



## CROW: THE MYTHIC BIRD IN THE POETRY OF TED HUGHES

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the use of myths especially biblical myths in the poetry of Ted Hughes. Ted Hughes uses myths and legends in his poetry especially the Crow. Myths and legends are prevalent in all most all the religio-cultural tradition of the world. Hughes takes these myths, interweave them in his poetry, satirizes them with scientific acumen and regenerates new myths. Myths are used in the poetry from time immemorial. Right from Perso-Arabic Poets such as Fariduddin Attar and Abu Nuwas to English poets Geoffrey Chaucer and William Blake, mythic birds have remained cynosure of poetical imagination to describe the spiritual journey of man. But, Ted Hughes sees the myths rather obliquely. He does not use the biblical myths for spiritual appetite or to justify the ways of God to man. He hammers upon the established myths to drive home the idea that generally accepted myth as truth, is not real truth. To do so, Hughes uses the trickster crow in his Crow poems, and establishes superiority of the bird over omnipotent God. Whatever truths, we believe, are not truths, but they are simply myths and by obliterating the old myths and regenerating the new myths, Hughes succeeds in his poetic crusade.

Key Words: Myth, Mythology, legends, poetical tradition, Arab Poets, creation, satire, Sylvia Plath, God.

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Poetry on birds and animals is not a new idea. Right from Greek and Sanskrit to Arabic and Persian languages, poetry on birds and beasts has been considered the vehicle of transformation. English is no exception to it. Abu Nuwas, Antarah ibn Shaddad, Al-Jahiz and Fariduddin Attar had written in Arabic and Persian, as many poems on birds and animals, as the poets in other languages had written on the subject. In fact all these Arab poets have written mythic poems in the form of fables and parables of which, characters are animals and birds rather than humans. A striking similarity is visible if the work of these poets are analysed. It is said that

the one and the same idea strikes on the mind of people, living in different places and at different time. We find striking similarities among the different religious tenets. Such ideas had stricken the minds of those people at that particular point of time simultaneously. So also in poetry we find that poets of different ages and places have written on the same subject, hence we find striking similarities between the two pieces of literature written at a different point of time at different places. We see that Geoffrey Chaucer has written Canterbury Tales and the Parliament of Fowls, so also Fariduddin Attar has written The Conference of the Birds, Manṭiq-uṭ-

Tayr and Ted Hughes has written the Crow poems, properly known as Life and songs of Crow. All these poets have used animals or birds as their protagonists telling the biblical tales unlike Ted Hughes who tells as well as satirizes. The pivot or the logos of all these magnum opuses revolves round the myths, legends and folklores of world religions.

Chaucer sings of many birds in *'The Parliament of Fowls'*, Fariduddin Attar Sings of *Hoopoe* and *Simurgh*, Blake Sings of *'Tyger'* and other animals but Hughes sings of Crow the mythic bird of folklores and legends. Hughes generates and regenerates the themes surrounded by crow. Hughes weaves new myths using old myths of genesis. In fact he deconstructs the myths of creations encapsulated in world mythology especially the Genesis of Old Testament through Crow.

Eskimo legends tell us that in the beginning raven was the only creature and the world was black like it. Though there are many such legends, the central account of Crow which Hughes makes use of can be described thus:

God, having created the world, has a recurring nightmare. The nightmare appears to be independent of the creation, and God cannot understand it. The nightmare is full of mockery of the creation, especially of man. God challenges the nightmare to do better. This is just what the nightmare has been waiting for. It plunges down into matter and creates Crow. God tests Crow by putting him through a series of trials and ordeals which sometimes result in Crow being dismembered, transformed or obliterated, but Crow survives them all little changed.

(*The Art of Ted Hughes*, Keith Sagar, 1975.)

Keats' lines in Ode to a Nightingale 'Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird! No hungry generations tread thee down;' can well be applied to Crow. No generation understands the crow completely, no generation can wipe him out and no generation can do without it. He is indispensable for every generation and for every society. His nature is paradoxical because he was before good and evil, a denier and affirmer, a destroyer and a creator.

