against the natural violence is memorable. He displayed his strength violently. The hawk is immortalized by Ted Hughes.

Hughes immortalized the animals violence throughout his selected poems. His remarks on Jaguars are highly critical. He writes:

"A Jaguar after all can be received in several different aspects... he is a beautiful, powerful, natural spirit. He is a homicidal moniac, he is super, charged piece of cosmic machinery. He is a symbol of man's baser nature showed down into the id and growing Cannibal murderous with deprivation. He is an ancient

symbol or Dionysus since he is a leopard raised to the ninth power. He is a precise historical symbol to the bloody minded Aztech and so on. Or he is simply a demon.... a lump of ectoplasm. A lump of astral energy."³

Hughes was deeply influenced by D.H. Lawrence. Lawrence, too handled the theme of violence in his poem. Neil Roberts compares Hughes animal poems to Lawrence. He writes, "Hughes animal poems are very unlike Lawrence's one never has the feeling that Hughes's animals are imperatively alien, like Lawrence's fish and bat. It was Lawrence's achievement to honour the animal creation by asserting its independence of human ideas. The fact that Hughes frequently does not honour his animal subject in this way was offended some critics. Hughes's animals are unmistakable 'Other' in that they present a shock and challenge to the poet."⁴

Ted Hughes wrote extensively on the natural life including domestic and wild animals. Hughes's animals are ferocious as well as simple in their nature. They represented in realistic and alive. "The Horses" and "Meeting" are the two poems of simple creatures. They present their simple and gentle nature. Hughes narrates in "Meeting" how an unexpected opportunity to gaze into the creature's eye produced a strong experience for the human being.

"But once when on an empty mountain slope a
Black goat clattered and ran

Towards him and set forefeet firm on a rock a
Square-pupilled yellow-eyed look.
The black devil head against the blue air
What gigantic finger took."

Hughes emphasized on the simplicity of his ideal creatures. His poem "The Horse" displays its simple nature. In the hour before dawn when the atmosphere is dark and stillness creates its atmosphere as :

"And I saw the horses; hugh in the dense grey-ten
Together- megalith-still.
They breathed, making no move, with draped
Manes and titled hind - hooves making no sound"

"The Horses" describes in a realistic and yet poetically powerful manner a simple fact about the horses behaviour in a cold, frosty winter.

The speaker in the poem finds ten horses standing silent and still, close to one another, breathing but making no move at all. Not one of the horses is heard snorting or jerking his head. The horses are as silent and still as the rest of the scene which the speaker has described in the beginning. The description of the horses is as graphic as the description of the natural scene. Then comes another piece of graphic description. This is the description of sunrise and it is a most impressive and almost fascinating description. The sun colours the eastern sky, which at first looks orange and then red. The clouds dissolve in the sunlight and the speaker can see the blueness of the sky. Next, the speaker retraces his footsteps and come back to

the spot where the horses stood still. The horses are still there and they still make no sound.

"Gray silent fragments
Of a grey silent world."

These two lines emphasize the silence and stillness of the horses and of the world around them. None of them snorts or stamps the ground with his hooves. The only change now is that their breath is visible in the warmth of the sun and their hooves are moving silently as the frost beneath them begins to melt. It is the passivity of these horses which is the focus of the poet's attention. Perhaps it is the intensity of the cold which has turned these energetic and robust animals into silent motionless and quiescent beings.

The hawk in the "Hawk Roosting" is an embodiment of the life of pristine instinct. It sits "the top of the wood" like the lord of the earth and tells us about its life of instinct, life 'uncorrupted' by 'falsifying dreams' which was nurtured by reason and civilization. Its eyes are closed to the faculties of the mind, which corrupt elemental life. It is our body, not the mind that is alive to instinct. The hawk acts purely by instinct. The activity is predatory and the hawk's entire body from head to foot is adapted to that activity. Even its dreams are about preying. The bird makes no bones about its nature. Refusing absolutely to indulge in sophistry it states bluntly;

"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."

Its right to kill, does not require the moral support sustained by logical arguments. That right is in its blood. The bird has been living according to its nature ever since it was born. As far as it is concerned, its life will always go on the same way.

The hawk in the poem is not merely a preying bird that gives free play to its instinct it is positively blood-thirsty. Hawk gloats over its ability to "hold creation in its foot" and to cut "through the bones of the living". Furthermore, it is a narcissist. Alan Bold calls it "a complete solipsist."⁵ It views itself as God's supreme creation; its world is the world it sees; it believes that everything exists for its sake and it is equal to God in its role as arbiter of death.

