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TED HUGHES' "PIBROCH": CELEBRATING INNER MUSIC OF LIFE-AN ALTERNATIVE READING

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ABSTRACT

"Pibroch" of Ted Hughes's poem collection *Wodwo* is a short, lucid lyric with complex metaphorical and mystical overtones. This poem's apparent nothingness, symptomatic of Ted Hughes in the poems of *Wodwo* is more discussed by eminent critics than its deep philosophical, spiritual and religious underpinnings. It is a poem with unusual title bearing symbolic kinship with its theme. The title of the poem reminds us of the musical genre of Scottish Highland known as *ceol mor*. It is a multilayered signifier and my humble effort in this paper is to explore the "unheard melodies" of it. Unlike the poems of *Wodwo*, the poem is less dramatic in unfolding of its evident. But what strikes is the intensity of a quest for one's own self that is the hallmark of the collection. A detail analysis of this poem will unfold various metaphors presented by the sea, heaven, stone, wind, mountain, tree and an old woman but no one can overlook the centrality of the theme of the poem—a philosophical journey of the poet as a modern man to search the root cause of existential dilemma which ends in an epiphanic moment of self-realization. However, the poem cannot be read in isolation. The way the different characters of the poem are found to be linked thematically or the way the poem is found to be closely associated with various other poems of the collection in both theme and in spirit probably justifies the aptness of the title. It is indeed a Big Music.

Key Words: existential dilemma, music, five elements, self-realization.

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Reviews or criticisms of Ted Hughes' "Pibroch", a "poem in five stanzas of five lines each" (Gifford, 38) are apparently chiefly centred on a single line "Nothing lets up or develops" (Pibroch, 180) which forces many a critic including Terry Gifford to label the poem as "a formal lament for a lack of purpose or meaning in an existential universe..." (Gifford, 38). "Pibroch", a poem of the volume *Wodwo* (1967), apparently lacks the dramatic unfolding of events which is the essence of the works of Ted Hughes in general and visibly present in other poems of this volume such as 'Ghost Crabs', 'Second Glance at a Jaguar', 'Gog', 'Out', but it presents before us an

introspective and mystic poet who is presenting a different music emanating from interaction between various forces of nature. It is true that oft usages of the words in this poem such as "meaningless voice", "bored with appearance", "Nothing lets up or develops" conjure up a sense of nothingness, boredom and ennui but as John D Barrow in his book *The Book of Nothing* has observed that "the concept of nothingness that developed in each arena merely to fill some sort of gap and then took on a life of its own and found itself describing a something that had great importance" (16), the poem also plugs a few essential gaps of life to

explore subtleties of life through an "inner music" of the very existence.

Another striking aspect is the poem's title, "Pibroch". Unlike almost all the poems whose titles bear close reference to their subjects, this poem suddenly strikes a discordant note into the mind of a thoughtful reader. Pibroch is an art music genre associated primarily with the Scottish Highlands that is characterised by extended compositions with a melodic theme and elaborate formal variations. (Wikipedia) A more general term is *ceol mor* (Scottish Gaelic: *ceòl mòr* (reformed spelling); *ceòl mór* (unreformed spelling)), meaning the "great music", to distinguish this complex extended art-music from the more popular Scottish music such as dances, reels, marches and strathspeys, which are called *ceòl beag* or "little music". Indeed the poem is complex. Like the musical structure of *ceol mor*, the poem also offers variations at regular pace with subtle touches but never shifts from its central theme. Moreover, do not we find any resemblance with the tradition of *ceol mor* when we read the poem along with other poems of the volume *Wodwo*? More so, when the poet himself admits in his interview with Amzed Hossein on his "quest" in *Wodwo*

I suppose I am searching for what everybody is searching for-I am searching for myself, searching for ways to confront myself. Because in the West,-I don't know how it is in the East, because your whole culture is so deeply different, and your psychology is so deeply different because of your religion, long history, different spiritual background- but in the West, our history has resulted in a psychology where human beings very easily lose touch with themselves. Sounds ridiculous, of course, but it is the condition of most Westerners that they are no longer in touch with their real self,...it is the business of confronting what really matters with your self, what really matters. And it is so easy to evade that, because we've no religious system that brings us face to face with that culturally. We have to do it ourselves, every man on his own...(Hossein,152).

