

# Achieving Harmony In A Temporal World: A Manichaeian Study Of The Poetry Of Ted Hughes

Sharma, Seema<sup>1</sup>, Sharma, Dr. Vidushi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, FET, Manav Rachna International University,

sector-43, Faridabad, Haryana, India

*seemasharma1836@gmail.com*

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, FCH, Manav Rachna International University,

Sector-43, Faridabad, Haryana, India

*seemasharma1836@gmail.com*

**Abstract:** Manichaeism was the religion of Mani, which originated in Mesopotamia in the third century A.D. It explained a state of war between spirit and matter, light and darkness, good and evil, creation and destruction and so on. Its mythology interprets the present mixed state of things as a partially successful assault by the darkness on the light, and states that it is the duty of man to restore the separation, largely by ascetic practices. The present study aims at critically examining the elements of Manichaeian duality lurking in the psyche of modern man as reflected in the poems of Ted Hughes. Ted Hughes' so called 'animal' poems, on the ultimate analysis, highlight his preoccupation with the baffled psyche of the modern man. Ted Hughes has interestingly drawn a pattern of this Manichaeian quest for identity in the temporal world through all his poems. He inspires us to live in harmony with nature, to make a constructive use of our energies and to lead a purposeful life. Hughes was always interested in receiving the primitive Manichaeian balance between man and nature. A closer study of Manichaeism in Ted Hughes will illumine the presence of creative-destructive elements as the major thematic paradoxical concepts in his poetry.

**Key Words:** Manichaeism, duality, creative-destructive, Manichaeian balance, paradoxical concepts.

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## 1. Introduction

Man has always found himself caught in the web of conflicts, dilemma, and duality. This has resulted in the psychic imbalance, which, in turn, is conducive to frustration and depression ending up in a disintegrated society. The problem is so severe as to attract the attention of many philosophers, psychologists, thinkers and writers across the globe. The identification of the natural forces around us and their control over us leaves us baffled and we find ourselves scuttling for a way out of this maze. Existential questions bother us to no end. At this stage, all cultures and religions come forward to offer a solution before us. Religions not only explain the reason of man's birth and his relation to nature, but also show a way to achieve a harmonious co-existence. One such religion, Manichaeism, gave the concept of dual aspect of human life.

## 2. Manichaeism

Manichaeism was the religion of Mani, which originated in Mesopotamia in the third century A.D. It propounded the duality of human existence as split between spirit and matter, light and darkness, good and evil, creation and destruction and so on. Its mythology aims at the expulsion of evil with the help of the primal man, using him as a warrior or knight of the forces of light, who must be enlightened on the 'Three moments'[1]: (1) The former time (2) The present time (3) the future time. The relevance of each of the three periods and their connection with the present human predicament can be summarized as follows:

In the Former Time, there were yet no heavens or earths, there existed only Light and Darkness. The nature of Light was wisdom, that of Darkness was folly. In all their formal motion and rest, they were completely opposed to each other.

In Present Time, Darkness invades Light and gives rein to its passions to chase the Light away. Light, in turn, enters Darkness and is deputed with pledges to push back this 'Great Calamity'. It (i.e. the Light) detests its departure from its original body and pleads to leave the 'fiery abode'. One must therefore wear out the (physical) body in order to save the (luminous) nature. This is what the holy doctrine states and if the truth is fashioned from falsehood, who would dare listen to the commandments? One must therefore be critical and search for the cause of deliverance.

In the Future Time, the things which we teach and preach on will come to an end and truth and falsehood will return to their roots. Light once more will belong to the 'Great Light' and Darkness will return to the 'Ultimate Darkness'. 'The two principles will return to their normal state and give up and return to each other (what they have received from each other)

Within this framework, then, of the 'Three moments,' there unfolds a cosmic drama involving the two primordial principles, light and darkness. This drama is central to Mani's teachings as it explains how the enlightened souls of men which are of divine origin came to be clothed in the body of matter which is evil. Primaeval Man is the major figure in this mythology, a warrior of the forces of light, who "clad himself in his armour and set forth to do battle with the cohorts of matter, of Darkness, of evil. This armour is, nothing but his own 'self', his 'soul'.

Mani, thus, explains the existence of evil by the dualistic theory based on the doctrine of the two principles of light and darkness and the three stages (or Three moments) of cosmic history.

### 3. Discussion

Ted Hughes is a prolific poet whose poetry is replete with animal symbolism and Manichaeism, Which, on critical examination, highlights his preoccupation with the psyche of man and his relation to nature and animals. The available studies on Hughes' poetry, by and large, deal with classifying him as an 'animal poet' or a poet of violence, but very few of them exclusively concentrate on tracing the influence of Manichaeism on his poems.