Thus, the hawk combines three things; life of instinct, brutality and god-likeness. All these three things are aspects of nature's vitality itself. That Hughes saw all these in the hawk, is obvious from his own view of the poem expressed in an interview :

"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 of the devil out of Job what they actually kicked out was Nature.... and nature became the devil. He doesn't sound like Isis, mother of the gods, which he is. He sounds like Hitler's familiar spirit"⁶

"Hawk Roosting", is like most poems of Hughes, celebrates the vital energy of nature to the extent of being anti-human. Hughes is opposed to man's total neglect of his animal appetites, his primal energy. This neglect has created a vacuum in man. The evolution of man has been one-sided that is intellectual. This sapped the enormous vital energy of the creature called man who is in fact both rational and passionate, both mind and body. The neglect of the body, caused mostly by man's fear of its brutal energy. It is not nature that has become complex, but man who created a split within him between mind and body, between reason and instinct. Man has been suppressing his instincts.

The ancient men created rituals and dogma which contained the violent energy that man inherited from nature. In an interview to London Magazine (Jan. 1971) Hughes says that

"modern man has lost faith in the old rituals and dogma but has not found any alternative which can contain the violent energy. Hence, he suppresses this energy into the deep recesses of the unconscious by different means such as rationalization and philosophisation. The more suppressed an evil, the more devilish it becomes. Thus while animals revel in their pristine energy instinctively - man suppresses it and makes a devil of it".⁷

The polarity of fierce energy and indolent inactivity expressed in the "Hawk Roosting" and "The Jaguar" is also notable in "Thrushes". But its symbolism is much less complicated than that in either of the two other poems. It is rather a symbolism of single

minded energy which goes very well with the mechanically single-minded vision of the thrushes.

As usual with Ted Hughes, the poem first finds a local habitation and a name of the animal, this time the comfortable and pleasant setting of a spring lawn for the predatory thrushes. There is an ironical contrast between the setting and the fierce energy and predatory purpose of the thrushes. Similarly, there is an ironical contrast between the delicacy of the thrushes and their triggerish mechanical energy. But the central point about the thrushes in the first stanza, as Hughes described it in an interview in the *Guardian* is that these animals in his poem are "living the redeemed life of joy".⁸ In case of the thrushes, then this "redeemed life of joy" comes down to the level of perfect adaptation to the needs of the life and the total absorption of the being in action.

He described the single minded pursuit of their prey and the taut energy of these predatory birds in the first stanza of "Thrushes". Ted Hughes now raises a question about the source of this energy and mechanical motion. Does it drive from their small, single-minded-sized skull, a trained body? Of course many men have occasionally shown this single-minded concentration and pursuit of goal. Mozart was one such a single-minded, full absorbed genius. But what is an exception in human beings is a generality about animals. The shark, for example is so absorbed in the hunger of its body that can scent its prey's blood and in its taste of blood, it does not even recognize whether the blood comes from the prey or from its own side. The name for this single-mindedness is perhaps a mechanical sort of efficiency which is caused by doubtful thought and sentiment.

Ted Hughes here contrasts the behaviour of these impulsive animals with the overly conscious, even conscience-torn conduct of human beings. Human beings often suffer from a dualism in their thoughts and claiming to be rational beings. They ignore their impulses which mark the irrational. This discovery, say Gifford and Roberts, "most men persuade to give up the quest of liberating the animal self. But Hughes reminds us of the necessity of pursuing it".⁹ And this he does in the last stanza by showing how dualistic human vision when we bend in prayer, it is the thought of the devils that haunts us. Animals are free from such dualism.

"Pike" is another animal poem from *Lupercal*. Ted Hughes describes the pike-fish with its fierce and destructive nature. The pike-fish are "killers from egg," meaning that they have the destructive instinct from the very time the mother-fish lays its eggs. The pike-fish are destructive in their nature that they even kill one another to satisfy their hunger.

The pike is just three inches long and its colour is a blending of green and yellow. It is a killer from its very birth onwards. Even a newly born pike has an ancient, spiteful grin. The pike-fish seem to be dancing on the surface of water, with the flies hovering around them. They seem to be fully conscious of their own grandeur. Their shapes produce on the onlookers an impression of mixed delicacy and horror. Though small to our eyes, they are very large in the world to which they belong. They dwell in ponds where they lie still in the darkness beneath the surface. They lay on the last years black leaves which are submerged in the water and from there they look

onwards. Their jaws have the shape of a hooked clamp and inside the jaws are their teeth. Whose sharpness cannot be blunted at this stage of their existence which has been moulded by their environment.

