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Gaze of the Green: Human and Subhuman Perspective

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Abstract: An eco-friendly environment has been a much craved for dream in this present age when in spite of enforcing numerous and varied vigorous attempts of bringing about environmental awareness proved less effective or else secured less than an average result. There is an urgent need for rapid compensation against a prolonged heedless exploitation of this environment. This paper, through the mode of gaze, seeks to delve deeper into the selected poems of the 1984 British Poet Laureate, Ted Hughes to find out his attempts to bring about awareness among people to maintain a harmonized natural world, free from the excessive domination of human beings over other aspects of nature. If a gaze, as per the theoretical concept, excites a response from a person and that response creates a sense of shame or anxiety, the concerned poems of Ted Hughes can also evoke a sense of awareness from his readers to awaken in them the environmental gaze and consciousness of a greener approach for creating an eco-friendly environment. These sources of artistic endeavours, through the mode of environmental gaze, also contribute to the making of a better tomorrow and strive to emphasize the need to conserve biodiversity.

Key Words: Animals, Environment, Gaze, Nature, Plants, Human beings

Introduction

The introductory passage in *Seeing and Being Seen: Emerging from a Psychic Retreat* records John Steiner's opinion, "The recognition that being observed can lead to embarrassment, shame, and humiliation allows us to focus on the importance of gaze" (Steiner, 8). This embarrassment, shame or humiliation due to the recognition of being observed by others can rightly honour the function of the gaze only when any positive change is procured by it. Nothing more rewarding can prove to be a viable positive change in case, the change concerned depicts a fruitful change in human consciousness towards bringing about an eco-friendly environment through gaze. As a radical skepticism towards various aspects of Western culture which characterize postmodernism glances back to the nineteenth century spiritual myth of objective truth, the poems of the post-modern poet, Ted Hughes also harps back to the rudiments of



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natural objects in the light of objective truth in relation to the environmental gaze in the perspective of both its beauty and violence.

Ted Hughes, the post-modern poet shows his closeness with Nature in general since his childhood days in South Yorkshire. The Scout rock had cast an immense impact on the young Ted Hughes and it began to shape his artistic fervour in the early phase of his life. Thomas West in his book, *Ted Hughes* notes, “ ‘The first facts’ – the poetic ‘first principles’ – which set in motion a creative response in the Young Hughes seem to be associated both symbolically and literally with a sheer cliff in the Calder Valley, in the west of Halifax:

I have heard that valley is notable for its suicides, which I can believe, and I could also believe that rock is partly to blame for them....A slightly disastrous, crumbly, grey light, sunless and yet too clear, like a still from the documentary film of an accident.... All because of that rock and its evil eye.” (West,16)

The Scout Rock infused the spirit of artistic genius in Ted Hughes. The sinister look of the Scout Rock which casts a spell on the ordinary onlookers to commit suicide, induced a sense of shame in young Ted Hughes who got inspired to write poems from it. The gaze here performs a positive function for the budding artist, Ted Hughes but for the ordinary people, who committed suicide, it had the function of nothing except something in a negative perspective. The artistic creation of the poet can unveil the environmental consciousness of the stubborn and anthropocentric human beings through the reflection of gaze.

While the speaker in the poem *The Hawk in the Rain* struggles hard to cope up with his journey through the muddy way in the inclement weather, the hawk, accustomed to the untame forces of Nature stays motionless and still ignoring all those difficulties experienced by the speaker himself. The speaker plods his way through the mud that clings to his feet and obstructs his progressing forward. The hawk on the other hand, casts a cold look at the face of the earth and its wings became weightless due to the buoyancy:

I drown I the drumming ploughland, I drag up
Heel after hell from the swallowing of the earth's mouth,
From clay that clutches my each step to the ankle



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With the habit of the dogged grave, but the hawk
Effortlessly at height hangs his still eye
His wings hold all creation in a weightless quiet,
Steady as a hallucination in the streaming air. (C.P, 19)

The speaker here is completely entangled and engulfed by the strong overpowering energy of the agents of Nature. His eyes, breath, heart, head, bone and his whole being become thwarted but the bird conquers the forces of Nature by its power of endurance:

While banging wind kills these stubborn hedges,
Thumbs my eyes, throws my breath, tackles my heart,
And rain hack my head to the bone, the hawk hangs
The diamond point of will that polestars
The sea drowner's endurance (C.P, 19)

The vibrancy and grandeur of the hawk's superior and vibrant enduring power unfold a sense of shame and anxiety to the speaker who recognizes the defeat of the human being to a non-human creature. However, ultimately the speaker incurs wrath against the creature and craves for its ultimate destruction:

That maybe in his own time meets the weather
Coming the wrong way, suffers the air, hurled upside 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 the mire of the land. (C.P, 19)

The destructive gaze of the speaker finally destroys the 'angelic eye' (CP, 19) of the hawk. The angelic gaze of the hawk is annihilated by the destructive and Satanic gaze of the speaker. Similarly, there persists the question of gaze in the fourth poem of *The Hawk in the Rain*, named "The Thought Fox". The poem is the manifestation of an imagination on the movement of a wily fox which actually depicts the speaker's process of poetic composition. The poem is itself a "mind's creation of an imaginary fox which is also used to symbolize the creative faculty of the artist" (King, 116). The natural or normal movements and



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twists of the fox has paved the path of poetic development. The poem depicts the path of the poet's quest for identity since poetry is the identity of a poet:

I imagine this midnight moment's forest:
Something else is alive
Beside the clock's loneliness
And this blank page where my fingers move.
Through the window I see no star:
Something more near
Though deeper within darkness
Is entering the loneliness: (C.P, 21)

In the poem, instinctive gaze, captured in the environmental gaze of the reader, gives place to the intellectual gaze of the poet. Ted Hughes seems to highlight the primitive and instinctive qualities in creating a work through the movement and motion of the fox, an element of nature where the natural gaze outshines the intellectual gaze of the readers. The idea or "the conception of Ted Hughes's poetry is inspired by the Oriental traditions and beliefs and quite close to the Vedic view of poetry which views poetry as an act of inspiration. According to the Vedas 'Brahman' is the inexpressible core of creation. In Hughes's vocabulary we call it the 'spirit', the current. It is this 'spirit' which not only permeates each and everything in life, but transcends them all. It is also the communion with this 'spirit' that gives form and depth to any intended creative endeavour. Thus the poem "The Thought Fox" implicitly registers Ted Hughes's opposition to the conception of poetry as a conscious construction of the human intellect" observes Pawan Kumar Sharma in *Ted Hughes: An Ecocritical Study* (Sharma, 46). It becomes obvious through the environmental gaze that every creature and any object, as for here the mere fox, can induce poetic inspiration for a poet to complement the process of poetic creativity through its motion only recorded in a system of rhythmic pattern.

Wilfred L. Guerin in *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* highlights, "Postmodernism questions everything rationalist European philosophy held to be true, arguing that it is all contingent and that most cultural constructions have served the function of empowering members of a dominant social



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group at the expense of “others” ”(Guerin,300). The “other” in question harks back to the animals and natural objects hitherto marginalized under the dominance of human egocentric view of the world. However, in the light of environmental gaze, the “other” here seeks to assert their rights and secure a plane parallel to that of the human beings. Charles Darwin in *The Origin of Species: By Means of Natural Selection* contends, “Nothing at first can appear more difficult to believe than that the more complex organs and instincts should have been perfected, not by means superior to, though analogous with, human reason, but by the accumulation of innumerable slight variations, each good for the individual possessor. Nevertheless, this difficulty, though appearing to our imagination insuperably great, cannot be considered real if we admit the following propositions, namely- that gradations in the perfection of any organ or instinct, which we may consider, either do now exist or could have existed, each good of its kind- that all organs and instincts are, in ever so slight a degree, variable- and, lastly, that there is a struggle for existence leading to the preservation of each profitable deviation of structure or instinct. The truth of these propositions cannot, I think, be disputed” (Darwin, 366-67). Darwin’s proposition stands justified and it places a thrust on the instinctive capability of every species, in its own way, to wage a war against hostility and preserve its existence and win in the struggle for existence, applying in its individual way. Darwin’s emphasis on the attempts for preserving the species’s existence on this earth reinforces the urgency in considering the dignity of all the objects in nature and to undergo an evolutionary progress of its own kind and in its own degree for its betterment. However, the question of human superiority is profoundly shunned and the anthropocentric worldview may come to its check through the environmental gaze and restrict its prowess. Wendy Woodward in “The Animal Gaze ” observes Derrida’s point of view from his 2002 essay named, ‘ The Animal that therefore I am (More to Follow)’, where he lays down the role of an animal as a moral agent. Wendy Woodward records, “In his essay, Derrida reframes the Genesis myth so that the animal embodies a moral agent who brings the human to awareness of good and evil rather than an unthinking creature who is ultimately responsible, like the Edenic serpent, for human shame.....Literally, then, a cat can look at a philosopher which *stimulates* his questions about (human) being in the gaze of the animal” (Woodward, 2-3). The gaze of the human being comes into a play of power-politics where the



interaction secured from gazes of both stimulate a different kind of environmental gaze from the perspective of the environment and its content elements be it nature, animal or human.

