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THE LIAISON BETWEEN HUMAN AND NATURE: A DECONSTRUCTIVE STUDY OF THE
SELECT POEMS OF LOUIS MACNEICE, PHILIP LARKIN AND TED HUGHES

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ABSTRACT

In the long mutiny between human and nature, it is observed that the position of power centre is always in flux, and human and nature are interconnected with each other as the writers tend to correlate external nature with internal human nature. From the humanitarian renaissance to the present age of technology, the literary authors view this liaison in different angle, as they sometimes give impetus to the humanitarian subject conceiving it is fit to the present context, and sometimes to the ecological subject when it demands for attention. In this paper, I throw light on the unsteady position of logos and how in the present technological age, writers' observation of life is gradually changing from an anthropocentric or human-centred viewpoint, towards a more bio-centric or eco-centric temperament.

Key Words: Anthropocentrism, ecology, deconstruction, materialism, negation, logos.



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At the dawn of western philosophy especially from the time of Plato, the presence of being or logos finds its force in the realm of philosophy and Literature until the emergence of Deconstruction theory of Jacques Derrida that poses question to the presence of centre. In his epoch making essay 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences' Derrida opines that "This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside* it. The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its center elsewhere*. The center is not the center" (Derrida, 351). Deconstruction theory does not only change the colonial mindset of people but also the very existing theory of western philosophy. In western philosophy and literature, man is considered to be the rudder of society, manipulates and controls all the aspects of it, and directs the direction and fate of all the animate and inanimate objects until the emerging of ecological study of some writers such as Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Lord Byron, Percy

Shelley, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Cullen Bryant, James Kirke Paulding, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, Robert Frost etc. who strike hard knock at the anthropocentric study of literature. In the material and industrial world, these writers perceive the value of natural objects, so they promote the ecological study giving impetus to the natural writings. In the modern and postmodern world, most of the writers being influenced by these authors provide impetus to the ecological study in the world of spiritual and moral sterility realizing the healing power of nature. "The Wordsworthian belief that nature is our best teacher and moral guide and the poet's main source of inspiration has continued to influence our thinking, particularly in the twentieth century, when industrialism and technology have increasingly distanced most of us from the natural world"(Galancy, 180). Ecological writing reaches its highest peak at the hands of Romanticists, declines at the hands of Victorian and Modern writers as they were preoccupied with the predicament of human being, but gets rejuvenated at the hands of some writers such as Robinson Jeffers, Edward Thomas, and Ted Hughes etc. Louis MacNeice, Philip Larkin, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, and W. B. Yeats who manifest how the mind of modern man constantly revamps from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism. The trend of ecological writing tends to be continued in the postmodern world amidst the scientific temperament of human beings. "As a reaction against declining romanticism, some of the Imagist poets of the early twentieth century, such as T. S. Eliot, condemned poets who wrote about the English countryside, considering it a limited, provincial topic. But there have been several fine twentieth century British poets who, because they came from rural backgrounds, have powerfully described the landscape and lamented the passing of the old rural ways."(Galancy, 180)

Modern age witnesses the decline of traditional beliefs about the universe due to scientific advancements. It is an age of mechanism, self-centredness, alienation, disorder and conflict on an unprecedented scale. There is a loss of energy, vigour, zeal, moral and spiritual certainty which affected all spheres of life. In this sophisticated world, it is observed that man utilizes natural objects recklessly for their luxurious life. They are devoid of peace of the natural world or green life and are busy with artificial culture of artificial life. Famous nature poet, William Wordsworth regrets for this indifferent attitude of man towards nature. In his famous sonnet "The World is too much with Us", Wordsworth illustrates that man tends to provide more importance to the material world bestowed with the artificial culture. They simply waste their time by hoarding and spending money instead of enjoying the beauty of Nature 'that is ours'. Being intoxicated with the artificial lifestyle, man fails to perceive the benevolent assets of Nature as their heart is benumbed with the 'sordid boon'.