The above description of the pike-fish is given by a speaker who tells a couple of his own experience with the pike-fish. He and his companions had kept three pike-fish in a glass jar in which they had provided a large quantity of weeds for the pike-fish to feel comfortable. One of these three pike-fish was three inches long, the second was four inches long, and the third was four and a half inches long. Then one day it was found that there were only two pike-fish left in the jar. Finally, only one pike-fish was left in the jar, and it had a sluggish belly and the spiteful grin with which it was born.

The strongest of the three pike-fish had eaten the other two, one after the other, to satisfy its hunger. Indeed, these pike-fish do not spare anybody. Then the speaker goes on to tell us that, on another occasion, he and his companions had found one pike-fish had belonged to a bigger variety of them, being more than two feet long and six pounds in weight. One of the two had plunged its teeth into the other's throat. The one which had been killed, seemed to be locked in the grip of the other and its eyes still retained its steely expression.

The speaker then proceeds to tell us one of his experiences of fishing. He had been trying to catch fish from a pond which was "as deep as England." The pike-fish in it were reported to be so huge that

they could not move at all. The speaker did not have the courage even to try to catch fish of that size. However, he throws his fishing-line into the pond to try to catch one of them, though he was in a state of great fear at that time. In fact, he felt so overwhelmed by fear that a darkness arose from outside and began to come towards him.

When Hughes writes about any animal in his poems, he makes us forget our own identities as human beings and focuses our whole attention upon the animal concerned. It is Hughes's supreme construction, a series of descriptions, anecdotes, impressions building up the single theme. It is a fine poem, with Lawrentian passages which are yet pure Hughes:

"Silhouette
Of submarine delicacy and horror,
A hundred feet long in their world."

The horror, says Keith Sagar, is in the pitch of specialization which this fish has reached as a killer :

"The jaws hooked clamp and fangs
Not to be changed at his date;
A life subdued to its instrument"

Though the whole creature existed purely to enable its jaws for their business. Two marvelously economical anecdotes prove this claim. One anecdote pertains to the strongest pike - fish killing and eating two weaker ones and the other refer to one strong fish's piercing its teeth through the others gullet. At the end, the speaker in the poem recalls his fishing at night, he is no longer fishing pike but for the

nameless horror which night's darkness frees to rise up from the legendary depth of his unconscious dream.

"View of a Pig" is another poem, which evokes various thoughts, anecdotes and pieces of information about pigs and returns in the final stanza to the poet's concentrated stare at the dead pig with which it started. The imagination thus collects while it concentrates. The technique of "Pike" is so similar that they must have been written close in time - both were first published in the summer of 1959. It must be among the poems which he said in an interview in the *Guardian*, "a lot of my second book, *Lupercal*, is one extended poem about one or two sensations".¹⁰ There are at least a dozen or fifteen poems in that book which belong organically to one another. The conclusion of "Pike" however takes us into a different dimension. The poem begins factually, pike three inches long' and reflected on the beauty and ferocity of the fish and on its awesome stillness.

The dead pig lay on a barrow; people said that it weighed as much as three men. The dead pig lay with its eyes closed, with its pink white eyelashes and with its trotters stuck out straight. Such a heavy dead pig did not seem to be just dead. It was less than dead, less than lifeless. It could be compared to a sack full of wheat.

The speaker in the poem, who might be the poet himself, then says that he struck his hand against the body of the dead pig without feeling any remorse because one feels guilty only if one is insulting a dead body, while this pig did not seem to be dead but less than dead.

Being less than dead, this pig could not have accused the speaker in the poem the guilt of insulting a dead body. In fact, this pig was dead because how it was mounted only to a certain quantity of lard and pork which could be weighed and sold. This pig had lost even its last dignity and furthermore, it was no longer an animal at which one could laugh. This pig was so dead that one could not even feel any pity for and its loss of earthly existence and pleasure. Any pity for it would have been irrelevant at this stage.

The speaker felt oppressed by the heavy weight of this animal. It was so heavy that anyone would cause the butcher a lot of trouble even to cut it into pieces. The wound caused by the butcher's knife in its throat was shocking to an onlooker but it did not evoke any pity.