Crow is regarded as a bird of augury in world mythology. The premonition of the bird crowing seated on the *todla* of a village house is well known in Indian tradition. It is suggestive of forecast of the happenings, either of evil or good. The omnipresent, crow has been scorned off by people of all cultural and religious traditions for its blackness. In the very beginning of the Crow- The life and songs of Crow, Hughes presents the dark and the gloomy picture of the bird. Hughes heralds the coming of the Crow with all its blackness in "Two legends" an awe-inspiring poem in the Crow poems.

The opening poem in the sequence, "Two Legends" is a literal and anatomical description of the creation of Crow. Crow comes into existence out of blackness and emptiness. It flies destructively from the dominion of desolation. This doesn't mean that Crow has no place in the universe.

"Two Legends" comprises of two stanzas which reveal poet's spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. It shows the poet's sharp imaginations and visions of black, directly and poignantly. As a result, it uses short and plain lines, most of them are simple sentences, to give readers an impression that they are all truths spoken by a prophet. Here Hughes like his bird, is set to make premonition of what is coming in the next poems. The blackness that runs in the veins of crow are meticulously delineated like a dissectionist. He dissects with his imaginative lancet each part of the body of crow, finds everything black and utters:

"Black was the without eye  
Black the within tongue  
Black was the heart  
Black the liver, black the lungs  
Unable to suck in light  
Black the blood in its loud tunnel  
Black the bowels packed in furnace  
Black too the muscles."

("Two Legends." Ted Hughes Crow P.1)

He uses his personal visions to illustrate the black. In the first stanza, the poet has assumed the role of an anatomist. Like an anatomist the poet is analyzing the black in human body. The entire world of the bird is black. It is not melancholic or pathetic gloomy picture, but it is the gloom seen within the hollowness of things.

In the second stanza, the poet weaves a series of images which emerges such as “the wet otter’s head”, “the rock, plunging in foam”, “an egg of blackness” and “a crow, a black rainbow”. If we try to discern its underlying relationships, we will find that black is the underlying urging force, which urges to generate everything. It is reflected in a strong otter swimming in the river or a rock making big foams. Black is inside the body, in the blood in the soul, but Black does not have the power to create, to “pronounce the sun”, but has the power to urge human to create and to strive continuously.

Black is the wet otter's head, lifted.  
Black is the rock, plunging in foam.  
Black is the gall lying on the bed of the blood.

Black is the earth-globe, one inch under,  
An egg of blackness  
Where sun and moon alternate their  
weathers

To hatch a crow, a black rainbow  
Bent in emptiness  
over emptiness  
But flying. (ibid. P.1)

Sylvia Plath also uses the symbol black in his sixteen stanzaic poem ‘Daddy’. Black in Plath is totally in contradiction to black in Hughes. “Daddy” and “Two Legends” are familiar as far as use of black is concerned. Both take black as the main symbol, which is not an independent subject but is something persistently fought against and questioned by the poets. “Daddy” attributes black to the patriarchal and masculine power and extends its meaning to the history and the conscience of the West, while “Two Legends” introspects into oneself and the nature. But the two poems all strive to transcend the black veil in which the world is engulfed.

Ted Hughes uses many myths in his poems. The Crow a collection of poetry is full of various myths and folklores of the world. In *Lineage* he says:

In the beginning was Scream  
Who begat Blood  
Who begat Eye  
Who begat Fear  
Who begat Wing

Who begat Bone  
Who begat Granite  
Who begat Violet  
Who begat Guitar  
Who begat Sweat  
Who begat Adam  
Who begat Mary  
Who begat God  
Who begat Nothing  
Who begat Never  
Never Never Never  
Who begat Crow  
Screaming for Blood  
Grubs, crusts  
Anything  
Trembling featherless elbows in the nest's  
filth.  
("Lineage." Ted Hughes Crow P.2)

In this poem we find a parallel between the myths of creation as enshrined in the Genesis. Genesis is the first Book of the Old Testament where, the myth of creation is presented. There was nothing in the beginning and out of this nothingness God created the world. The story of genesis goes as under:

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.  
Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.” (Bible, Genesis -1)

The bird crow in the above poem reverses the plan of God. In the poem above, it is not the God who created the world but God comes later, in sequence after Mary and after the God’s coming into being, nothing was created therefore the lines are:

“Who begat Mary  
Who begat God  
Who begat Nothing  
Who begat Never  
Never.. Never.. Never  
Who begat Crow” (ibid. P.2)

Here, it is seen that out of nothingness was begotten Crow screaming for blood. Equally in another poem from the life and Songs of Crow, the myth of creation seems to have been subtly satirized by the poet in *Childish Prank*. As the poem is very short, it is reproduced entirely for the sake of analysis. It goes as under:

“Man’s and woman’s bodies lay without  
souls  
Dully gaping, foolishly staring, inert  
On the flowers of Eden.  
God pondered.  
The problem was so great, it dragged him  
asleep.  
Crow laughed.  
He bit the Worm, God’s only son,  
Into two writhing halves.  
He stuffed into man the tail half  
With the wounded end hanging out.  
He stuffed the head half headfirst into  
woman  
And it crept in deeper and up  
To peer out through her eyes  
Calling its tail-half to join up quickly, quickly  
Because O it was painful.  
Man awoke being dragged across the grass.  
Woman awoke to see him coming.  
Neither knew what had happened.  
God went on sleeping.  
Crow went on laughing.”  
 (“Childish Prank.” Ted Hughes Crow P.8)

In the above poem the impish bird crow plays the role of a trickster. After creation of man and woman in the form of Adam and Eve, God was pondering what to do with the carcasses. God was pondering and he snoozed. Crow came on the arena and solved the problem of God by giving life to these bodies. Crow cut the son (worm) of God into two halves and put each part in male and female. Here the symbolic meaning of worm is creative energy. The myth of trickster is well presented through crow itself in this poem.

This poem is amusing because it takes the well-known creation myth and turns it into satire, implying that God is not all – powerful, as we have always been told he is. He is unable to solve the problem of the empty human bodies he has created,

and as a result of this lack of knowledge, humanity happened by accident, due to the machinations of a crow. An animal of all things, supposedly unintelligent and relatively short-lived, a crow has given Adam and Eve the life that God could not. Here the poet seems creating newer myth through all powerful crow. The crow is shown to be superior to God, Adam, and Eve. The lifeless bodies are described as ‘gaping, foolishly staring, inert,’ and later, they wake up to find themselves at the mercy of desire of God. Hughes bluntly writes ‘Crow laughed’ at God’s confusion and ends the poem with ‘Crow went on laughing’ as he watches man’s first struggle.

There is a story of two brothers Habil (Abel) and Qabil (Cain) in the Quran, though in a different context, is related here in comparing the intelligence of the trickster crow. Habil and Qabil were the two sons of Adam and Eve. Qabil had killed his brother, he did not know what to do with the corpse to prevent the wild creatures from devouring it, so he carried him in a sack on his back until Allah sent the two crows who fought until one of them killed the other and the killer scratched the ground and buried the dead crow in it, and then covered the hole with dust. The Quranic interpreters state that Allah inspired the crow to do what birds are not used to, and perhaps this is backed by Allah’s saying: “Woe to me! I am not even able to be as this crow and to hide the dead body of my brother” (Quran 05: 31), just as the crow had done. Qabil was taught sacred rites by the crow. Here Crow is shown more intelligent than human.

As Milton in *Paradise Lost* is set to justify the ways of God to man, the Quranic clerics are also set to justify the ways of God to man but Hughes is set to criticize and to satirize the conventional religious tenets and canons. Hughes finds solace in crow a ubiquitous and ominous black bird. It is not the reservoir of Hughes cognoscenti from where took shape the ideas of this black bird, but it is the corpus strata of various religious and biblical myths and legends from where the fountain of inspiration flowed into Hughes’ mind and he created the songs of crow.

