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## KAKABHUSANDI MEETS CROW: HUGHES' MYTH MAKING AND THE MODERN WORLD



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### ABSTRACT

Ted Hughes is a mythic poet, who, through the use of myth, brings to light the inadequacies of two dominant explanations of the origin of life—evolutionism and creationism. Hughes implies that excessive dependence on science and logic, and the denial of the powers of myths and rituals has resulted in the alienation of modern man from his self. Through his Crow poems, Ted Hughes explores the deep recesses of man's collective unconscious to once again unite man with his lost self. Ted Hughes' Crow makes journeys to the mysterious world of man's human psyche but does not undergo any transformation and remains an existential figure lost

in existence whereas Tulsidasa's Kakabhusandi, after passing through many lives and deaths, emerges as an enlightened crow, who goes beyond time and space and reaches the grey zone, which is otherwise not accessible.

**KEYWORDS :** *Kakabhusandi Meets Crow , Myth Making , life—evolutionism and creationism.*

### INTRODUCTION :

Rapid advancement in the field of science and scientific enquiry, especially after the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859 and the consequent suppression of the emotional side of life has resulted in the alienation of man from his self. Excessive materialism and rationalism has eroded man's faith in religion, myths and rituals, which are the projections of our collective unconscious. Consequently man finds himself surrounded by an inhuman scenario both within and without. In a period of such hollowness and barrenness, T. S. Eliot found the traditional method incompetent for giving expression to the modern man's predicament and his spiritual aridity. Eliot turned to mythical method and used myth as a framework to give shape and significance to the chaotic material of contemporary life. Without mythical method he could not have given order to "the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (Eliot 103).

Hughes too felt that evolutionism was not sufficient to explain man's purpose of life on earth and turned to myth, magic, religion and ritual to bring out the inadequacies of both evolutionism and creationism. Ted Hughes is a mythic poet who, through myths and archetypes, tries to explore the

unaccommodated universe of the human unconscious. It is myth that provides him with an opportunity to delve deep into the powerful energies of mythic figures like gods and devils and utilize them in his poetry to bring about a cathartic experience. Myth gives him access to a number of ritual frameworks which have been used by different cultures over the centuries to tap the violent energies and turn them into creative forces. For Hughes myth is not just a source or subject matter of his poetry, but a very useful part of the very essence of it. It is a medium through which the powerful destructive energies can be easily controlled and channelized into proper creative direction. Besides *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow*, his other significant prose works like *Winter Pollen*, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* establish him as a mythic poet *par excellence*.

The poetic volume *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* is a fine example of Hughes' art of myth making and his interest in the primitive. In the poems of this volume, Hughes has made an excellent use of myths spread over the various regions of the world—oriental as well as occidental. In fact, he has created his own mythology in the Crow poems. Myth is not a literal truth but a significant means of passing on a body of culturally significant symbols from one generation to the next, and Hughes, through his use of myth in *Crow*, has explored the stream of the development of human culture and civilization. The poems in this volume are an indirect attack on the modern man's greed, his self-centeredness, his utter lack of compassion, his use of cunningness to gain his ends and his denial of the instincts which are essential for preservation of the basic values in human nature. In these poems Hughes' basic objective seems to promote the aims of true culture as distinguished from the false cultural values which the modern man has constructed.

In *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* Hughes, for the first time, has used his vast anthropological learning and constructed his own folk-mythology. By creating the quasi-human figure of crow, Hughes explores the human psyche and deals excellently with such complex themes as death-rebirth, alienation of man from nature and the war between the spirit and flesh. It may be likened to a shamanic journey to a world other than ours to once again connect man with his lost self and his unconscious. Hughes has invested his crow with all the mythological and folk-lore peculiarities crows are generally associated with. In his BBC talk, Hughes referred to some of the characteristics of crows: The crow is the most intelligent of birds. He lives just in about every piece of land on earth and there is a great body of folklore about crows. Of course, no carrion will kill a crow. The crow is the indestructible bird who suffers everything, suffers nothing. ("Ted Hughes' Crow")

