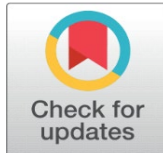
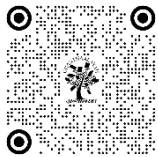


THE INTERTWINING OF ECO-SPIRITUALITY AND NON-HUMAN VOICES: A STUDY OF SELECTED POEMS FROM TED HUGHES' CAVE BIRDS

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ABSTRACT

Ted Hughes' *Cave Birds* emerges as a profound poetic exploration of the spiritual and environmental crises afflicting humanity in the 21st century. By intertwining eco-spirituality and non-human voices as material agency, Hughes crafts an alchemical drama that critiques anthropogenic cultural attitudes and highlights humanity's estrangement from the natural world. Hughes' spiritual belief in the sanctity and materiality of natural world has its own logic and validity. Tracing his deep awareness about ecological degradation, his poems treat the spiritual and environmental crisis as one. The poetry of Ted Hughes is fundamentally pitched against anthropocentrism, the root cause of environmental and spiritual crisis across the globe. Aligned with material ecocritical perspective, Hughes employs non-human voices to embody the agency of nature, challenging the anthropocentric perspective that places humanity at the centre of existence. Non-human entities in the poems serve not merely as metaphors but as active participants in a broader eco-spiritual dialogue, challenging the dominance of human-centric worldviews. This study explores how Hughes draws upon the ritualistic indigenous traditions to offer a critique of anthropocentric values and the mechanistic mindset of modernity while proposing an alternative vision of coexistence rooted in interconnectedness and harmony. Hughes envisions nature as both a victim and a healer, capable of offering relief to humanity's spiritual and ecological disarray. Ultimately, *Cave Birds* serves as a poetic response to the ailing humanity of the 21st century, advocating for a reawakening of eco-spiritual consciousness as a path to both ecological and spiritual restoration.

Keywords: Material Ecocriticism, Non-Human Agency, Spiritual and Environmental Crises, Interconnectedness, Natural World

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ted Hughes (1930-1998) was a prominent English poet, critic, playwright, and short story writer of the latter half of the 20th century. His early works established him as a distinctive and exceptional poetic voice, marked by his profound understanding of the natural world and non-human agencies. In the post-Second World War British literary landscape, Hughes' consistent focus on the natural world as a central theme of his poetry stands out in several significant ways. During his childhood, Ted Hughes spent much of his time on the moors, engaging in hunting, shooting, trapping, and fishing. Critical studies have noted that Hughes' profound fascination with the animal world significantly shaped his imaginative sensibilities. Additionally, the portrayal of animals in his poetry is often linked to myths from indigenous

cultures and ancient symbolic traditions across various poetic forms. Yvonne Reddick's statement provides a very vital clue of Hughes' life interest, "From his boyhood, Hughes presents himself as an outsider: individualistic, neo-primitive, a child of nature. Here are the origins of his critique of modernity, his nostalgic longing for lost landscapes, his identification with certain kinds of animal, and also his sense of alienation from the working class" (*Ted* 71). Hughes' childhood experiences of hunting, fishing, and observing the natural world became the foundation of his environmental awareness and a key inspiration for his poetry about animals and nature.

Ted Hughes in a letter to Keith Sagar wrote about the environmental awareness of the 1960s, a phase that according to him "produced the whole idea of our ecological responsibility, fully developed—maybe the crucial awakening. And the idea of ecological interconnectedness, which is the fundamental assumption now of children under 18, is only the material aspect of the interconnectedness of everything in spirit" (*LTH* 426). His understanding of 'interconnectedness' helps him develop an original critique of environmental crisis. In *Poetry in the Making* (2008), a book on creative writings, Hughes connects with his experiences of animal capturing with poetry writing. On how Hughes treats his own poems, the following remarks of the poet become quite significant:

But the more I think back the more sure I am that with me the two interests have been one interest. [...] I suppose, I think of poems as a sort of animal. They have their own life, like animals, by which I mean that they seem quite separate from any person, even from their author, and nothing can be added to them or taken away without maiming and perhaps even killing them. And they have a certain wisdom. They know something special . . . something perhaps which we are very curious to learn. (15)

In the poetic world of Ted Hughes, animal world represents natural world. His language, images and symbols work in unison. They carry 'a certain wisdom' and 'life' which means independence.

