

Allegorical Representation & Application of Animal Imagery in selected poems of William Blake, Ted Hughes and Derek Walcott.

Loveleen Parmar

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government Mohindra College, Patiala

Animal imagery in literature is more often than not used to depict human beings via animal traits or by suggesting some resemblance between the human characters and the image of the animal used for them. It is done to suggest the actual nature of human beings using the habits and conduct as well as the instincts of animals. Animal imagery has not only been used by poets but the authors of plays and novels alike have utilized this tool to vividly describe and portray various characters in their works. It's a way of symbolizing animal characters by passing on their characteristic features to human characters. It may also be suggestive of the animal peculiarities that one should be watchful of, in human beings. Such poems may also be aimed to indicate, counsel or simply intimate the readers of the possibility of finding and encountering such animal-like deportment in the world of Homo sapiens. Simile, metaphor and personification by using animal imagery have been extensively used by writers for delineating the attributes, disposition and psyche of the characters they choose to enunciate through their craft.

Be it "The Tyger" and "The Lamb" by William Blake, "The Hawk in the Rain", "The Crow" "The Jaguar", "The Thought Fox" poems by Ted Hughes, "Goats and Monkeys", "A Far Cry from Africa" by Derek Walcott, animal imagery has served poets of all nationalities and languages across continents to convey, reveal and demonstrate the latent feelings concealed in the innermost recesses of their minds. Various poets have found succour to spell out, clarify and demonstrate the role of myth vested deep inside their culture in various animals and birds of diverse shapes and sizes, that has been instrumental in providing them and their people a specific identity and respect. The animal imagery has been used by poets to represent themes of innocence, experience, deception, violence, spirituality and others for the reader to learn, think, reflect and act with responsibility and duty. Man in his egoistic beliefs of being all powerful and in control has accidentally or otherwise interfered with Nature and this misplaced authority has made him culpable and guilty of the blame he deserves and thus his accountability must be defined in his behavior towards animals and birds in particular and Nature in general.

In "The Tyger" by William Blake, the animal imagery represents ferocity and a physique that is fearful. This poem is by the visionary poet who seeks an answer from Nature or God by questioning the existence of such a dangerous animal. The first stanza itself sets the tone:

"Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?"

Critics consider this poem a vital question in all religions that pertains to the creation of evil forces by God and the reason behind such a decision. The poet expresses his wonder at the creation of such a spectacle – the tiger. The poet is in awe of the fact that the Tyger is an embodiment of boldness and violence, of power and control, and shares his apprehension with the reader if it is the same God that also created the highly docile and innocent creatures like the lamb, in the following lines from the poem:

"Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?"

Again, in the poem “The Lamb”, Blake expresses a sense of disbelief at the wonderous picture of the innocent lamb. He asks a question first about the creator’s inspiration at the time of shaping the virtuous lamb and in the second stanza himself answers that the lamb has been created by the Almighty in the image of Lord Jesus Christ. It’s a child-like enquiry in the poem about the traits and behaviour of the lamb. While the tiger was symbolic of evil, the lamb symbolises everything good and innocent and the sounds and noises produced by the lamb create a happy environment. The poem creates a vivid scenery of the lamb hopping and dancing in the meadows, springing, leaping and prancing around in abundant bliss. The poem indicates the all-pervasiveness of the wholesome and sustaining influence of Nature on the lamb and hints at the advantages of nourishing and nurturing the child-like innocence of Nature even in humans, as depicted by the lamb.

In the above two poems, it can be noted that William Blake displayed a revolutionary kind of spiritualism wherein he suggested that God wasn’t only gracious and compassionate in his creations but also the originator of malevolent and ferocious beings on earth. God was the creator of the good as well as the evil. “The Tyger” represents all that is bad, problematic and enigmatic whereas “The Lamb” symbolises the virtuous, decent and righteous aspects. “The Tyger” sets the menacing and threatening tone and in opposition, “The Lamb” inspires happiness, exuberance and a fun-loving atmosphere.

“The Hawk in the Rain” is a composition of the British poet Ted Hughes contained in an anthology by the same name that contains forty poems. The reference goes back to the times in England when prey was captured through trained hawks and this procedure was named HAWKING. In this poem, however, the hawk is being hunted and during the process the hunter witnesses the hawk being blown off and thrown onto the ground where it dies. The poet expresses the violence of Nature in this poem delineating Nature as a primal force that will always dominate man. The death of the hawk in the poem lends a cruel and chaotic tone to it. This chaos can be related to the disturbing milieu of England during those times where England can be symbolised by the hawk caught in an insane world.