A deeper study of Hughes' works reveals the reflection of Manichaeism which aims at the expulsion of evil with the help of the Primal Man, using him as a warrior or knight of the forces of light. Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts highlighting Hughes' relation to Manichaeism point out:

Manichaeism... was a major influence on Orghast. The religion of Mani, which originated in Mesopotamia in the third century A.D. posited a state of war between spirit and matter, light and darkness, good and evil. Its mythology explains the present mixed state of things as a result of a partially

successful assault by the darkness on the light, and the whole duty of man is to restore the separation, largely by ascetic practices. A major figure in its mythology is Primaeval Man, a warrior of the forces of light, who clad himself in his armour and set forth to do battle with the cohorts of matter, of darkness, of evil. The armour consisted of his five light elements and in sum they constituted not merely his armour but his own being, his 'proper self', his 'soul'. [2]

Hughes has used the figure of knight in his poem. In the third part of 'Gog' and in a poem from 'Cave Birds' called 'The Knight', there is a clear influence of Manichaeism and a resemblance to Primaeval Man. 'The knight' achieves a still knowledge of unity with the material world through his complete submission to the natural processes outside him.

The knight  
Has conquered. He has surrendered everything  
Now he kneels. He is offering up his victory.  
And unlacing his steel.

The 'conquest' of the knight (actually the dead bird) is absolute and unquestioning. He retains his dignity through his achievement of accepting his own death as an actual contribution to the earth itself. The knight, here, is the modern equivalent of the Manichaean hero, who identifies the forces around him, accepts them and conquers by his re-absorption into them. Here conquer and defeat are one, a dual state which is at the heart of Manichaean mythology.

Ted Hughes has interestingly drawn a pattern of this Manichaean quest of reason, light and truth in the temporal world through his protagonists' encounter with the dark forces. Through all his poems he inspires us to live in harmony with nature, to make a constructive use of our energies and to lead a purposeful life. Hughes was always interested in receiving the primitive Manichaean balance between man and nature. A closer study of Manichaeism in Ted Hughes will illumine the presence of creative-destructive elements as the major thematic paradoxical concepts in his poetry. Hughes' poetry is a drama of two paradoxical voices -- one voice reflects the ordinary man, at once unknowing, lost and intimidated, yet conscious of the larger forces, the other reflects a superior and supernatural vision. Behind these two conflicting voices is the moving force of the poet himself. Through the tragedy of his protagonists' drama, Hughes is always seeking to forge a new, single self, a re-organization. According to Hughes, this will bridge the gap between the natural animal and the human animal.

The most common factor of Hughes' drama of split consciousness is the indulgence of the desire to find an uncomplicated value in animal life, to see the animal as a 'beautiful', powerful nature spirit that simply puts man in his place. Hughes' poems are a Manichaean quest for meaning in the material world, expressing the perception of continuities and dependencies whose rejection by the conscious mind is death. An outstanding example is 'The Bull Moses', which

makes its effect on the reader by what the poet has called 'some sort of charge and charm and series of operations' taking him from a simple external reality to the depth of his own mind. As Hughes has said in Guardian [3] that 'the bull represents what the observer sees when he looks into his own head'. The second section of the poem transcends from sensuous, immediate reality to deeper levels of meaning.

Blackness is depth  
Beyond star...he would swing his muzzle at a fly  
But the square of sky where I hung, shouting,  
Weaving,  
Was nothing to him; nothing of our light  
Found any reflection in him.

The poem moves towards its central mystery. Why does the bull accept a seemingly humiliating domination by our temporal world?

Each dusk the farmer led him  
Down to the pond to drink and smell the air,  
And he took no pace but the farmer  
Led him to take it, as if he knew nothing  
Of the ages and continents of his fathers.

The word 'led' suggests the farmer's domination and the bull's indifference and submission. It would be arrogant to say that the mystery of the bull's meekness is solved: 'the locked black of his powers' remains inaccessible, locked and black. There is a Manichaeian dimension to the perception that the bull is subject to the farmer, and yet so removed in being from the farmer's world as to be beyond the range of subjection, which is fully developed and its psychological significance articulated.

If consciousness separates man from the so called 'automatic purpose' of other creatures, it does enable him to observe his own response to the depths from which their vitality springs. Hughes in his poems confronts directly the problems of defining on a larger scale the Manichaeian relationship between the forces that sustain the survival of life and the processes of dissolution and death.