The speaker then tells an experience. He ran to catch a small greasy pig, which ran faster and with a greater ease, than a cat. Its squeal was like the sound of a piece of metal being cut into two pieces. Living pigs, says the speaker must be having, in their veins, blood which is hot. Their blood must be as an oven is. The bite of a living pig is sharper than a horse. A pig can cut a half-moon without the least difficulty. A pig can eat cinders and dead cats. Hughes contemplated on pig as follows :

"Pigs must have hot blood, they feel like ovens.

Their bite is worse than a horse's

They chop a half moon clean out.

They eat cinders, dead cats."

The bloody-mindedness of this stanza reflects recent history and it reminds the German bombing raids over England, the savage treatment of the Jews by the Nazis, and the horrors of the nuclear bomb. Coming back to the dead pig lying on a barrow, the speaker says this dead pig was now beyond the speaker's capacity to make distinctions between pigs and other animals. 'It was like a sack of wheat' is not just a simple simile conveying bulk and weight, it expresses the way the pig now seems unanimal, neither living nor dead.

In the poem "An Otter", the otter is less a description of an otter than an invocation of the spirit of an otter. The otter is depicted as almost the opposite of the hawk, who rules the air with a feeling of authority. However the otter, like the hawk is a predator. An otter can put an abrupt end of the trout life though, from the arrival of man on the scene with his trained dogs, he himself has also become a prey. Symbolically speaking, the otter "crying without answer for his lost paradise" is surely, an image of the dualism in man. The otter, like man is neither wholly body spirit, neither wholly beast nor angel. He is like man yearning for his Eden home where death did not exist.

The speaker in the poem, "The Bull Moses", keenly perceives the presence of the bull and so he says :

"But the warm weight of his breathing
The ammoniac reek of his litter, the holly tongued
Mash of his cud, steamed against me"

The speaker then dwells upon some of the other features of the bull, the brow which looks like masonry and the deep-keeled neck. The bull seems to the speaker, it belong from another world, beyond the world of human consciousness. In fact the bull seems to stand at the meeting-point of the two worlds. There was a time, says the speaker, when bulls were uncontrolled by any power. But now the farmer leads the full to the pond to drink and to smell the air. The bull has to obey every movement of the farmer. He has to submit to a life of servitude. Of course, within the bull sleeps, "the locked black of his powers" who could not hold in case the bull were to revolt. But he does not revolt because he has no awareness of any slavery. In this respect, he resembles the Jaguar whom Hughes had written that his stride meant "wildernesses of freedom" and "the world rolled under the long thrust of his heel." The bull, which has the name moses, resembles a visionary or dreamer confined to a cell but not treating the cell as a prison. The consciousness of moses is a racial consciousness. What redeems his servitude is that he 'wombs'. He fills the wombs of many cows with his progeny. Moses is only a link in the unbroken continuity from his wild ancestors to his wild descendants because a time would come when man would cease to rule. Moses is progenitor, a patriarch and like the Biblical moses. He beholds the Promised Land which he will never enter, feeling satisfied by ensuring the continuity of the race. He has played his part. His descendants will escape from servitude and inherit the earth. Only Hughes could have written such a poem about a bull. The original and vivid picture of a bull is combined in poem with a symbolic view of the animal. The human figures in the poem, the speaker and the farmer, certainly enhance the poem's interest

because, without human beings, there would be nobody to behold the animals and to interpret the meaning of their existence. At the same time the gulf between man and animal represents the gulf between civilized man and man's animal self.

"Ghost Crabs" was published in part first of the *Wodwo* (1967). Since most of the poems, including "Ghost Crabs" and stories were written between 1960-1966. That is the period immediately after the death of Ted Hughes's wife Sylvia Plath, the shadow of her death lengthens over these poems. The vision that these poems present is a nightmarish vision and the mood of the poet is quite somber. In "Ghost Crabs" Ted Hughes gives poetic shape to the inner horrors and nightmares that lurk just below human consciousness and are part of unconscious.

The poem "Ghost Crabs" begins with an apparently literal description of a scene by the seaside at the time of nightfall. But soon the metaphors take over literal descriptions and as they develop they create a myth, which has to do with Hughes vision of the world and life.

All night falls, the sea darkens and this darkness begins to cover all the areas from the gulf to the bank of the sea. It seems as if rocks were uncovering themselves and tearing their own pallour into the night's darkness. The tidal waves withdraw from the shining things which look like nacelles. These nacelles - looking things then emerge as giant crabs under their flat skulls and appear to be starting towards the mainland, like helmet wearing soldiers emerging from a trench.