The Crow is another poem that brings out a bleak, black, dull and dark image in the poem, starting as,

When God, disgusted with man,
Turned towards heaven,
And man, disgusted with God,
Turned towards Eve,
Things looked like falling apart.
But Crow Crow
Crow nailed them together,
Nailing heaven and earth together-

Ted Hughes had witnessed the deaths of his wife Sylvia Plath first and then his lover Assia who took their daughter Shura along into the other world. Life isn’t always as expected nor is it the beauty that we may want it to be. The crow poems have borrowed a lot from mythology and have been seen as an attack on Christianity. These poems also triggered the second phase of Poetry of Ted Hughes. The poem Crow was described as his masterpiece by the poet himself. This poem has been studied as a critical commentary on Christianity and the teachings about God. The crow sitting on the branch of the hemlock tree symbolises the change in the mood of the poet as it shakes off snow and causes movement, symbolised as transition from the physical to the spiritual. It may also be equated with the symbol of death, not the physical death alone but the transition and a sort of transformation or an event that heralds new beginnings.

The Jaguar by Ted Hughes embodies the spirit of freedom in the jaguar even though it is kept in a cage in the zoo compared to the weak stance of the other animals. The wild eyes and heart of the jaguar help us explore the themes of captivity, freedom, strength and resistance symbolised by the unshattered potential and spirit of the jaguar. The jaguar is different from the other animals in the zoo as it has its determination, power, ferocity and wilderness intact.

“but there’s no cage to him,
More than to the visionary his cell:
His stride is wilderness of freedom:
The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel.
Over the cage floor the horizons come.”

The imagery in the poem Thought Fox is about the creative process of a poet while writing poetry. The first stanza depicts the work of the poet in his study, late at night.

“I imagine this midnight moment’s forest:
Something else is alive
Beside the clock’s loneliness
And this blank page where my fingers move.”

In the very first line, one can hear echoes of Blake’s poem Tyger. The night is starless and the climes are dark and black but something can be felt stirring this atmosphere of stillness. It’s the cautious movement of the stealthy fox that has stirred the stillness like the creation of a poem as the thoughts progress from the inner recesses of the mind of the poet. The mysterious, artistic inspiration is metaphorically represented in the garb of the thought fox. The stealth of the sly fox represents the poetic inspiration as the poet struggles to get words on the paper from the dark holes in the mind’s inner recesses.

The poem Goats and Monkeys is a part of the collection by Derek Walcott “The Castaway and other Poems”. Walcott was a Caribbean poet who wrote about the identity crisis faced by the displaced people who try to find a place in their adopted country. The relationship here is of the man and his servant, quite similar to that of Robinson Crusoe and Man Friday, which essentially is the master-slave relationship. The relationship portrayed by Derek Walcott is between the ruler and the ruled, the coloniser and the colonised. Goats and Monkeys also has reference to Shakespeare’s Othello, while the basic urgent theme is that of identity and historicity. The myth, the history and the identity of the slave was repressed by the master coloniser, be it through imperialism or the camouflaged methods of colonization that set to glorify the Europeans with the excuse of civilizing the slaves or the negros.

The society of the modern world is still not ready to accept Desdemona’s black lover Othello. The social law ironically known as the “divine law” must establish equality between the black and the white race, which unfortunately hasn’t been the case. The title of the poem is ironical. The poet himself identifies with Othello as both are black and Derek Walcott was also competing for recognition in a white dominated world. Walcott became poet laureate as a successor to Ted Hughes and this way became instrumental in establishing the belief of the United Kingdom being a multicultural society, hence absolving it of the crime of racist hatred and skepticism against commonwealth countries.

In Walcott’s poem A Far Cry from Africa, he uses abundant animal imagery to present the plight of the native Africans and his own country at the hands of the European/British invader where the Kikuyu uprising has resulted in chaos- internal as well as external, among the African tribes as well as between the natives and the Coloniser. The poem opens with the following words :

A wind is ruffling the tawny pelt
Of Africa. Kikuyu, quick as flies,
Batten upon the bloodstreams of the veldt.
Corpses are scattered through a paradise.
Only the worm, colonel of carrion, cries:
"Waste no compassion on these separate dead!"

The visual imagery of animals like the Lion, flies, worms, ibises and beasts is used by the poet to put across his feelings and point of view. Africa is just like a lion with a "tawny pelt". The Kikuyu tribe of native Africans is compared to the blood sucking flies. The British colonizers are compared to worms that feed on human flesh presenting a sickening image of massacre at their hands. The ibises are the natives of Africa that moved freely in the meadows and jungles before the Britishers arrived in their land and usurped it. They are the representatives of the African civilization before colonization. The animal imagery has been used to depict the violent and savage side of both the civilizations. Moreover, the last line quoted in the stanza above implies that no compassion should be shown to the dead, who in other words, deserved to die at the hands of the manmade chaos.

Different poets use different tools to give expression to their innermost feelings and deeply felt emotions. These poets discussed above have widely used animal imagery in their verse as an attempt to lay bare the intricate sentiment they had experienced with respect to separate soul stirring happenings in their

lives, the chance encounters, the hardships, the dilemma, the tragedy that befell them, the conscious and subconscious struggles of which they had been an inextricable part, things that hurt them, shocked them or left an indelible impression on their psyche. Once put on paper these animal images themselves became an inextricable part of their poetry.

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