

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

ECOLOGICAL ACTIVISM AND SOME OF THE POEMS OF TED HUGHES, SEAMUS HEANEY AND DYLAN THOMAS

ARINDAM GHOSH

M.A. English, Presently Pursuing Research Under Visva-Bharati



ABSTRACT

With the rise of ecological branch of literary criticism many critics have attempted to explore the relationship of literature and environment. Consequently the role of literature, and especially poetry is re-examined from ecocentric perspective, that is, poetry is considered as promoting ecological consciousness. Some of the critics even argue that this consciousness can be converted into activism. To them poetry can be successfully utilized in arresting the present ecological degradation and thus can save the planet from disaster. Here some mid-twentieth century poet, namely Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney and Dylan Thomas are taken and their works are considered as promoting ecological consciousness. Further, some of the poems are thought to have reached to the level of ecological activism. Hughes' poetry directly addresses the problem of man's cohabitation with the non-human world. Heaney attempts to establish deeper connection of the individual with the soil. And Thomas' pantheism is often considered as having deep ecological values. In the context it is also judged if at all poetry can have the seeds for promoting a global ecological movement.

Key Words: Ecocriticism, ecological activism, poetry, deep ecology, sense of place, pantheism, eco-poetry

Ecocriticism is the systematic and interdisciplinary reading of the relationship between literature and environmentⁱ, with an awareness of the man-made damage on earth, and with a motive of finding solutions to the contemporary environmental problems. It approaches literature from the point of view of nature. It tries to analyze human culture through the reassessment of the idea of nature. The British Romantics and the American Transcendentalists are held up in special status in ecocriticism. The ecocritics try to reread major, canonical works by applying ecocentric concepts, such as, growth, balance, fertility, energy circulation, symbiosis etc to them. They question social and linguistic norms and preconditions that relegated nature merely as resource. They celebrate

multiplicity and diversity in nature. The ecocritics are enthusiastically concerned over certain issues, such as: the role of the physical setting of a literary work; the metaphor of land or place; bearing of scientific ecology with literature itself; and the connection between the natural world and the cultural artefacts of language and literature. Although Ecocriticism is synonymously used with Environmentalism, there are several other co-philosophies, such as, Deep Ecology, Eco-Marxism, Eco-Feminism, Post-colonial Ecocriticism etc which explore the possibility of an improved man-nature relationship.ⁱⁱ

Instead of traditional nature poetry, Ecocriticism prioritizes a form called Eco-poetry. Eco-poetry denotes a kind of ecologically-informed

practice, which forms a tone of reconnection towards nature and resistance towards the anti-ecological perspectives. We may consider Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney and Dylan Thomas as ecopoets, and thus view their poetry as promoting ecological consciousness. These poets writing even in the techno-centric, highly industrialized and war devastated world focuses primarily on nature. Instead of romanticizing or humanizing nature, they presented the natural world as it is. They did not compose simple celebratory verse that would have been misleading in the post-war context. Instead, they presented fractured man-nature relationship, nature being pre-eminently hostile to man's existence. But ultimately they come to believe in the possibility of man-nature cohabitation. Their poetry stays witness to the fact that environmental changes have vehemently affected the mind of poetry. Ecocritical readings of their poems may open up new dimensions in environmental criticism and ecological activism.

Ted Hughes (1930-98) was born and grew up in West Yorkshire, Mytholmroyd, near Calder Valley. The bleak moor and the elemental presence impressed upon his mind the picture of a harsh, pitiless natural world. Hughes directly addresses the problem of human cohabitation with nature. He converted his pastoral vision as a form of social therapy. His poetry compels us to believe that poetry can perform radical engagement with environmental issues. Hughes was not simply an environmentalist poet but also an environmentalist activist in practice: he donated copies of his books for saving plants; talked with the Prime Minister of Britain being concerned with the vanishing of salmon population in river; sent anonymous letters to *The Times* on fish stocks and injecting cattle with steroids; wrote letter to the Prime Minister for treating environmental cataclysm as war on all fronts.