Hughes also emphasizes that Crow shares many attributes common with man. In his letter to Alan Bold, Hughes wrote:

Crow is the bird of bran, is the oldest and highest totem creature of Britain .... England pretends to a lion—but that is a late fake import. England's autochthonous Totem is the Crow. Whatever the colour of the Englishman you scratch you come to some sort of Crow. (Bold 234)

The form and structure of *Crow* has been greatly influenced by the primitive poetry and song, especially in his use of parallelism, repetition and variation. Hughes, in fact, is a compiled poet who fuses in his poetry elements derived from the Bible, Shakespeare and modernist and primitive poetry. Regarding the increasing complexity of Hughes' imagery, Michael Hulse remarks:

It will not do to have a familiarity with Jung and Levi-Strauss alone, with Joseph Campbell and Carlos Castaneda and Graves' *The White Goddess*—we must know the *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and Fariduddin Attar's *Conference of the Birds*, and Mircea Eliade on comparative religion and shamanism, and Paul Radin on primitive man and the Trickster, and Michael J. Harner's *Hallucinogens and Shamanism* ... not forgetting, of course, those essential parts of the received canon, from Shakespeare to Blake to Lawrence to Richard Wilbur, which have always in some way been Hughes' sub-

texts. (49)

In *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* Hughes has used the songs and antics of Crow to create a cycle of adventures that seem drawn from the deepest levels of "the collective unconscious, which is the source of all psychic creation: religion and rite, social organization, consciousness, and finally art" (Neumann 41).

Jung makes it clear in his *Man and His symbols* that archetypal patterns emanate from the collective unconscious and can be revealed to an individual consciousness through intuitive flashes of inspiration. The way Ted Hughes composed *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* suggests that he drew inspiration from unconscious sources. In his interview with Ekbert Faas, Ted Hughes said, "Most of them appeared as I wrote them they were usually something of a shock to write. Mostly they wrote themselves quite rapidly" (Lehmann and Ross 18)

Tapping into the unconscious sources, Hughes has allowed deep knowledge to flow through his conscious mind to create patterns and symbols of universal significance. It is within such depths where an artist tries to find the truths of the world. The unconscious lies at the root of all experience of unity and oneness. Hughes, who was a learned student of anthropology, has become an explorer of such psychic realms, and brought back a wealth of material as exemplified by *Crow*, which contains parallels to these archetypal patterns, that is, Shamanistic rituals, Biblical legend, the feministic principle and the Trickster Cycle.

In *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* Hughes has performed the role of poet-shaman very efficiently by delving deep into the regions of our collective unconscious and creating songs of healing through catharsis. Hughes himself said that poetry takes for its subject what is depressing and destructive and lifts it into a realm where it becomes healing and energizing.

Hughes in his *Crow* has followed the tradition of the Bushman, Eskimos and Gabon pigmies by using the animal stories in *Crow* to illustrate the human predicament and bring about some enlightenment. Some primitives have developed whole bodies of poetry around their totemistic beliefs. Among these primitive societies, the shaman, just like Hughes, chooses a specific animal through which he works to gather knowledge that is later revealed to the clan. The animal chosen by a shaman performs the role of his alter ego and within the animation rites the shaman relates the life history of his chosen spirit animal. Here in the *Crow* poems, Hughes as a poet-shaman has chosen Crow to become his totem creature and has related his life and songs to the benefit of the mankind. From the moment Crow passes through the "womb-door" he begins to learn the hard lessons of life-- the links between birth and death, love and guilt, life and pain.

The language of *Crow* is also reminiscent of the incantory style of primitive song. Crow's rhythmic language, like early sacred song or prayer, contains repetition of words and themes, parallelism and alliteration:

Black was the without eye  
Black the within tongue  
Black was the heart  
Black the liver, black the lungs

("Two Legends I" 1-4)

This type of echoing phraseology in *Crow* is fundamental to the primitive song of the shaman, and makes clear Hughes' magical intentions. Words such as "black", "death", "weeping", and "nothing" occur throughout the text to implant Hughes' message into the reader's mind.