Ecocriticism, a modern offshoot of environmentalism, explores the relationship between literature and the physical environment through an earth-centred lens. By merging environmental concerns with literary analysis, it examines the representation of nature in texts and the environmental crisis in literary discourse. Focused on humanity's interaction with nature, it highlights nature's pervasive role in life while re-evaluating human agency in relation to the natural world. The main research problem addressed is to examine the extent to which the non-human and natural world attain a 'life' of their own. Hughes was consistent in his views on writing poetry and non-human presence in the ecosystem. This study mainly examines Hughes' poetry as a meeting ground of natural and human agencies. It deals with the question of agency in natural world in relation to other life forms, primarily humankind. Material ecocriticism, or new materialism, has introduced fresh dimensions to the field of ecocriticism. It challenges static interpretations and linear thinking, offering a renewed perspective on environmental criticism. Its focus on viewing 'matter' as an active agency is particularly noteworthy and innovative. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann first formulated "material ecocriticism" in 2012 in the ecocritical journals *ISLE* and *Ecozon@*. They cite a vast range of influences for the material turn that spans the humanities. In "Theorizing Material Ecocriticism: A Diptych" they provide key features of 'material ecocriticism':

The main feature of the 'material turn' is the refusal to talk of matter in reductionist and essentialist terms . . . What is at stake in the 'material turn' is the search for new conceptual models apt to theorize the connections between matter and agency on the one side, and the inter - twining of bodies, natures, and meanings on the other side. These meanings can be social, political, cultural, symbolic, or (as biosemioticians maintain) "natural", namely, connected to the way living matter organizes itself in auto-regulated patterns. (450)

The material turn is foremost determined to assert that matter is not comprised of inert, discrete objects but rather of dynamic, vital phenomena.

In *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007), Karen Barad, one of the most-cited new materialists, clarifies the phenomena in 'agential realism' and asserts that the "world is a dynamic process of intra—activity and materialization in the enactment of determinate causal structures with determinate boundaries, properties, meanings, and marks on bodies" (140). Agential realism is not, then, an ethereal metaphysics in which everything is infinitely malleable; rather, it explains how fundamental intra—acting phenomena produce fixed, determined, or local resolutions, effecting the sense of separate entities.

Scientific and cultural attempts to remedy environmental challenges of 21st century quite frequently mention one or the other images of natural world in ancient narratives. Literary and cultural discourse, as the ancient traditions have shaped it through time, space and place retain their relevance and spiritual depth. Influencing contemporary culture and literature, these traditions also interact with or react to environmental discourse. Contemporary interest in Nature or natural world pulls traditional views toward the currency and scientific grounds of environmental discourse. It is impossible to overlook the interconnections of natural world, religion, philosophy, culture, literature and environment. Fischer and Hajer in *Living with Nature: Environmental Politics as Cultural Discourse* (1999) argue that among the biggest causalities of climate change and overall environmental degradation are the indigenous cultures, their traditional yet diverse knowledge and spiritual traditions. Though within environmental discourse and practices attempts are being made to respect these traditional zones. Carolyn Egri discusses that how nature can be understood in alternative “spiritual world-views demonstrates the ways in which nature-centred religions and philosophies in other cultures have constructed distinct understandings of the relationship of humans to nature” (69). Further, she elaborates that to face the environmental challenges of the 21st century, the spiritual traditions can help to create less mechanistic and more harmonious cultural relationships with nature.

Ted Hughes’ spiritual belief in the sanctity and materiality of natural world has its own logic and validity. Tracing his deep awareness about ecological degradation, his poems treat the spiritual and environmental crisis as one. The poetry of Ted Hughes is fundamentally pitched against anthropocentrism, the root cause of environmental and spiritual crisis across the globe. *Cave Birds: An Alchemical Cave Drama* (1978) is a work of collaboration between Ted Hughes and Leonard Baskin. In the Note to his *Selected Poems 1957-1981*, Hughes explains about the volume “a sequence of twenty-nine poems written to accompany drawings – of imaginary birds – by Leonard Baskin” and terms, poems “plot the course of a symbolic drama, concerning disintegration and re-integration, with contrapuntal roles played by birds and humans” (Keegan 1199). The drama Hughes produces in line with Baskin’s paintings, is symbolic at every step. But its advances mainly come from the identity of ‘You’ and ‘I’ – dramatic voices, both representing birds.