The modern man develops to provide so much prominence to the material world that they seize to enjoy the nature and assets of natural world. Instead of devoting time at the lap of nature, the modern man likes to go in a bar and enjoys driving by car. They make use of animals for their ornaments or decoration of the room. In the first stanza of 'Bagpipe Music', MacNeice says:

It's no go the merry-go-round, it's no go the rickshaw,
All we want is a limousine and a ticket for the peepshow.
Their knickers are made of crêpe-de-chine, their shoes are made of python,
Their halls are lined with tiger rugs and their walls with heads of bison. (MacNeice, 96)

Modern man's obsession with the artificiality is very minutely depicted in the next lines in which MacNeice expresses his view that these people forget to go to the 'Yogi-Man' represents the primitive culture or the world of Nature. Their only motto of life is to hoard money and to have physicality.

"It's no go the Yogi-Man, it's no go Blavatsky,
All we want is a bank balance and a bit of skirt in a taxi." (MacNeice, 97)

The last two lines of the poem explicitly exhibit the predicament and moral degradation of modern man. Through the image of glass, MacNeice lays down that moral degradation of people tends to continuously accelerate and if they continuously submerge in this condition, 'the glass will fall forever' that will certainly bring their destruction. So, in this poem MacNeice manifests the adverse impact of artificial culture on the

people that certainly bring doom for them, contrary to the world of Nature that provides solace and peace to the most despondent, dispirited, dejected and demoralized hearts.

In 'At Grass', Philip Larkin, at first, exhibits his ambivalent attitude towards Nature, but at the end, he delineates that the fate of nature is at the mercy of human being. In the beginning of the poem, Larkin illustrates that at once the horses used to bring fames for their owners by winning at the race, but at present, they are unnoticed by the people as they lost their potency or energy at the old age. Their present condition is marked by "dusk", "shadow" and "silence". Nobody pays heed to them as they seem death-in-life in the forest. They are motionless in their shelter until the wind sways their body parts.

The eye can hardly pick them out
From the cold shade they shelter in,
Till wind distresses tail and main;
Then one crops grass, and moves about
- The other seeming to look on -
And stands anonymous again (Larkin, 29)

Contrary to their present situation, fifty years ago, people used to take proud of these horses, used to huddle to watch the race lining their cars line by line at squadrons and to shout at them. Their names were hanged on the wall and their names were immortalized by being enlisted in almanac ked. But at present, being old and palsy, they fail to keep their values and worth, so they are cared by 'only the grooms, and the grooms boy'.

"The poem in fact offers a wholesome attitude to life in all its stages. It presents two contrary states of life – a past of fame and a present of anonymity, the past of involvement in the social life and the present of withdrawal from its pressures" (Chatterjee, 158-59). It may be read as the two contrary states of Nature – a past primitive age of paganism when the people eulogize and worship Nature and the present material and artificial world in which people love money, cars, physicality being devoid of natural bliss.

In these two poems, it is observed that man gets the upper hand position or position of logos, and the bridle of Nature lies at the hand of human beings. They make use of nature and its assets to fulfil their artificial needs irrespective of perceiving the value of Nature. Nature is depicted as nothing but mere puppet to them and is at the mercy of them. But at the hand of Ted Hughes, this structure gets a deconstruction, and supplementation of power takes place. He got engaged with the world of animal or Nature from his childhood when he lived with his family in the Calder Valley. "The geography of his childhood world became his map of heaven and hell; the distinctive interplay of the elements in that place gave him his sense of the creating and destroying powers of the world; the local animals became his theriomorphic archetypes" (Sagar. ed, 4) Though he is much acclaimed for his projection of savage world of animals, ecology, and the artistic fusion of ecological elements with postmodern culture, his poems explore the relations between the animal planet and the human world. He also takes Nature as part of this universe to which man is closely related. "His subject is most simply described as the relationship between man and nature, but that phrase conveys nothing of the intensity of the imaginative endeavour. This endeavour is to gain access to, and give expression to, a level of being at which the continuity between the process of nature experienced within and observed without is unimpeded by consciousness. Here lies the source of all energy, creativity and delight" (Gifford and Roberts, 62). Ted Hughes considers Nature with various differing attitudes; unlike Hume, Schopenhauer, Wordsworth and Tennyson who only depict the one side of Nature either Nature as friend, guide and philosopher or Nature as 'red in tooth and claw', not juxtaposing the two. In a letter to Keith Sagar on 30 August, 1979 the ecological concerned of Ted Hughes is fully realized. He speaks of "the whole idea of our ecological responsibility, fully developed – maybe the crucial awakening. And the idea of ecological interconnectedness, which is the fundamental assumption now of children under 18, is only the material aspect of the interconnectedness of everything in spirit" (Reid, 426). In his poems, Nature gets the position of logos and human beings are at the mercy of Nature. Here Nature is depicted as more powerful and energetic than human beings. Man is exhibited as wicked, trickster and inconsistent being in comparison to nature and animals. In 'The Horses', Ted Hughes eulogizes the beauty of nature by portraying the stillness of atmosphere and motionless of horses at

