
Cultural Disintegration and a Reading of Ted Hughes's *Wodwo* (1967)

Dr.Ruhul Amin Mandal, Assistant professor and Head of the Department of English,Sitananda College ,Vidyasagar University ,WestBengal ,India

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Abstract:

Ted Hughes is one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century. His poetry is a radical departure in theme, style, and technique from his predecessors, including Eliot and Yeats. Hughes breaks the established norms and traditions of writing poetry in all aspects. The article undertakes one of his most obscure books of poems, *Wodwo* (1967), to depict the revolutionary, innovative exploration of the law of lawlessness and anarchy prevailing upon human history from ancient to contemporary times. The study also focuses on the universal chaos and disorder, savagery, and ferocity in nature and the world of animals, birds, insects, and fishes. The reading reveals a strange world of topsy-turvy-ness where the definition of culture, ideology, society, and even civilization comes into question.

Keywords: anarchy, ferocity, culture, ideology, civilization.

Introduction:

Reading Hughes has always been an exciting experience. His poetry is a revelation of fundamental truth hitherto unexplored. Since his maiden publication, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), Hughes started to hammer upon the dark area of culture and civilization in which we are taught to feel pride. The article takes a dig to unearth one of his most eccentric and obscure anthologies of poems, *Wodwo* (1967), to discover and uphold identity as well as the raw truth of "Nature, red in tooth and claw" (Tennyson 62). He also depicts the dark recesses of the human psyche and human nature that is murderous. Most of the poems in the anthology unearth the bloody truth of existence, which survives solely upon ferocity, barbarity, and murder of others. The precarious existence of humanity is not based on love, benevolence, or sacrifice but on killing and eating others and plundering others' land or materials. In this sense, Hughes highlights the bleak truth that 'truth' or 'ideology' are false notions propagated to cover up the murderous nature of man as well as nature. The article shows how the significant poems of *Wodwo* reveal this strange phenomenon of existence.

Methods and Materials:

The precarious world of Hughes's *Widow* reminds us of Shakespeare's famous statement in *King Lear*, "As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods/ They kill us for their sport" (Shakespeare, Act I, Sc, I). This is a universal state of the universe's bizarre, chaotic, and disordered time, which Shakespeare tried to uphold. The same in a different way is done by another 20th-century famous poet, W. B. Yeats, in his 'The Second Coming':

"Things fall apart; the center can not hold
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;"(Yeats, 424)

Hughes's poems of the sixties and seventies continue the tradition of representing chaos and violence, both temporal and timeless. His innovative jargon and expressions amalgamate the disorder, chaos, and anarchy of the past and the violence and disorder of the temporal history of humanity. Of course, in this respect, his vision is not circumscribed by time and place. Hughes's visions and voices remain dark and hopeless here, as in his other preceding anthologies. The article cites several important poems to depict this cultural disorder and chaos as essential to existence. 'Thistles' is a poem of violence and energy, battle and butchery, murder and survival. The poem is ambiguous and multi-dimensional in meaning. The poem may be about the thorny shrub, but the poet personifies human attributes to the thistles and gives them a new dimension. The chief motive of the poem is the violence of murder and revenge, as well as the ferocity and fierceness of the settlers in terms of human actions. The last nine lines of the poem embody barbarity, cruelty, and fierceness:

Every one a revengeful burst
Of resurrection, a grasped fistful
Of splintered weapons and Icelandic frost thrust up
From the underground stain of a decayed Viking.
They are like pale hair and the gutturals of dialects.
Everyone manages a plume of blood.
Then they grow grey, like men.
Mown down, it is a feud. Their sons appear,
Stiff with weapons, fighting back over the same grounds.
('Thistles', *Wodwo*)

The term 'splintered weapons' suggests modern warfare of arms and ammunitions, of bombshells. Similarly, 'Underground Stain of a Decayed Viking' connects modern warfare to the fighting of the pirates of the eighth to ten centuries. Again, each of these plants has 'a plume of blood'. They all grow grey like men and are all killed, like men fighting in a battle. Then their descendants come, armed with weapons, fighting over the same ground. The meaning and purpose of this continuous chaos and brutality of man upon man remains unknown. Another excellent animal poem of chaos and disintegration is 'Second Glance at a Jaguar'. Here, too, the ferocity and violence of the jaguar remain intact. The word 'gangster' for the

animal suggests the animal's violent nature. At the same time, it suggests the leader of a gang of ruffians who acts and behaves by baser instinct. The use of the phrase 'Cain-brands' is also highly symbolic. It suggests the Biblical first murder of Abel by his only brother, Cain. Again, the jaguar represents the shamanistic act of 'muttering some mantra, some drum song of murder.' In this poem, the poet tries to present the baser nature of killing instinct.