Mark Twain also declared and attempted to prove that 'Man is a machine' In 'what is man?...' he summarized his argument as follows:

To me, man is a machine made up of many mechanisms, the moral and mental ones acting automatically in accordance with the impulses of an interior Master who is built out of born temperament and an accumulation of multitudinous outside influences and trainings; a machine whose one function is to secure the spiritual contentment of the master be his desires good or be they evil; a machine whose will is absolute and must be obeyed; and always 'is' obeyed. [4]

In 'Hawk Roosting', Hughes puts forth an extraordinary humanized anti-human brain thinking. Hughes has made the following comments which can be read as having a general comment to the whole of 'Lupercal' and to the problem of interiorizing the superior knowledge of the voice which speaks in 'Job':

What I had in mind was that in this hawk Nature is thinking, Simply Nature. It is not so simple maybe because Nature is no longer simple. I intended some creator like the Jehova of Job but more feminine. When Christianity kicked the devil out of Job what they actually kicked out was Nature...and Nature became the Devil. He doesn't sound like Isis, mother of the gods, which he is. He sounds like Hitler's familiar spirit. There is a line in the poem almost verbatim from Job. [5]

This is an explanation of a further glimpse of the Manichaeian dual world of the hawk's eye: 'Nature thinking' sums it all up, both from the poet's perspective and from that of the reader. And so do the sexual questions Hughes raises with regard to the bird whose 'manners are tearing off heads'. Just as human nature has split matter and mind, similarly, bi-sexual Nature is also split into female body and male brain. This is why, the hawk seems so rigidly masculine and blood-thirsty. In reality, it is 'we' who have suppressed body which monstrous hawk refuses to do. Ultimately, of course, man needs to identify not only with the destructive forces he has to battle, but also with the healing process associated with this battle.

'Wodwo' is the first collection to have the sort of intellectual and emotional unity that distinguishes a sequence from an anthology and which gives each individual poem an extra resonance. As an inner quest, 'Wodwo' is the mental process of disencumberment that gives rise to the wodwohood, i.e., half-man, half-beast, the life of a wild man amongst wolves and serpents and other wild beasts. One can feel in 'Wodwo', a narrator attempting to submit himself, through a series of child-like questions to wodwo-hood, which is neither a thing, nor a person, but a state of mind. The wodwo is an implementation of Manichaeian quest for one's self. In the poem, the speaker is himself a wodwo. He finds himself at large in a world inhabited by other creatures whose relation to himself he does not in the least understand. He is without roots, "dropped out of nothing". He does not know why his nose leads him to water or why his hands pick bark off a rotten stump. He does not know who he is or what he is doing there:

What am I?

...

What am I doing here I mid-air?

...  
Do these weeds  
Know me and name me to each other  
Have they seen me before, do I fit in their world?

Hughes is a wodwo in all his poems asking these same questions about his relation to the world in which he find himself. Ted Hughes says in 'Poetry in the Making':

Here is another poem of my own about some sort of goblin creature- I imagine this creature just discovering that it is alive in the world. It does not know what is going on. It has a whole series of thoughts, but at the centre of all of them as you will see, is this creature and its bewilderments. The poem is called Wodwo. A wodwo is a sort of half-man, half-animal spirit of the forests. [6]

An important feature of most of Hughes' characteristically good early poems is the role of the protagonist as perceiver, registering some startling or frightening quality of energy in the world but making no claim to embody it in his personality. In 'Billet-Doux':

If, dispropertied as I am  
By the constellations staring me to less  
Than what cold, rain and wind neglect,  
I do not hold you closer and harder than love  
By a desperation, show me no home.

Here, the speaker is too self-absorbed, ending up in self-contemplation. 'The level of unity' [7] with the material world that Hughes achieves in his best poetry is the one at which there is no question of self-assertion. In other words, the Manichaeian quest starts in Hughes' early poems ends up in later poems where inner and outer selves are unified. In later poems, especially those 'Moortown' and 'Cave Birds', Hughes thinks of death as a culmination of the reality of life. For Hughes begins to see a connection between physical extinction and the religious experience, that of a 'Shaman'. In the 'Knight' he shows an acceptance of death:

His sacrifice is perfect, He reserves nothing.  
Skylines tug him apart, winds drink him,  
Earth itself unravels him from beneath-  
His submission is flawless.