the month of winter. Then, Hughes beautifully draws the natural imagery such as image of dawn, rising sun, blueness of sky, brightness of sun, lighting in the forest, and glittering top of the trees. The speaker is so fascinated by this natural beauty and ambient atmosphere that he recalls this picture in the hectic and crowded town life and wishes to come back to this place in order to taste the bliss of nature. Though the woods are lovely and dark, and there exists 'Evil air, a frost-making stillness', the speaker wishes to go:

"Between the streams and the red clouds, hearing the curlews,
Hearing the horizons endure." (Hughes, 22)

"The poem is Hughes' most Wordsworthian. 'Resolution and Independence' is its model. That poem too begins with the evocation of a sun-rise and of all the creatures which seem to be at one with it. ... At this moment he comes upon the Leech-gatherer on the moor, an old man who seems, like the horses, to be in a 'sort of stupor' – 'not all alive nor dead, nor all asleep," (Sagar, 20). These two poems end with the nostalgic and optimistic note wishing to recall the previous images of stillness.

In 'Hawk Roosting', Ted Hughes strongly strikes the existing traditional philosophy of binary opposition and anthropocentric temperament of people. Here he deconstructs the philosophy of binary opposition by supplementing the position of Nature and Man. In this poem, hawk is placed at the top position of all creation. "The whole poem is in the first person – a hawk's eye view of the world. The hawk, taking himself to be the exact centre, assumes that trees, air, sun and earth are there for his convenience; that the purpose of creation has been solely to produce him; that the world revolves at his bidding; that all other creatures exist only as prey; that his eye is stronger than change or death" (Sagar, 47). It shows no mercy to anyone and kills instantly without a bit of hesitation to meet its food. It takes all creation to make its foot and feathers, and holds all creation in its foot.

It took the whole of Creation

To produce my foot, my each feather:

Now I hold Creation in my foot (Hughes, 68-69)

In this poem, the attitude of Nature is not like Wordsworth – friend and guide, but speaks through Tennyson – 'red in tooth and claw'. Here hawk is presented as the spokesman for Nature having the fierce, controlling and ruling power over all the creation. Its fierce attitude is depicted in the next lines in which it says:

I kill where I please because it is all mine.

There is no sophistry in my body:

My manners are tearing off heads – (Hughes, 69)

At the end, the hawk has a firm belief that from its birth nothing has changed in this world. It likes to keep things at the same state and has permitted no change in this world, nor permitted its mind to change its fierce and superior mentality.

Thus it is observed that in the first two poems of Louis MacNeice and Philip Larkin respectively, the superiority of human beings is depicted in which man utilizes natural and animal world for their ornamentation and decoration of the household to fulfil the artificial needs of their luxurious life. In these poems, as man occupies the position of logos, anthropocentric viewpoint gets the due consideration. Here human beings are busy with material prosperity and live in the material world of moral and spiritual sterility, so they are devoid of the bliss of natural peace and beauty. But in 'The Horses' and 'Hawk Roosting', the power position gets a deconstruction and the power swipes to the Nature, so eco-centric attitude is established with high impetus. Here Nature that takes role of logos controls the fate of human beings and is considered as the peaceful abode of all animate and inanimate objects. Healing and dominant nature of Nature is getting exposed in these poems because Nature can provide peace to the dispirited hearts and can have control over all creation.

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