The environmental gaze takes its shape from cognitive and stylistic propositions in the poems as well. The incessant flow of language in a ceaseless stream reinforces Ted Hughes' rejection or at best may be said, opposition to the mode of poetic creation as a product of conscious human intellect that can influence the human mind. The following lines amply testify to this observation:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow,
A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;
Two eyes serve a moment, that now
And again now, and now, and now
Sets neat prints into the snow
Between trees, and warily a lane
Shadow lags by stump and in hollow
Of a body that is bold to come
Across clearings, an eye,
A widening deepening greenness,
Brilliantly, concentratedly,
Coming about its own business
Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox
It enters the dark hole of the head.
The window is starless still; the clock ticks,
The page is printed. (C.P, 21)

The 'two eyes' that come near gradually through the snow setting foot prints actually precipitates the entire poetic composition in the poet. The 'two eyes' which merge into one is the luminous bright light which enlightens the human mind. Ted Hughes says "Poetry was to drag into the clean nakedness of the light" (qtd.in Faas, 182). The wide eye acts as an eye opener to the readers. The poet's vision reveals the world in his poem. The gaze operates on the way of comprehending the process of poetic creation which according



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to Ted Hughes' poem is purely unconscious devoid of any conscious effect. The conscious and the unconscious fields of action can act antipodally in regard to its mode of operation and bring cognition to the readers and reveal an aspect of environmental gaze.

The thin film of ice on the surface of the glass, half full of wine, in the poem "October Dawn" from the same book of Ted Hughes, namely, The Hawk in the Rain brings to the mind of the English reader the sense of shiver, cruelty and fierceness of Nature in winter. The environment gazes at the redeemed endurance of the human beings in front of the plants and water bodies which are rarely given any significance. Once again, the feeble enduring power of human beings is exposed where they have to bow down in front of the mighty power of Nature which freezes the entire world with snow. The month of October is very cold in England and this month heralds the onset of winter. The night time dream of the glass half full of wine is actually a prophecy of the forthcoming winter days and also the ice-age. A thin cast of ice or a thin layer of frost on the plants and shrubs and everything exposed in the air will solidify and form a thick and hard surface on everything and then the water bodies will freeze. Excessive snowfall will restrict or lock the moment of the flowing water. Ultimately, snow, ice, frost and cold weather will reign the place giving the impression that the world, pushed back to the prehistoric times when only gigantic monster-like figures of Mammoth and tiger-like beasts wandered in the world. The world will then come to a time when these beasts will celebrate and rejoice their resurrection and restoration in the world. In fact, at that time, Nature will look like a creature which will be flexing its muscles. It is however important to recognise and "identify and describe these energies, powers and presences of the non-human universe, not only in human terms but in their own, that is, in Nature's terms" (Sagar, 4). The superiority of Nature is again highlighted with a total denunciation of anthropocentric world-view. The thin film of ice on the surface of the half-full glass recounts to the mind of the readers the power and enormity of Nature which it can impose upon the world along with its whole body of organisms and all other contents in the face of odds. It explicitly reveals a sense of shame as the boastful human beings consider themselves to be all-powerful and goes on exploiting Nature in all possible needless ways. It thus becomes, immediately necessary to turn a benign look at the environment so as to promote a sincere development for maintaining proper livelihood.



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The gaze therefore can cast a beneficial role with regard to the environment and save the world both ethically and culturally, proclaiming a rescue from the anthropocentric worldview. Ted Hughes's selected poems serve best to surface the present concern and depict the horror concerned also in some cases as in the poem *The Hawk in the Rain*. It is up to the human species to strive and endeavour and to regard the concerns upheld by the British poet and make proper utilization of the world to make it a perfect habitable place for all, with due respect and reverence to the rights of living for all creatures in this world. Thus the text read from a postmodern point of view through the lens of environmental gaze breaks through the intellectual shackles of the past and exposes the complex working out of the power structure combined with socio-political and cultural realms. The postmodern idea of considering language and stylistic elements in a text to serve as a multilayered medium where the readers can find multiple meanings is amply found from the perspective of the environmental gaze prevalent within. The environmental gaze in the poems of Ted Hughes removes any fixity of sense in its absolute and eternal form where the meanings remain historically conditioned. The environmental gaze in the poems also posits a strong belief against the superiority of the human world and establishes the notion that human- nature is in itself a mere human construct. Finally, it must be acknowledged that this post modern poet successfully connects with other texts and secures the existence of his texts by relating it with them through environmental gaze and rendering its profound message to the readers.

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