



‘Nature’: A force to reckon with in the poetry of William Wordsworth and ted Hughes

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Abstract

This paper is inspired by a brief yet inspiring discussion with a senior academician who gave me a fresh insight into poetry. As I lamented about the freshness and sublimity of nature poetry of romantic poets especially Wordsworth and wondered how he managed such fertility of imagination and painted the pictures of benign nature, she encouraged me to look at contemporary writers like Ted Hughes who are equally capable to creating picture images in our mind while talking about the power of nature. That was a shift in my perspective towards nature poetry written by contemporary poets. This chance meeting challenged me to compare and analyze how the poets of these two genres approach nature. This paper envisages to explore the world of poetry of both the poets with special reference to nature.

Keywords: poetry, expression, sublimity, aggression, animal symbols, self-destructive tendencies of man

Introduction

Man, as one of the most beautiful creations of God has created pieces of art that transcend the barriers of time. Be is the Chaucerian Drama or Christopher Marlowe’s Dr.

Poetry as an expression

Till, with a sudden sharp stink of fox

It enters the dark hole of the head.

The window is starless still; the clock ticks,

The page is printed.

Here the fox is a symbol of the poet’s inner instincts which come to fore as he expresses himself on paper. At one moment, we see the fox outside the window and the next moment we see it in the mind of the poet himself.

Words are a dynamic medium of expression. With so many other modes being talked of for expressing one’s self, words remain at the helm of affairs. Be it the words of Aduri Satyavathi Devi which hover around her like birds and creep into her whenever an idea comes to her. They are also compared with the lullaby which sooth and calm the mind of the poet. They also come as reassuring as mother’s breast milk when the poet feels tormented by the disillusionment that she suffers in the world. Finally, she compares words with a ‘school’ as they guide her and become her mentor through the thick and thin of life. When she faces ‘humiliations like a caterpillar’, words come to her rescue. They also help her explore new realms of human imagination and intellect. (Myriad Winged Bird- Translated from Telugu by K. Damodara)

They may also be the words of Ted Hughes which assume the garb of a fox. The comparison with fox is suggestive of the shrewd or shall we say apt nature of words which enter the ‘dark hole’ of our heads. This is also a reminder of the ‘Shady Plot’ (Elsie Brown) when John Hollock who is in a great need of an inspiration to write finally meets a ghost who is trying to

inspire him day in and day out taking time out from her favourite pastime of haunting. She is a part of the society which she, along with other ghosts have formed to help ‘struggling’ writers who are in ‘need’ of some kind of ideas. Scholars like Hughes and Wordsworth would rather be the ‘Helens’ of the Shady Plot than being the ‘Hollock’. They would be inspiration to millions across the world rather than inspiration seekers. Inspiration is nothing to be chased, it drops like a drop from the ocean above and seeps into the fertile imagination of the poet thereby leading to sprouts of prolific offshoots of poetry. These offshoots may be ‘consumed’ by the readers and they in turn not only derive pleasure but also gain a new insight into the realms of human consciousness. Such is the influence of poetry that it transcends the barriers of time and space and is a ‘a thing of beauty is a joy forever’. Words serve as an effective medium for conveying one’s thoughts in the most convenient manner although there are many words said beyond the actual words which would form the subject matter of yet another paper. Wordsworth referred to poetry as the ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions recollected in tranquility’. The very word spontaneous emphasizes on the futility of the idea seekers. It flows naturally from the fancy and imagination of the poet as he as he experiences life and goes through it just like any other mortal being. He is sensitive to the world around and is able to catch the minute things which otherwise are not noticed by a man struggling to meet the challenges of life. The poet is overwhelmed by feelings and pens them down in the form of a piece which is not only a purgation of his feelings but also a source of delight and food for thought for many. The role of tranquility in this regard cannot be undermined. The humdrum of life, no matter how fascinating it may be, robs man of his solitude which is otherwise a precursor to a piece of literature. When he quietly reconstructs ad deconstructs what he saw or visualized, he draws word pictures like an artist gives birth to a creation. He

may be just giving expression to the language of his soul or he may even be serving it up for the edification for the readers. There is no specific destination that poem is supposed to reach. In Walt Whitman's words, poems come back to the poets in the form of feedback or analytical criticism.

"For song, issuing from its birth-place, after fulfilment, wandering

Reck'd or unreck'd, duly with love returns."

As enumerated by Shri Bhim S. Dahiya, (A New History of English Literature, pg. 160) the poems written by romantic poets had certain characteristics in common;

1. The urge to give vent to personal feelings and emotions, desires and longing, dreams and fantasies, ideals and fantasies;
2. The glorification of the pure and ideal human nature, which finds expression through the innocent child, the simple rural folk, the platonic beauty, the ideal society, and the unity of being;
3. The spirit of love desiring union between man and woman, man and nature, man and universe;
4. The lyrical ode relying on unity and harmony of the subject matter, on the organic growth of the poem, on the intensity of feeling, on the uniformity of rhythm; and
5. The symbolic language relating matter to spirit, body to soul, physical to spiritual, one to many, man to nature etc.