I could not resist the temptation of putting the entire speech of the poet which is probably the best explanation on the backdrop of *Wodwo*. His portrayal of nature and animals in *Wodwo* is no more the celebration of brute force only, rather power of the brute force gradually diminishes as in "Second Glance at a Jaguar" ("His body is just the engine shoving it forward/Lifting the air up and shoving down under") and paves way to a parasitic and helpless existence in the "Ghost Crabs" ("We are their bacteria,/Dying their lives and living their deaths") and chiefly riddled with frustration in "Boom"(More More More/Meaning Air Water Life/Cry the mouths/ That are filling with burning ashes"), fear and an urgent need of self-introspection. Things fall apart. So it is with the beliefs in religious dogmas. Traditional beliefs and religious myths are challenged. The "protagonists" of *Wodwo*, in the words of Robin Skelton, "come face to face with their shadow selves"(9) to learn that "the drama of unconscious is more potent than that of the conscious, and that our most intense experience and struggle occur on the level of instinct in the darker places of the mind." (Scigaj, 13) The journey that begins with tragedy of "Thistles" and ends with a mystic search of own self in the poem "*Wodwo*" reminds us deep influence of philosophies of East upon the poet. Critic like Scigaj points out influence of Zen Buddhism, Shamanism, Upanishads upon Ted Hughes. But it is what the poet himself admits in his interview with Amzed Hossein that tickles the mind to rediscover Hughes in "the spirit of East" and to find his "formal lamentation" in "Pibroch" in altogether new way:

...I would like to see the West completely injected by the East, I would like it-, to see it completely suffused by the East. I think what the West needs is a lot of the spirit of the East. That is why I think during the sixties there was an enormous thirst for Eastern things. Because we know that the whole world, the whole spiritual world, on which the East still floats in many different ways and forms and so on-from extreme fundamentalism to philosophical mysticism-nevertheless, there is an easy acceptance through Eastern society that

existence is based on spiritual things....They (westerners) want some invented new spiritual reality that hasn't been discovered.(Hossein,162)

The "five stanzas with five lines each" and reference to five elements sea, heaven, pebble, wind and sun immediately brings into the mind the concept of "Panchabhoota" or "Five Elements"-earth or Prithvi (pebble), water or Jal (sea), Fire or Agni (sun), Wind or Vayu and then Ether or Akash (heaven or Space)-with which "the cosmic quest of the world and beyond"(indianscriptures.com) begins and which manifests "in an enjoining manner to form life force" (indianscriptures.com) and subsequently disintegrates to ensure a celestial traverse at the "Paramanu" (atom) level. **The Taittiriya Upanishad** (indianscriptures.com) states that all creation is made of these five elements which came from the Supreme Being. From the Self (Atman) space came into being, from space came air, from air came fire, from fire came water, from water earth, from earth man and man has within himself the self (Atman). It is said that the five elements are pillars of creation and when the spiritual energy of an individual is awakened it strengthens the energy of five elements. To attain the state of equilibrium in life it is essential to trace the harmonious relation among these five elements. But when we fail to understand the nature and its hidden energy emanating from the interaction of the five elements, dissociate and disintegrate them and thereby hamper the balancing effect of these five elements we remain as baffled as like the "old Woman fallen from space/ Unprepared for these conditions./She hangs on because her mind's gone completely"(Pibroch,180).

The fall of an "old woman" from space reminds us Hughes' own version of fall of man from Paradise in "Apple Tragedy" where in sharp contradiction to Christian theology the "mother of mankind was not seduced by the snake, but it happens the other way around". It may be interpreted as Ted Hughes' "ambivalent attitude towards female sex" (101)as Karl Heinz Goller has observed while interpreting "Theology" in view of the portrayal of Eve as the "all devouring Great

Mother". In fact, there are reasons to argue as there is reference to "staring angels go through" in "Pibroch". But at the same time, one can hardly overlook the old woman in "Pibroch" as a symbol of aged and progressive civilization where man himself gets detached from his own self or the Atman (space) with his gradual dissociation from the elements of Nature upon which many an element of His Creation thrives:

Drinking the sea and eating the rock

A tree struggles to make leaves-(Pibroch, 180)

The use of words such as "struggle" in respect of a tree, "meaningless voice" or "without purpose" in connection with sea, "imprisoned" for a pebble and creating a perception of negativity with heaven and wind are also very significant. This is probably a conscious and deliberate effort on the part of poet. Otherwise, why the same characters, who are lively and vibrant in their interaction either with themselves or with outside world in many other poems of **Wodwo**, become so dull and pale in "Pibroch"? The sea where the Ghost Crabs recuperate all day after a tumultuous night venture, the sea which is the very source of quartz pebbles, the same sea that symbolizes very essence of life by accepting death and rebirth with poise suddenly becomes a "meaningless voice" "Probably bored with the appearance of heaven". Is not the poet's own assessment of life in the West where the age old belief in Christianity with dedication, self sacrifice and "without deception" suddenly crumbled because the old notion of "Christian God fizzled out and was discredited by science"(Hossein,163)? What actually ails the poet is "...a deep unhappiness that every individual Westerner lives in. And they know that no matter how much they have, they don't have the important thing which is to be happy, and they know what they are lacking is something, some sort of spiritual foundation."(Hossein, 163). This is a modern man's illusion that compels him to think that the sea is too tired of its monotonous, endless existence like mythical Sisyphus. But Hughes's sea is endowed with divinity. It equally treats both its dead and living. Moreover, the sea reaches out itself to meet the horizon and creates an unending arena of

vastness. They mutually do not create a vacuum of emptiness but assert the infinite, eternity which we fail to comprehend and lament.

This desperation further culminates with existential crisis. Stone- of the poem "Mountains"- which is caressed by air "attentively", which is "lit with peace/Of the father's will and testament"(176) and which instantly conjures up the very spirit of existence as depicted in almost all the major religious scriptures "Wearing flowers in their hair, decorating their limbs/With the agony of love and the agony of fear and the agony of death"(Mountains,176) or the "outcrop stone" of "Still Life" that is "miserly with wind" suddenly becomes a "imprisoned" soul in "Pibroch", a "blind" entity cocooned or caged with its own apprehensions, "growing/Conscious of the sun's red spot occasionally"(180) and aspirations "...dreaming it is the foetus of God."(180). It is also striking that quite consciously the emphasis has been laid upon the "stone" rather than upon wind which has the potential to change. It is perhaps a conscious effort to portray the modern materialist society's existential crisis. It is the survival that is "imprisoned" with self-interest and "blind" with self gratification and aversion to change. The withdrawal of wind, a symbol of change and constant movement, with hope that "the stone's mind came feeling/A fantasy of directions" (Pibroch, 181) metaphorically expresses the poets hope for culmination of new ideas, reinvention of a new spirituality in the spiritually barren modern waste land only to be belied with a blank response and leading towards acceptance of the world as it is.

Next stanza juxtaposes the lamentation of "nothingness" with hope. A tree, in this world of pain tries to create leaves. Poetically Hughes says "Drinking the sea and eating the rock/A tree struggles to make leaves" (Pibroch,180). This is the spirit of life that amidst pain of existence and challenges the cycle of life should go on. The last stanza says that with time nothing actually happens, life is a dull repetition of routine. But Hughes epigrammatically celebrates eternity where time is beyond past, present or future; soul is indestructible, the game of creation and destruction is endless. This world like a wheel is revolving

continuously with a perpetual game of transience and permanence "And this is neither a bad variant nor a tryout."(Pibroch,180)

"Pibroch" is a mystic poet's journey of self introspection and search to the meaning of life through diverse elements of Nature. It is not lamentation, but a commentary on the existential problem that ultimately leads to the question "What am I?" It forces one to introspect on the purpose of life, urge to connect with the greater Self. Its jarring notes surprise a reader and complex theme warrants a reader to appreciate the poem in light of the spirit of **Wodwo** as a whole as well as the philosophy and belief that Ted Hughes owned. The poem is indeed a "Big Music", a justification to the tradition of *ceòl mòr*.

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