These crabs appear as ghosts till they are identified as ghost crabs. They emerge as invisible dispelling of the seas cold water over the man walking along the sandy bank. From there they start moving toward the inland and reach the woods and towns. Then they look like tall, staggering ghosts, gliding like volunteers in water. They can penetrate through the walls of our houses, even our bodies. He can not see them but still we can not turn our mind away from them. As we lie on our beds or sit in our rooms, these ghost crabs pierce our vacant mind. Our reveries are disturbed or suddenly we wake up to our material world in a burst of sweat as though we had seen a nightmare. Sometimes they come in the shape of sliding, staring presence. These ghost crabs possess the whole world. All the night they are around us, they walk before us, hold fast to each other. They are really the power of the world, while we are only their humble bacteria for we die their lives and live their deaths.

At dawn they go back gliding to the bottom of the sea. These ghost crabs are the commotion in history, the convulsion at the bottom of our blood, and they are present in the cycles of recurring patterns. For them, our countries are no more than battle grounds. During the day they relax and rejuvenate themselves under the sea. Their singing is like a breeze near the rocky bank and this signing can be heard only and crabs. These ghost-crabs are the toys that God has created to plays with. These ghost crabs are no other than the nightmares that arise out of our unconscious and possess us during the night or whenever we are alone.

"Second Glance at a Jaguar" as its title indicates is a rethinking about "The Jaguar" written by Ted Hughes earlier and published in *The Hawk in the Rain*. Apart from the fact that in this poem we get a much more detailed description of the animal than we had in the first poem, there is also a shift in the author's point of view. Now the author feels that the jaguar has become impatient with his life in the cage and seems to be keenly aware of the severe restraints upon his freedom of movement. In the former poem, the jaguar was depicted as being totally heedless of his imprisonment in the cage but in this poem the jaguar is depicted as feeling miserable because of his imprisonment. This time we are told that his head is like the worm-down stamp of another whole jaguar that his tail hungs behind him gracelessly, that his head is dragging itself forward and that the hind legs are lagging. In other words, this time the jaguar seems to have slackened considerably in his movements. The old rapidity of movement is gone.

The poem "The Bear", has a profound allegorical significance. The animal called the bear is a symbol of our sleeping or dormant souls which can be awakened and made fully operational. If the soul is awakened, a man would begin to understand himself and the world would then try to overcome his old self and discover a new identity for himself. In primitive times, the bear was slaughtered as a sacrifice to achieve a regeneration of the body and the soul. Thus the bear in primitive times served a sacred purpose. Hughes dwells upon these mystical associations of the bear in order to arouse an awareness of the need for self-renewal and for recognition of the spiritual potential in ourselves.

"Theology" is one of Hughes's early poems but even in this early poem Hughes appears as a disbeliever in the Biblical account of the creation. According to general view, it was the serpent in the Garden of Eden who tempted Eve to eat the apple, which Adam and Eve had been forbidden by God to eat. But this belief is wrong and is merely a distortion of the real facts of the case. The truth of the matter is that Adam ate the apple, that Eve ate Adam and that the serpent ate Eve. This is the real answer to the whole mystery of creation. After the serpent had eaten Eve, he went to sleep and he is still asleep there is the Garden of Eden. In the course of his sleep, when the Serpent hears the voice of God calling out to Adam and Eve to appear before him, he (serpent) smiles with amusement. What Hughes really means is that the serpent was certainly God's opponent in the Garden of Eden and that he did win a victory over God, though not in the manner in which the Bible describes it.

The poem, "The Howling of Wolves" expresses Hughes's sympathy with the wolves which are caught by human beings by means of steel traps. What he seems to be objecting in this poem is the cruel and brutal treatment which the captured wolves receive from human beings. For hours and hours these wolves would continue to suffer the agony of having been caught in steel traps and would keep howling in their predicament, to be eventually killed in a brutal manner. Hughes has written a large number of animal poems. Some of these poem depict the fierceness, the cruelty and the violence of the animals but this poem describes the brutality which human beings inflict upon animals. Hughes does not express his sympathy

in words. He merely describes the trapped wolf or wolves and only by deft hints does he express his sympathy for these animals.

"The earth is under its tongue
A dead weight of darkness,
Trying to see through its eyes.
The wolf is living for the earth."

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