Wordsworth is a quintessentially romantic poet whose poetry weaves the magic of romanticism in many of his poems. His childhood was spent in the lap of nature and this was the beginning of a prolific poetic career based on his love for nature. He saw in nature a benign friend, mentor and guide. He also eulogized nature in all her aspects. As clichéd as it may sound, he found in nature his friend, philosopher and guide. He looks at every phenomenon of nature with great awe and the reader unconsciously joins him in this journey. He seems to write for himself and his love for nature is free from any inhibitions. He sings like the solitary reaper in the quiet corner and his poetry came as a fresh respite from the Classicism writings which followed the set rules and were generally related to aristocracy. Romanticism came like a fresh spring flowing incessantly like the 'Brook' as it chatted and babbled along its way. It sang with the farmers, lulled tormented souls to a deep calm and were like balm on the ruffled spirits of mankind.

Ted Hughes

The twentieth century suffered two world wars and Hughes was born 1930 to witness the aftermath of the first world war and bear testimony to the havoc that the second world war brought. He wrote about nature at length and his perception about nature was that of a creator and destroyer. Nature can be devastating and this view bears more relevance in the contemporary world when we have overused and exploited the natural resources.

"From Hull's sunset smudge
Humber is melting eastward, my south skyline:
A loaded single vein, it drains
The effort of the inert North – Sheffield's ores,
Bog pools, dregs of toadstools, tributary

Graves, dunghills, kitchens, hospitals.
The unkillable North Sea swallows it all.
Insects, drunken, drop out of the air."

Hughes Ted, Selected Poems (1957-1967), 1972 ed.

Although river is compared to the life line of a city and the vein of a city which provides the much needed nourishment to the people who reside around it, in the same breath it also symbolizes destruction. It swallows the remains of the dead and carries them along in its flow. In this way, it also bears the brunt of the human activities. As the contemporary world shows, this unmindful human activity has turned nature into a destroyer when we temper with the equilibrium maintained by nature thereby turning it wrathful. This kind of vision was unlikely in the age of Wordsworth when sustainable development was not a goal in itself. The relevance of this concept holds more significance in the contemporary world when man is faced with an eternal dilemma of technological growth, infrastructure development and needs of rising population tipped against the disruption in the ecological equilibrium. Both the poets in their own way perceive nature and rightly so, sing her glory.

In his sonnet 'It is a Beauteous Evening', Wordsworth describes the evening as thus:

"It is a beauteous evening, calm and free
The holy time is quiet as a nun
Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
Is sinking down in its tranquility;
The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the sea: "

The idyllic picture of evening drawn by nature appeals to the senses and the imagery mixed with sublimity focuses on the divine aspect of nature. The comparison with the holy nun further suffuses the environ with a calm touch. The modern literature sometimes came as anti thetical to the sublime poetry of the romantics. However, their successors did not feel the need to be anti – romanticism. Rather, they developed their own contemporary style coupled with poetic devices which created a niche in itself.

In the words of Bhim S. Dahiya

"Like the nineteenth century earlier literary movements, the modernist movement was also marked by its pioneering first generation and the second younger generation, which was free from the burden of creating and establishing a new kind of poetry. Thus, while the first generation had to write devastating criticism of the Romantic tradition, besides consciously and deliberately creating an anti-Romantic poetry, the second generation was totally free from the polemics and self-consciousness of their seniors." –pg. 278, The Literature of the Modernist Movement, A New History of English Literature

However, Hughes was often criticized for being too crude in his using a the crow as a metaphor. Critics like Martin Dodsworth and Stephen Coote are dismissive of him for using 'brutalism' in his poem 'Crow'. However, as per Hughes himself, the story that he intended to tell 'was of course the story of Crow, created by God nightmare's attempt to improve on man.' Seen in this context, when the surroundings were

marred by violence and despair, this air of despondency was not only unavoidable but also understandable. It is said that literature reflects the society it is placed in and vice versa. The imagery in the poetry of Hughes is also unmistakable despite the occasional shadow of gloom. Animal imagery seems to be his favourite as he used different animal images in his poetry.

Many of the romantic poets have also used animal imagery like the cuckoo bird, the skylark or the nightingale but in different contexts. Many of the poems by Hughes use animals as symbols as in 'The Jaguar, The Thought Fox and Ghost Crab. Jaguar symbolizes that spirit of man which longs for freedom and entrepreneurship. One almost feels like going through a world of fables as one reads his poetry. He uses pathetic fallacy in such poems. Few lines from 'Skylarks' by Ted Hughes go like this:

But leaden
With muscle
For the struggle
Against
Earth's centre.
And leaden
For ballast
In the rocketing storms of the breath.
Leaden
Like a bullet
To supplant
Life from its centre."