In such poems, Hughes shows signs of his capacity to understand and negotiate, poetically, with death. The next collection 'Crow' deals progressively with the crow's alighting from the deep spaces on to the earth, his various observations and experiences and his comments on them. The world that the crow sees is a disjointed, fragmented, alienated and nightmarish world. According to Terry Gifford and Neil

Roberts, 'In crow...there is a 'Manichaeian battle between crow and stone'[8] in 'Crow and Stone':

Crow was nimble but had to be careful  
Of his eyes, the two dewdrops.  
Stone, champion of the globe, lumbered towards  
him.

'Cave Birds' presents the theme of Manichaeian discovery of the universal in the self. It is a collection of poems focusing on the patterns of life and death and the stages in between. According to Terry Gifford, the word 'cave' is also like to puzzle the readers as it does not occur anywhere in the poem. It suggests both the inwardness of the drama through its location in the 'cave' of the protagonist's being, and the mysterious, frightening character of caves. It reminds one of Plato's 'allegory of the cave'[9]. In the allegory, Plato likens people untutored in the Theory of Forms to prisoners chained in a cave, unable to turn their heads. All they can see is the wall of the cave. Behind them burns a fire. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a parapet, along which puppeteers can walk. The puppeteers, who are behind the prisoners, hold up puppets that cast shadows on the wall of the cave. The prisoners are unable to see these puppets, the real objects, that pass behind them. What the prisoners see and hear are shadows and echoes cast by objects that they do not see. Such prisoners would mistake appearance for reality. They would think the things they see on the wall (the shadows) were real; they would know nothing of the real causes of the shadows. Plato's point is that the prisoners would be mistaken. For they would be taking the terms in their language to refer to the shadows that pass before their eyes, rather than to the real things that cast the shadows. The 'Cave Birds' is an attempt to visualize an 'egoless return' to a state of soul prior to its birth in the form of an individual. In 'The Jaguar' Hughes looks at the caged jaguar as it hurries enraged 'Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes', and finds victory in its untamed energy:

...there is no cage to him  
More than to the visionary his cell  
His stride is wilderness of freedom

The poem thus presents an encounter between the civilized man and the primitive, barbarous energy represented by the animal, jaguar, symbolizing predatoriness, ferocity and repressed energy of the id in the human consciousness. Ted Hughes values such moments of power and intensity but isolates them as a Manichaeian duality between past and present, cause and effect, reflection and evaluation. According to Martin Dodsworth, the violence is present in Hughes' poetry 'as a desperate wish to be out of human altogether'. [10]

The note of envious longing in the concluding lines of 'The Jaguar' is heard in the opening stanza of 'Thrushes'. It establishes a contrast between the human world disturbed by consciousness of good and evil and the animal world which

knows and works for its purpose without caring to and without having the capacity to rationalizing what it does. The poem compares the 'terrifying' thrushes who live at the quick of instinct as it were in an eternal present, with time-bound, self-divided men.

Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn,  
...those delicate legs  
Triggered to stirrings beyond sense-  
Overtake the instant and drag out some writhing  
thing  
No violent procrastinations and no yawning stares  
And a ravening second.

There is a Manichaeian contrast between the human beings who are lost in 'sighs and scratchings' and the thrushes who know nothing but 'a bounce , a stab... And a ravening second'. Through his poems Hughes tries to depict the story of mind exiled from Nature as the story of man. It the story of progressive but more desperate mechanical and rational man achieve harmony with the world of nature. A disorder in one is often reflected in another. It is only by procuring peace with the world outside, man can be at peace with the world inside.

#### 4. Conclusion

Hughes' preoccupation with the Manichaeian mythology reflects in his efforts to elucidate and control the modern scene and modern situation juxtaposed with the temporal reality. For Hughes, cruelty and violence, death and suffering are not simply part of men's manifold experience, but the tortures specially designed by nature for the whole mankind. Once he had adopted such a view, Hughes naturally came to affirm stoicism and intelligent volition as the only means by which man could stand up to universal chaos and fight down his raging primitive passions. An integral personality possesses these necessary qualities which help it to achieve a certain unity and balance between man and life. Accepting the natural processes is accepting what is real. Hughes' effort is to gain access to and give expression to, a level of being at which continuity between the processes of nature experienced within and observed without is unobstructed by consciousness. Man

has to connect with that elemental power circuit of the universe, from which he has broken contact with, in the Manichaeian way. There is no gainsaying the fact that the best approach to interpret and understand the works of Hughes is through the Manichaeian patterns used by him which render an inherent unity to all his themes.

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#### Author Profile

Seema Sharma, received Bachelor's and master's degree in English from M.D. University, Rohtak, Haryana, India, in 1988 & 1990 respectively. now a research scholar at MRIU, Faridabad, Haryana, India.