Another aspect of shamanic initiation Hughes has made use of is the act of dismemberment.

The shaman has to endure the act of dismemberment and suffer a symbolic death so that a spiritual and enlightened rebirth may occur. Hughes' Crow has to suffer a lot as he is "flocked", "shot", "nailed", "strangled", "clubbed", "dragged", and "smashed", and "has roots tearing out of the bed rock atom":

Flogged came with legs  
Shot through the head with balled brains  
Shot blind with eyes  
Nailed down by his own ribs  
Strangled just short of his last gasp  
By his own windpipe  
Clubbed unconscious by his own heart  
Seeing his life stab through him, a dream flash  
As he drowned in his own blood  
Dragged under by the weights of his guts  
Uttering a bowel-emptying cry which was his roots out of the bed rock atom  
Clapped his mouth and letting the cry rip through him as at a distance  
And smashed into the rubbish of the ground  
He managed to hear, faint, and far—"it's a boy"  
Then everything went black ("A Kill")

Like the crow, Kakabhusandi of Tulsidasa's *Ramcharitmanas* too passes through many births and deaths to emerge as an enlightened sage crow. In fact Kakabhusandi was not born as a crow. He was born as a human being in Ayodhya. As a young man he was very arrogant but he was a great devotee of Lord Shiva. He would spend most of his time in his devotion to Lord Shiva in the temple where another saint too worshipped Lord Shiva but, unlike Kakabhusandi that saint had the same reverence for Lord Shiva and Lord Rama. However Kakabhusandi had strong aversion to Lord Rama. One day Kakabhusandi was busy in his prayers to Lord Shiva and, even after seeing his preceptor entering the temple, he did not show respects to him as he was prejudiced against him for his preceptor worshipped Lord Shiva and Lord Rama with equal devotion. This arrogant behaviour of Kakabhusandi infuriated Lord Shiva who cursed him that he would thenceforth become a serpent and dwell in the hollow of a tree and he would have to take one thousand sub-human births. On the entreaty of Kakabhusandi Lord Shiva mitigated His curse by sparing him the sufferings in each sub-human birth whereas birth, life and death was to take place according to the curse. Later Lord Shiva blessed him with the boon that he would not lose the awareness of all his past births and eventually achieve the devotion of Lord Rama.

At last Kakabhusandi was once again born as a Brahmin in Ayodhya. He became a stout devotee of Lord Rama. He wanted to worship Lord Rama in embodied form and, therefore, came to Lomasa Rishi to seek his guidance on how to worship Lord Rama in embodied form. However Lomasa Rishi did not agree with the view that the Omnipotent God ever appears in an embodied form, and stressed that God is always without form or attributes. Kakabhusandi did not agree with Lomasa Rishi and this infuriated him. Consequently Lomasa Rishi cursed him that he would immediately be changed into the form of a crow. Even at being cursed, Kakabhusandi did not show any animosity and stayed humble. At this Lord Rama Himself asked Lomasa to take back his curse. Lomasa felt repentant at his harsh action and consoled Bhusandi in every way. Lomasa imparted to him the mantra of Lord Rama and showed him the way of devotion to Rama. Lomasa recited the entire *Ramcharitmanas* to Bhusandi

and gave him the blessing that devotion to Rama would ever abide in his heart. Eventually after passing through many curses, Kakabhusandi emerges as an enlightened crow who goes beyond time and space and reaches the grey zone which is, otherwise, not accessible either to God or man, whereas Hughes' crow does not undergo any transformation and remains an existential figure lost in existence.