He sees the operation of violent primary forces everywhere in the universe, which he believes can bring about man's relocation into the ecosystem by erasing cultural consciousness. Hughes' remedy for healing the split between man and nature, is through romantic primitivism which with its biocentric principles allows man to develop

correspondence with nature. Hughes' fascination for tribal societies, oriental philosophies, and pagan religious principles is also inspired by their nature-centric ways. He performs empathy with the natural world so that he can connect the internal human nature with external nature. He imbibes his poetry with the dynamism of the ecosystem and aims to bring about psychological renewal in man. His animal poems realistically depict their survival strategies in order to promote conservation of species, and to teach lessons to man regarding survival on this planet. The environmental sensibility of Hughes' poetry also emanates from their awareness about the contemporary threats to the environment ranging from deforestation, pollution, chemical contamination, dumping of toxic atomic waste, and so on.

His earliest volumes like *The hawk in the Rain*, *Lupercal* etc initiate us to the potent forces of nature. *Crow* depicts a sharp attack on the one dimensional values propagated through science, technology and religion and myths. His crow acts like a steward of nature attempting to rectify man-nature relationship. *Gaudete* and *Cave Birds* mark the beginning of the restoration of man-nature rapport. After that Hughes' vision is transformed and he shows nature reclaiming its lost glory. In *Remains of Elmet* the industrial remains of old mills and factories are reincorporated into the soil. However, *River* stands at the acme of Hughes' biocentric vision in which he is not merely a romantic observer but an active participant who aims to rewrite man's misdemeanour on nature.ⁱⁱⁱ

Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) was born and brought up in Mossbawn, Country Derry in Northern Ireland. Heaney's earlier bucolic mode was much inspired by his childhood experiences at Country Derry. Latter he, being influenced by Hughes, presented an unsentimental natural world bent on destroying existence, which became the objective correlative for contemporary violence in Ireland. Heaney combined romantic enthusiasm for nature with contemporary green politics. Like Hughes, he did practical advocacy for nature: his fascination for the bogs is actually a protest against climate change and deforestation; it has conservational motives since only 18% of the original bog lands remained in

Ireland. He mourns for the extermination of the Irish wolves, finding economic progress and mechanization as responsible for this. He protested against the victimization of native flora and fauna and birds species due to the chemical tampering of Ulster landscape, and also because of the mechanization of agricultural techniques.

The environmental agenda of Heaney's poetry challenges the pastoral idealization of nature in order to make us aware of the real situation of the biosphere we are living in. His poetry sets out to rectify man-nature relationship by developing an intuitive, unalienated bonding with nature by exploring the pre-social part of man. Heaney's poetry takes a pluralistic approach to the environment. Being aware of the threats faced by indigenous species Heaney's poetry searched methods for their biocentric rehabilitation. He attempted to heal the troubled psyche of the people of his land by initiating them to the fertility and creativity principles in nature. Language in his hand becomes a potent medium for connecting human culture with the pristine forces of nature. His most biocentric effort is in the conception of poetry-making as workings in the field. However, what makes Heaney's contribution as an ecological poet unique, is his prioritization of the ugly and more ecologically threatened zones, such as, bogs, fens and marshes etc.

Death of Naturalist, his first poetic volume is marked by nostalgic yearnings for his agrarian roots, countering the progress based idea of contemporary culture. In *Door into the Dark* Heaney seeks to explore his own relationship with the pervasive and transcendental natural forces. *Wintering Out* incorporates the bog poems and initiates postcolonial ecology in its very resistance, which disagrees to the idea of nature as politicized and colonized landscape. *Field Work* is the climax of Heaney's biocentric achievement exploring the deep rooted organic connection between field work and poetry-making. His last poetic volume *Human Chain* attempts to establish connection between linguistic medium, environmental and colonial enterprise.^{iv}