Another tremendous representative poem of violence in the anthology '*Wodwo*' is 'Gog.' About the theme of cultural disintegration and violence in the poem, one of the great critics, Geoffrey Thurley, comments: "In Gog Hughes strikes through to a primal violence existing within the civilized man that is at the same time an intimation of a new awareness, a mutation almost, ready for the future" (Thurley 183). Gog is a mythical being who represents the primeval man or the primitive instinct of man. The poem is a soliloquy or a monologue by Gog, which describes the primeval creature's reaction to the announcement of God as Alpha and Omega and Gog's reaction to the things and happenings around him. There are different versions of the myth regarding the Gog. However, in almost all the versions, Gog is represented as an evil incarnation. Gog assumes different shapes, such as devil, dragon, and darkness, while fighting against God. Gog may also be the metaphor for the advancing evil Nazis brigade, a totalitarian regime that believes in the military power of coercion during World War – II. In the first part of the poem, Gog asserts himself egotistically when he pronounces:

I listen to the song, jarring my mouth
Where the skull-rooted teeth are in possession.
I am massive on Earth. My feet' bones beat on the Earth
Over the sounds of motherly weeping...
Afterwards, I quietly drink at a pool.
The horizon bears the rocks and trees away into twilight.
I lie down. I become darkness.

(‘Gog’, *Wodwo*)

'Skull-rooted teeth' may be the image of the skull of those dead bodies discovered long after his death. This skull may be of those men who died in Hitler's gas chamber or on any battlefield. Again, 'darkness' is an image of chaos after extermination. The poem's second part focuses on the bleak panorama of cold death and the death of all living creatures and plants on Earth. This is the picture of cosmic destruction where 'The sun erupts. / The moon is deader than a skull.' The last few lines of the part run thus:

Sun and moon, death and death,
Grass and stones, their quick people, and the bright particles
Death and death and death
Her mirrors.

(Gog, *Wodwo*)

In the poem's third part, we find the 'blood-crossed Knight, the Holy Warrior, hooded with / iron the seraph of the bleak edge.' Interestingly, this Knight differs from

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, who undertook long and troublesome adventures in medieval romances to rescue the distressed damsel abducted by some terrible demon. Instead, this Knight is murderous in nature and dictatorial in temperament. This Knight does not go for the Holy Grail. On the contrary, the grail is his arch-enemy. The poet presents the destructive, demonic Gog thus:

through slits of iron, his eyes search for the softness of the
throat, the navel, the armpit, the groin.

.....
Through slits of iron, his eyes have found the helm of the
enemy, the grail.

(‘Gog’, *Wodwo*)

Gog's tone, temperament, and action are anti-Christ and anti-democratic. He speaks of power and authority, not love and humanity. Hughes seems to celebrate the underlying brutality and violence of pseudo-polished human history. He seems to depict through Gog that the law of nature and human history is determined by brutal physical force that yields blood, death, and destruction. In this regard, A. E. Dyson's remark seems highly pertinent,

"For Ted Hughes, power and violence go together: his dark gods are makers of the tiger, not the lamb. He is fascinated by violence of all kinds, in love and hatred, in the jungle and the arena, in battle, murder, and sudden death. Violence, for him, is the occasion not for reflection, but for *being*; it is a guarantee of energy, of life, and most so, paradoxically, when it knows itself in moments of captivity, pain or death" (Dyson, 1959).

Hughes wrote many poems on cultural disintegration and chaos created by human actions. Among them, 'Out' is one of the most exciting poems, as it has autobiographical solid elements. Other poems in the volume *Wodwo* include 'Scapegoats and Rabies' and 'Bowled Over'. As an autobiographical poem, it recalls the fortunate survival of the poet's father, who had fought as a soldier in the famous Gallipoli campaign of 1915 in World War – I. The poet's father, Bill Hughes, had received severe injuries while fighting the enemies. Though his wound was deadly, he was one of the seventeen survivors in the battle. When he returned from the battlefield, Ted Hughes was only four years old. He used to tell little Ted the terrific experience of war. To Hughes, war has nothing to glorify. He does not think of war in terms of patriotism, heroism, or even victory. To him, war is nothing but a destructive event where innocent human lives are lost, and people suffer the agony of physical wounds. The poet presents a shocking picture of the killing field in the first part of the poem:

.....While I, small and four,
Lay on the carpet as his luckless double,
His memory's buried, immovable anchor,
Among jaw-bones and blown-off boots, tree stumps, shell cases
and craters,
Under rain that goes on drumming its rods and thickening
Its kingdom, which the sun has abandoned and where nobody

Can ever again move from shelter.

(‘Out, The Dream Time’, *Wodwo*)

The result of war and large-scale conflict is more than dreadful. However, according to Sartre, this is inevitable: "No gentleness can efface the marks of violence; it is violence alone that can destroy them" (Sartre 147). Samuel supports the idea. P. Huntington when comments, "The relation among states is of anarchy and hence to ensure their survival and security, states invariably attempt to maximize their power" (Huntington 33). This is one invariable aspect of conflict, clashes, and chaos leading to destruction and mass murder. The reason is ludicrous, but the result is enormous.

Conclusion: Hughes’s *Wodwo* is one of his most charming books of poems, which follows the poet's study of fundamental principles and laws of nature and human nature as well as the dark and bleak picture of the precarious state of our existence. The article states and analyzes these aspects of his reading, revealed in the poems of *Wodwo*, as well as the disintegration and lawlessness of our universe, which we often measure in terms of pseudo-cultural, invented, false jargon and thoughts. Hughes upholds the naked truth of nature and human nature, not a polished pseudo-culture that is fake and false. The article focuses on cultural disintegration and chaos, which is primarily artificial, as well as the universal, natural, and cosmic law of lawlessness and chaos, which we cannot control or change.

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