Another important aspect of shamanic initiation that Crow must pass through is exposure to fire. Crow, in a similar fashion, suffers exposure to fire:

Burning

Burning

Burning

There was finally something

The sun could not burn, that it had rendered

("Crow's Last Stand" 1-5)

Like the shamans who are masters over fire, Crow can walk through the hottest of flames and survive. But while the shaman would become transformed into spirit by these flames, Crow remains tied to his material existence.

Crow, like shamans, is also able to navigate to celestial realms to have conversation with God, and in this way Crow performs the shamanic function of acting as an intermediary between God and Man. Kakabhusandi, too, acts as an intermediary between God and man but while crow remains unchanged, Kakabhusandi gets transformed into an enlightened figure and attempts to re-establish the lost relation between God and man.

Apart from the shamanic initiation, Hughes has made use of Judeo-Christian mythology in the Crow poems by inverting their stories in order to illustrate his perception of the chaotic and nihilistic nature of the universe. As against the popular belief, Hughes asserts that no loving Creator or God maintains the order of things. Hughes strongly believes that this particular God of Christianity is anything but a kind deity. For him, it is the "man-created", broken-down, corrupt despot of a remarkable religion."<sup>1</sup> According to Hughes, Christianity is "just another provisional myth of Man's relationship with the Creator and the world of spirit" (Faas 205).

In a letter written to his sister Owlyn Hughes in the summer of 1959, Ted Hughes described God as an "absolute power having the irrefutable authority of the need to devour to live" (Hughes, *Letters* 148). According to Hughes God possesses none of the features traditionally attributed to Him. Hughes jeers at God and quite often presents Him as a clown or madman. Ted Hughes seems to say that God cannot be the only principle at work. There must be some opposite face as well. Thus he invents the crow as an adversary of God.

In contrast with Hughes' crow, Kakabhusandi has firm faith and knowledge of the Omnipotence of Lord Rama and through his chanting of the story of Lord Rama's life to his followers, he inspires others to follow in the footsteps of Lord Rama to achieve connection with God. Kakabhusandi not only transforms himself but also becomes an agent of transforming others from mere existential figures into transcendental figures.

Hughes holds Judeo-Christian religion responsible for the negation of the life principle which is evidenced in Puritanism. Ted Hughes was against any sort of religious dogma and held avarice, greed, cruelty and tyranny responsible for the destruction of the real worth of religion. He held that Reformation, puritan-based Christian teachings, responsible for the skewed attitude towards women and the natural world.

In fact, if the Bible is a mythology constructed to explain Man's origin and purpose in a universe that often seems hostile and frightening, then Ted Hughes' Crow can be viewed as a counter mythology, which is very much in the tradition of William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Both Hughes and Blake have, in their respective works, brought to surface the inadequacies of Christianity's dominant mythology.

In *Crow* Man's Fall is not a literal descent from the eternity of God's Eden to hell, but an alienation from nature or mother earth and the truth of his own physicality. Due to this alienation, Man finds himself in a self-imposed war between spirit and flesh. While the Bible presents a hope for man's redemption, the consolation that Crow offers is quite different. It comes in the form of self-granted peace of Man's final exhausted acceptance of his own mortality. Hughes, in no way, accepts transcendence of flesh by spirit.

Hughes has created his own version of Creation myth by inverting the original version of Genesis in the *Crow* poems. *Crow* emerges out of chaos, whose instinctual drives go beyond the control of God. God cannot have sway over this black bird whose primitive unconscious force lies at the root of the nature of all reality and, therefore, the whole of the universe goes out of control. *Crow* as a "black rainbow" can be taken to symbolize the broken covenant between Man and God, which is a prediction of Man's Fall from Grace. *Crow* of Hughes represents the grey zone where dark forces of the unconscious assert themselves. *Crow* is the existential expression of the unconscious instead of the transcendental mythology of the Bible. In fact *Crow* of Hughes is a counterpoint to the continuance or breakdown of a dominant western myth of the Bible.