In order to create his own universe, Crow destructs one by one the Christian concept of the universe delineated in the Bible. Thus, the third poem, "Examination at Womb-door" is a reshuffle of the sacramental rites of Christianity. The poem is a series of questions aimed at proving the superiority of death. In the baptismal rite, the candidate denounces death and its hold on life by affirming his faith in Christ I, who has conquered death by his resurrection. Thus, it is a rite in which the candidate renounces death and affirms eternal life through Christ.

The questions and answers in each line of the poem reveal that death is stronger than hope and love. This is an absolute rejection of the Christian concept of redemption. If death is stronger than hope and love, then the Christian concept of redemption becomes futile and ineffectual as hope and love are the foundations of Christian faith. Crow builds up the basis of his existence on blackness and death and emerges stronger than death.

Who is stronger than hope? Death  
Who is stronger than the will? Death  
Stronger than love? Death  
Stronger than life? Death  
But who is stronger than death? Me,  
evidently  
Pass, Crow.

("Examination at the Womb-door." Ted Hughes Crow. P.3)

At a primary glance, the poem is a confrontation between being and non-being, existence and non-existence. Life, even if for the smallest moment, is a triumph over death. In this sense, Crow's existence is a triumph over death as Hirschberg observes:

"In folklore myth and legend, Crow is a scavenger who derives his strength and nourishment from assimilating what death is incapable of ingesting, what death leaves behind. Thus, Crow is stronger than death since he feeds off death itself. The conclusion is both paradoxical and inescapable; for Crow the only secure basis on which to build a life is not hope, or love but death."

The creation of Crow's universe simultaneously accomplishes the demolition of the basic notions of

Christian belief. Thus, the universe of Crow is patterned on the basic assumption of violence as a paradox of creation and destruction. The creation of a new thing invariably demands the destruction of certain other things. All the poems in the 'Life and songs of Crow' are built upon this basic law of nature.

"A Kill" brings out the paradox of the existence of Crow. In fact it is the birth of the Crow. Since Crow embodies the negativities of life, birth is described ironically as death. The violence at the time of the Crow's birth and the consequent physical torture associated with it becomes a paradox. Crow comes to earth as falling onto the garbage. On the occasion of life's most pulsating moment, Crow is flogged, shot, nailed, strangled, clubbed and smashed."

Flogged lame with legs  
Shot through the head with balled brains  
Shot blind with eyes  
Nailed down by his own ribs  
Strangled just short of his last gasp  
By his own windpipe  
Clubbed unconscious by his own heart  
Seeing his life stab through him, a dream  
flash  
As he drowned in his own blood  
("A Kill." Ted Hughes Crow P.5)

The torture mentioned at the birth of Crow such as "balled-brains" and "nailed down by his own ribs" has close parallels in Celtic and Norse mythology. Usually such physical injuries result in psychic positivity. But in the case of Crow everything goes black. So, at the moment of birth he experiences pangs of death, rendering violence into a paradox of creation and destruction.

In "Crow and Mamma" finding himself alive, the first thing Crow does, is to break free of his mother. He wants to sever the bond with his mother. Paradoxically all his attempt to break free of his mother strangely end up in deep realization of his dependence on her. In his impulse to overcome the dependence of the womb of his mother, Crow is ready to go to any extent. He employs such mechanical devices as cars, planes and even rockets which drill clear through the heart of mother earth in his bid to escape the force of gravity.

He jumped into the car the towrope  
Was around her neck he jumped out.

He jumped into the plane but her body was  
jammed in the jet -  
There was a great row, the flight was  
cancelled.

He jumped into the rocket and its trajectory  
Drilled clean through her heart he kept on.  
("Crow and Mama." Ted Hughes Crow. P.5)

Ted Hughes uses Crow as a symbol for everyone who is eager to explore the world and starts to make choices on his own. For a while, he finds comfort of the rocket, but when he peers out at the universe, he crashes on land at the moon and finds himself still "under his mother's buttocks." Hughes, here shows that even technology cannot guarantee man's freedom from his environment. It provides him with transitory relief only to escalate the reality of his dependence on it. In his attempt to escape, he may violate the earth or cause ecological imbalance which is self-destructive. Thus, he can never escape from the barriers imposed on him by nature, even with the help of most sophisticated technological advancement, like that of a rocket as exhibited in the following lines:

"And it was cosy in the rocket, he could not  
see much  
But he peered out through the portholes at  
Creation

And saw the stars millions of miles away  
And saw the future and the universe

Opening and opening  
And kept on and slept and at last

Crashed on the moon awoke and crawled out  
Under his mother's buttocks." (ibid)

There is a sharp similarities between these two pieces of poems, one from the twelfth Century Arab poet Abu Nuwas and another from twentieth century modern poet Ted Hughes. Both the poets are singing the saga of the mightiest horse. It is beyond doubt that the land of Arabia was famous for its ambler and stout horses, so also the land of

United Kingdom is well known for the love of horses. The similarities are not to be eulogized for pedigree of horses and their power but the mystical imagery, employed by these poets is worth comparing. In the following stanza, Abu Nuwas the Arab poet delineates the mighty image of the horse.

..... Fire's energy coursed  
Through his tight-twist, taut-rope joints  
He was sent to earth by night clouds guided  
by a rising star  
Showered with their gifts  
Blessed by clouds black with rain  
In constant downpours.  
He drank from their bounty.

Limbs grew strong. (The Horse, Abu Nuwas)

But in the following lines, the mystical journey of Nuwas deserves encomiums.

I brought out Colt—a stallion of brute power  
and pedigree.  
Fire's energy coursed  
Through his tight-twist, taut-rope joints.  
.....The ass neighed in alarm.  
Colt stirred with lust.  
The ass sprinted from al-Tuwā's holy trees.

(The Horse, Abu Nuwas)

Abu Nuwas explores, a dominant feature of the ancient Arab notion of the horse, an equation of equine power, lightning and water. It is heightened to a mythic level: the horse is nurtured and cherished by lightning storms and rainclouds. As I read the final verse, the horse, the lightning from the rainclouds and death become one. The resulting picture is of an elemental horse of astonishing physical and poetic power. This mythopoeic quality is enhanced by the Quranic connotations in the description of the hallowed wild ass, safe in the holy asylum of al-Ṭuwā until the arrival of Death in the form of Colt.

A star dived from outer space – flared  
And burned out in the straw.  
Now something is stirring in the smoulder.  
We call it a foal.  
Still stunned  
He has no idea where he is.  
His eyes, dew-dusky, explore gloomy walls  
and a glare door-space.  
Is this the world?

It puzzles him. It is a great numbness. (New Foal, Ted Hughes.)

Hughes weaves a web of mystery and cosmic power around the newborn foal, describing how 'the foal wants only to be Horse' the epitome of power.

#### Conclusion

The quest of man to decipher the secrets of the universe is as old as the creation of the universe itself. From time immemorial man is trying to answer the questions of the mysterious world by creating tales, legends and myths. Myths are prevalent in all traditions and cultures. Out of these myths man has been trying to entertain and catechize man, as in Milton's words justifying the ways of God to man. Artists, painters, sculptors, and litterateurs, especially poets have tried to decipher the mysteries by using myths in their works. Ted Hughes sees myths rather obliquely and uses them in his poetry, tearing them apart creating new myths. The answers given to all mysteries of the world are nothing but myths and beliefs. They cannot be examined on the anvil of scientific truth. Who created this world? Who created man and woman? Who created the vegetation world? If we say X created Y, and Y created Z then the question arises who created X? This leads to infinite regress. To put an end to this infinite regress, a myth of omnipotent God has evolved, thus the omnipotence of God is nothing but it is a myth. To attack this myth Hughes creates a new myth in the Childish prank. When omnipotent God was pondering what to do with dull creation of man and woman, the Crow helped the mighty Almighty. This is the wonder created by Hughes to counteract the myth of God's omnipotence. Ted Hughes, like other poets of the world uses the prevalent myths in the society in his poetry, attacks or satirizes them and recreates the new myths. The bird crow in the world tradition is found as prototype of creation as it is found in Hughes poetry, as it is evidenced from the poetry of Attar, Abu Nuwas, Antarah and Geoffrey Chaucer.

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