Ted Hughes’ imaginings of interconnectedness of human and ‘more-than human life’ forms make up this ‘alchemical drama’ “where the dramatis personae are the bird-spirits of people, or people with bird-spirits” (Keegan 1199). The whole drama of *Cave Birds* is either presented through the persona’s relationship with all facets and elements of natural world. He is a typical persona of Hughes’ ‘Egg-Head’ likes. He represents the anthropocentric sensibility. His integration with non-human life and its essential sanctity is in disarray. Hughes’ imaginings of interconnectedness of human and ‘more-than human life’ forms make up this ‘alchemical drama’. The very first poem “The Scream” brings Hughes’ mythical environment of ‘alchemical drama’. The poem introduces the central voice, designed on Baskin’s paintings and stated to be a bird. But this non-human voice has memory of ‘childhood’. He can express his relationship with the surrounding reality. Hughes appears to dramatize the ironies of Socratic ideals through this figure of the protagonist. He is another egg-head with “braggart-browed complacency” about the nature of things. “The *Cave Birds* protagonist must be linked with the Egg-Head, whose error is rational hubris” (Robinson 108). He treats life as a gift and eats and drinks it like a spoiled child:

There was the sun on the wall-my childhood’s
Nursery picture. And there was my gravestone
Which shared my dreams, and ate and drank with me happily.

All day the hawk perfected its craftsmanship
And even through the night the miracle persisted.

Mountains lazed in their smoky camp.
Worms in the ground were doing a good job. (CP 419)

The poet uses the persona’s non-human background in paintings of Baskin ironically. His callousness is obvious in his responses to violence and death that turn into “self-satisfied cosmic generalization” (Gifford and Roberts 260). Even at the sight of horrible spectacle of an anthropocentric change in surroundings keeps him “brave and creaturely”. His temper is humanistic and celebrative in face of the animal agency ‘crushed’ by a world of his making “When I saw little

rabbits with their head crushed on roads /I knew I rode the wheel of the galaxy" (CP 419). The protagonist, as a product of the anthropogenic world, is completely self-centred. He is living with an impression of ruling 'the wheel of the galaxy' – an addition to the poet's vision that anthropocentrism is raiding and riding the universe. This also means his control over earth, however delusional and temporary, is complete.

In *Cave Birds*, the dramatic situation has an internal progress and the poetic tool pushing it is irony. This is the case in "The Interrogator" where a vulture becomes an agent in the overall action. The poet assigns the bird an empathic role similar to the vultures in the Prometheus myth. Their literal linkages with violence and act of devouring are pushed into background. In this poem particularly, the vulture acts as the bridge between the sun and the cave restricted world of the persona. Ted Hughes personifies the sun who has hired and employed the vulture to a specific task:

The bird is the sun's keyhole.

The sun spies through her. Through her

He ransacks the camouflage of hunger. (CP 421).

The sun exposes the gap in the persona's perceptions and the reality he is unable to connect with. In this happening, the vulture sees a sign of life and its revival in terms the sun disposes. Here the poet intermingles the features of human and animal to create an image of a menacing 'interrogator' "Her olfactory X-ray /She ruffles the light that chills the startled eyeball" (CP 421). The occurrence of contemporary reality through technological imagery is quite important to Hughes' poetics. In vision and thought process, it is the natural imagery that serves his purpose.

A persistent feature of Hughes' poetics is that the internal drama is externalized symbolically in an idiom that links everything with the contemporary crisis of environ and soul. The symbolism of "The Plaintiff" invokes the 'bird' as 'her'. This mystic reference to the regenerative 'female figure' subsequently takes a centre stage. The persona is living and thinking with a wound inside:

This bird

Is the life-divining bush of your desert.

The heavy-fruited, burning tree

Of your darkness.