It is seen in these lines that the physical attributes of the bird are discussed in aggressive terms using words like 'muscle', 'like a bullet' and so on. The physical attributes are suggested and the constant breaking up of lines also suggests the struggle and flight of the skylarks. There is isn't Wordsworth's skylark is also symbolic but slightly mild as compared to Hughes' larks.

Ethereal minstrel! Pilgrim of the sky!
Dost thou despise the earth where cares abound?
Or, While the wings aspire, are heart and eye
Both with thy nest upon the dewy ground?
Those quivering wings composed, that music still?
- 'To a Skylark'

The beauty of this skylark is that it is not the skylark but a skylark as it can be any one who aspires to explore the sky or one who wants to break free from the bondages but sooner or later comes back in search of his comfort zone or familial ties. It can be interpreted in different ways and our thoughts also soar with the skylark and we dance in the sky forgetful of the worries on earth but slowly the poet brings us back. However, we are exhilarated by the flight just like the adrenaline rush after a roller coaster ride. It is enjoyable and fascinating but we long to come back to the ground; the ground reality. Our wings are clipped, sometimes because of compulsion and sometimes because of self imposed regulations which hinder our flight. The skylark of Wordsworth seems to be the allegorical bird man who is torn between the responsibilities of earthly life and the aspirations of the sky and keeps going

back and forth. However, there is no desperation in his actions. He is inspired to measure the sky and also return as and when he longs for the familial ties. He is referred to as 'ethereal minstrel' as he is a heavenly bird who sings in bliss. The privacy of glorious heights is a juxtaposition where the heights provide the much needed seclusion. However, he returns to the ground as he cannot forget that he is an earthly being and longs for his abode.

Another poem by Hughes which may be worth mentioning in this parallel study is 'Ghost Crabs' where the crabs are portrayed as destroying one another and the violent details are grimly portrayed but here also, the poetic genius of the poet is unmistakable.

"... These crabs own this world.
All night, around us or through us,
They stalk each other, they fasten on to each other,
The mount each other, they tear each other to pieces,
They utterly exhaust each other."

How the crabs continue in their struggle and end up symbolizing the mutual friction among men is simply remarkable. The self annihilation is the path that the present civilization seems to be heading towards when trivial issues take over and men no longer represent the most intellectual species on the pyramid but rather the most irrational. It also refers to the malevolence that invades the subconscious of men as they succumb to the base desires. They overpower the subconscious of human beings. The violent race and the stiff competition spells doom for mankind who seems oblivious to the challenges of malnutrition, pollution, rampant exploitation of natural resources, poverty and the likes and focuses on issues which make him less mortal. If animals had the power of expression like humans, they would definitely scoff at the futile egos of man which lead to catastrophic destruction and wastage of resources on self destructive wars. Rather than taming animals for their use, man needs to learn lessons from the animal kingdom who hunt for food only and otherwise co exist. It is rightly said, "The hunter will glorify himself till the time the lion does not learn to write." If animals had the ability to rewrite the story of mankind, we would not take pride in calling ourselves human, rather we would look up to the animals in awe and wonder at their patience, spirit of harmony and lack of greed. They kill, pounce and hunt only when hungry and otherwise believe in 'live and let live'. This discussion may form the subject of another paper but this is certainly an off shoot of what Hughes intended; consciously or unconsciously.

In his journal, "Ted Hughes, a poet laureate is called a 'Zoo laureate', an animal poet', 'a poet of blood and guts', 'a terror's ambassador', 'a Heath Cliff', and 'an incredible hulk of British Literature'. The same poet's poetry is termed as 'a dismaying badness', 'a raw-sex-violence imagery.' All this is in bitter condemnation which is evident from his uncompromising, obsessive preoccupation with finding a permanent place in all his voluminous anthologies of poems." -ELK Asia Pacific Journals – Special Issue (ISBN 978-81-930411-1-6) page 2 'SYMBOLISM IN TED HUGHES' POETRY' by Dr. S.B. Radhika Bai

He is also known as the 'bard in the tradition sense and a shaman of primitive cultures'. His poems are a unique blend of the traditional and the modern and he stands on the liminal space ready to take the plunge.

Therefore, apart from the subtle comparisons which can be made between the two poets, it cannot be undermined that both the poets appeal to our senses in one way or the other. While words worth lulls us to a peaceful sleep where we dream of the daffodils, the scenery in Tintern Abbey ---, Hughes wakes us up from our slumber thereby leaving us pondering and reflecting.

The flight of the two poets take the flight but the trajectory and pace of the bird varies and same goes with the poetry of the two poets.

However, this view of nature is not a conscious effort on the part of the poet. The modernist movement has ushered in an era of realism when writers started focusing on the stark realities of life and the challenges faced by man. Therefore, any comparative study of these two genres remains incomplete if such factors are not accounted for.

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