Dylan Thomas (1914-53) was born in Swansea, Wales. His childhood and most of the mature years were spent in the seaside and cliffside

town of Wales, and the Welsh-fishing village of Laugharne. The growing up amidst elemental nature and close observation of natural life produced in him empathy for the natural world. The neo-romantic impulse that his poetry propagated is actually an environmental resistance whose cultural function is to reorient man with the consolation of an ideal bucolic past. Thomas opened up an original direction in the presentation of the natural world by approaching it from the viewpoint of elemental and actual life. The Eden project, that implies banishment from the present state of environmental crisis to an earlier and pristine mode of existence that Thomas' poetry espouses, could have the possibility of presiding over the post-war pessimism and gloominess. His direct involvement with the environmental issues is not few: he was aware of the contamination of the aquatic ecology; he protested against the vanishing of bird species. His Welsh nationalism is actually an environmental protest against rural depopulation as a result of war and industrialism. He wrote cold war pastoralism objectifying the threats of atomic war on man and environment.

Thomas' process view of the universe preaches biocentrism, and might be helpful in resolving nature/ culture, reason/ nature, instinct/ emotion dualisms. Through this he attempted to interpret human life in terms of the intertwining seasonal cycles of nature. His poetry initiates a post-humanistic, holistic world view in which the stereotypical anthropocentric man-nature relationship is reversed based on the principle of the organic universe. Thomas' fascination for surrealism enabled him to perceive things outside their conventional referential context, so that the relationship between the self and the world, the human and the non-human, is renewed. Moreover, his ability to envision the unitive, dialogic relationship between man and nature can promote psychic ecology that aims to resolve the split between man and nature.

18 Poems concerns itself with the biological processes of birth, death and decay. It also introduces his process-view of the universe. *Twenty-five Poems* captures Thomas' primitivistic and pantheistic apprehension which in its way of

worshipping nature intuitively realizes the sacramental nature and sanctity of all the elements and agencies of nature. *The Map of Love* takes celebratory approach to nature, and shows that despite the brooding presence of death, the power of nature can heal, and is redemptive. *Deaths and Entrances* gives primacy to death, but death appears in the optimistic sense of return of the body into the elements for the purpose of regeneration.^v

In conclusion we can say that ecocentric readings of their poems compel us to believe that poetry can develop environmental consciousness in man. Environmental changes can be achieved through changing our perception of the natural world, and poetry can play an important role in transforming our attitude towards it. An optimistic apprehension of the natural world in poetry can counter the post-industrial mental disintegration which distanced man from nature. Poetry can lead to radical restructuring of human psyche so that man becomes aware of his interconnections within the biotic community. In this way poetry can lead to ecological activism. Some of the volumes of Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney and Dylan Thomas can incite ecological activism by converting poetry into potential ecological tool. Their poems promote animistic vision, and do practical advocacy of nature motivating man to engage into active participation with the natural world.

ⁱ This is basic definition of Ecocriticism provided by Glotfelty in the volume cited below. I am greatly indebted to the book for providing me various details.

ⁱⁱ For theoretical details I thoroughly depended on the volume of Peter Barry.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hughes' poetry is often projected as promoting violence in the natural world. But according to the poet this violence becomes source of vitality which can save the moribund human civilization.

^{iv} Heaney's poetry suitably inculcates postcolonial ecological aesthetics which at the same time protests against the colonizing of the native population and the degradation of the ecological health of the native ecosystem.

^v Thomas' poetry preaches ecocentrism through their pantheism. Ecocriticism often depends for its effect on the primal green pagan religions of the world. In that Thomas' poetry has ecological values.