How you have nursed her! (CP 423)

This symbolic encoding in the 'heavy-fruited, burning tree' is extraordinary and rich. Hughes is suggesting the ecological condition of the planet Earth on fire. Environmental degradation in external atmosphere is connected to the spiritual crisis of the protagonist. The question regarding his 'nursing' of the tree and the bird is answered in the symbolic darkness further suggesting the protagonist as one of the anthropocentric species. Gifford and Roberts acknowledge that "the forces of the hero's material nature now cut through the "anaesthetic" of his own outer life, as well like the waters of "snow-melt", and close it" (Ted 194). His failure in self-correction leaves him listening to his own fate "Your heart's winged flower/Come to supplant you" (CP 423). Living a denial of the spirit, Ted Hughes suggests, is in fact a denial of natural world, truth of spiritual self and the feminine deity of *Gaia*.

In "The Executioner", the guilty protagonist is sentenced to death. His body is swallowed by the raven. But for the protagonist his death is also a rebirth, "It feels like the world /Before your eyes ever opened" (CP 425). The significance of these lines can be understood by the conclusion of the earlier poem "She Seemed So Considerate", "Whether dead or unborn, I did not care" (CP 422). The "note of priestly incantation", Hugh Underhill points out, is adopted with an eco-spiritual purpose (*The Problem* 287). The agency executing judgement is damaging in impact and intent:

Fills up

Sun, moon, stars, he fills them up

With his hemlock –

They darken

He fills up the evening and the morning, they darken

He fills up the sea (CP 424)

But Hughes does not treat the executioner above the sanctity and powers of natural world. Like the protagonist, he has to face and come “under the blind filled-up heaven” (CP 424). Hughes’ ultimate purpose like that of the protagonist, West argues, is to symbolize “a cultural as well as a personal renewal” (Ted 84). This ‘renewal’ is inalienable from the ecological mapping done through a poetics of rituals and symbols.

The mysticism embraced and practiced by Ted Hughes was deeply rooted in his personal beliefs, which were further reinforced by his study of anthropology during his time at Cambridge. This ‘green’ perspective, in the environmental sense of the term, prominently emerges in several poems within *Cave Birds*. In “The Green Mother” Hughes’ vision of a new deity and green spiritualism gets ample space in his poetic world. The green mother offers the protagonist the comfort of her motherly feathers and a return to the womb. The ecological messaging that the use of ‘green’ associations clearly indicates Hughes’ interest in indigenous cultures. The narrative voice is connected with the deep experience and traditional wisdom of oral communication:

These are only some heavens
Not all within your choice.
These are also the heavens
Of your persuasion.
Your candled prayers have congealed an angel, a star –
A city of religions (CP 431)

The protagonist is in the midst of a vision – a spiritual awakening. The materiality of planet Earth in its sacred form and voice has visited him. The poet has become a facilitator. The main character undergoing ‘transfiguration’ is now readily listening to the bird-like deity. At one level, both the deity and the poet as mediator convey a belief in earthly heavens. Faas sees it as “the re-emergence of Nature as the Great Goddess of mankind, and the Mother of all life” (187). Environmentalism of Hughes and his spirituality are generally considered Earth centric. The metaphor of “The Green Mother” and its mythical connotations are the basis of this approach. Therefore, the metaphor of “The Green Mother” and its mythical connotations refer to ‘Nature’ as bigger than the one perceptible in earthly experience of the poet or the reader.

2. CONCLUSION

In *Cave Birds*, Ted Hughes weaves a poetic tapestry that brings together eco-spirituality and the materialization of non-human voices to critique anthropocentric attitudes and illuminate humanity’s disconnection from the natural world. Hughes intertwines green spiritualism with the materialization of non-human voices, emphasizing nature’s regenerative power as a counter to humanity’s anthropocentric destruction. The alchemical drama within these poems reflects a path toward renewal, where acknowledging the ecological and spiritual ties between humans and the natural world offers a resolution to both personal and environmental crises. Ultimately, *Cave Birds* serves as a poetic response to the ailing humanity of the 21st century, advocating for a reawakening of eco-spiritual consciousness as a path to both ecological and spiritual restoration.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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- Abbreviation:** CP (Collected Poems)