Works Cited

- Ackerman, John. *A Dylan Thomas Companion: Life, Poetry and Prose*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991. Print.
- Allen, Michael (ed.). *Seamus Heaney*. New York: St. Martins, 1997. Print.
- Andrews, Elmer Kennedy- (ed.). *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*. Great Britain: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998. Print.
- Balakian, Peter. "Seamus Heaney's New Landscapes". *The Literary Review* 41.4 (1988): 501-5. Print.
- Bate, Jonathan. *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*. London: Routledge, 1991. Print.
- Bloom, Harold (ed.). *Modern Critical Views: Seamus Heaney*. New York: Chelsea House, 1986. Print.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation Of America*. New York: Belknap Press, 1996. Print.
- Burris, Sidney. *The Poetry of Resistance: Seamus Heaney and the Pastoral Tradition*. Athens: Ohio U P, 1990. Print.
- Corcoran, Neil. *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: a Critical Study*. London: Faber and Faber, 1998. Print.
- Coupe, Laurence, ed. *The Green Studies Reader: from Romanticism to Ecocriticism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Cox, C. B. (ed.). *Dylan Thomas: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Hillsdale; NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966. Print.
- Davies, Walford (ed.). *Dylan Thomas: New Critical Essays*. London: Cardiff, 1972. Print.
- Davis, James A. *A reference Companion to Dylan Thomas*. Westport; CT: Greenwood Press, 1998. Print.
- Dyson, A. E. (ed.). *Three Contemporary Poets: Thom Gunn, Ted Hughes and R. S. Thomas*. London: Macmillan, 1990. Print.
- Feinstein, Elaine. *Ted Hughes: the Life of a Poet*. Great Britain: Phoenix, 2001. Print.
- Ferris, Paul. *Dylan Thomas*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978. Print.

- Forster, John Wilson. *The Achievement of Seamus Heaney*. Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1995. Print.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism: the New Critical Idiom*. London: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Gifford, Terry, and Neil Roberts. *Ted Hughes: a Critical Study*. London: Faber and Faber, 1981. Print.
- _____. *The Green Voices: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry*. London: Manchester U P, 1995. Print.
- Glotfelty, Cheryl, and Harold Fromm (eds.). *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. London: U of Georgia Press, 1996. Print.
- Goodby, John, and Chris Wigginton (eds.). *Dylan Thomas: New Casebook*. New York: Palgrave, 2001. Print.
- Heaney, Seamus. *Death of a Naturalist*. London: Faber and Faber, 1966. Print.
- _____. *Wintering Out*. London: Faber and Faber, 1972. Print.
- _____. *North*. London: Faber and Faber, 1975. Print.
- _____. *Field Work*. London: Faber and Faber, 1979. Print.
- _____. *Preoccupations*. London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1980. Print.
- _____. *Station Island*. London: Faber and Faber, 1984. Print.
- _____. *The Spirit Level*. London: Faber and Faber, 1996. Print.
- Hirschberg, Stuart. *Myth in the Poetry of Ted Hughes*. Country Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1981. Print.
- Hughes, Ted. *Winter Pollen*. London: Faber, 1994. Print.
- _____. *Collected Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 2005. Print.
- _____. *Letters of Ted Hughes*. Selected by Christopher Reid. London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 2007. Print.
- Maud, Ralph. *Entrances to Dylan Thomas's Poetry*. Pittsburg: Univ. of Pittsburg Press, 1963. Print.
- Murphy, Andrew. *Seamus Heaney*. Plymouth, UK: Northcote House, 1996. Print.
- Parker, Michael. *Seamus Heaney: the Making of a Poet*. Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 1993. Print.
- Sagar, Keith. *The Laughter of the Foxes*. London: Liverpool U P, 2000. Print.
- _____. *Ted Hughes and Nature: 'Terror and Exultation'*. London: Fastprint Publishing, 2010. Print.
- Scigaj, Leonard M. (ed.). *Critical Essays on Ted Hughes*. New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1992. Print.
- Thomas, Dylan. *Dylan Thomas: the Notebook Poems 1930-34*. Ed. by R. Maud. London: Everyman, 1999. Print.
- _____. *Collected Poems 1934- 63*. Ed. by W. Davies, W. and R. Maud. London: Phoenix, 2003. Print.
- _____. *On The Air with Dylan Thomas: the Broadcasts*. Ed. by Ralph Maud. Notes by Daniel Jones. London: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1992. Print.
- _____. *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas: the Origin Edition*. Intro. By Paul Muldoon. London: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2010. Print.
- Tindall, William Y. *A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas*. Syracuse; NY: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1996. Print.
- West, Thomas. *Ted Hughes*. London: Methuen, 1985. Print.
- Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. London: Hogarth, 1993. Print.