The poem "Two Legends" presents the reader with the inadequacies of the two dominant explanations of life on earth. One refers to the dominant Christian mythology which does not recognize the truth of flesh and advocates transcendence of flesh by spirit. The other alludes to the Darwinian Evolutionism which displays the replacement of spirit by flesh and does not recognize man's unconscious part. Seen thus both explanations are inadequate in themselves. What Hughes seems to suggest here is the grey zone rather than the balance between both the extreme viewpoints where the known meets the unknown. But Kakabhusandi enters new zones of awareness and comes out to the present wiser and seasoned with his ego placed properly instead of being at the empty zone where one basks in the hollow arrogance of one's knowledge.

In another poem "Crow Tyrannosaurus" Hughes seems to indicate the failure of Christian mythology to admit to the truth of flesh and its needs and weaknesses. Hughes seems to imply that the trauma of birth and burden of flesh are enough of a punishment without the added burden of Original Sin which condemns us further. If the Crow follows the Biblical command "Thou shalt kill", it is impossible for him to survive. It brings to surface the unacknowledged paradox of a religious tenet which identifies as "sin" that upon which life itself depends:

Crow thought 'Alas  
Alas ought I  
To sto peating  
And try to become the light  
(*"Crow Tyrannosaurus"* 21-24)

As the Creator of the universe, the God of Christianity is responsible for the originary suppression of the physical energy represented by the snake. As such He is also responsible for the consequences of that suppression, that is, the rage or the so called 'evil' of the world, unleashed by the

repression of energy. As physical entities, Adam and Eve cannot help themselves but fall down in worship of that which embodies their own nature and physicality. Mark the lines:

God's grimace writhed, a leaf in the furnace.  
And the man's and woman's knees melted, they collapsed  
There neck-muscles melted, there brows bumped the ground  
There tears evacuated visibly  
They whispered 'your will is our peace'  
But crow only peered.

Then took a step or two forward,  
Grabbed this creature by the slackskin nape,  
Beat the hell out of it, and ate it.  
(“A Horrible Religious Error” 9-17)

In the poem “The Contender”, Hughes takes on the New Testament and depicts a weak and impotent Christ who suffers pointlessly and fails to redeem mankind:

He lay crucified with all his strength  
On the earth  
Grinning towards the sun  
Through the tiny holes of his tiny eyes  
.....  
Sometimes with eyes closed  
In his senseless trial of strength  
(“The Contender” 30-43)

The third archetypal pattern, Hughes has made use of in his Crow poems, is that of the feminine principle. Hughes shows that Man has separated himself from the feminine principle by his over dependence on masculine logic and its application in science and technology. As opposed to male-dominated mythology of Judeo-Christian religion, Hughes has drawn from material originated in ancient Earth Mother cults as found in Robert Graves' *The White Goddess*. Through the Crow poems, Hughes attempts to show that masculine and feminine are part of a single whole and man's attempt to deny the feminine principle may be likened to an attempt to destroy himself and world itself. The presence of this feminine principle is felt for the first time in the poem “Crow and Mama” in which Crow tries to escape from her. In his attempt to run away from her, he causes great harm to her, but Crow fails to get away from her as she is a very part of him, and if he destroys her, he destroys himself.

In the poem “A Childish Prank”, crow, who is male, is said to have invented sexuality. With his beak he bites the serpent right through the middle. He stuffs the two ends into Adam and Eve respectively. Since that time the head has yearned for its tail half and longs to be reunited with it. Thus Hughes constructs his own mythology to present sexuality not as a sin but a creative force.

In Indian mythology too we find depictions of male and female as being two complimentary parts of the same entity. *Ardhnarishvara* represents the synthesis of the masculine and feminine energies of the universe and illustrates how ‘shakti’ the female principle of God is inseparable from Shiva, the male principle of God. The union of these principles is exalted as the root and womb of all creation.

In Jungian analytical psychology too it is held that man possesses anima which is the feminine aspects of male psyche whereas a woman possesses animus which is the masculine aspect of the female psyche. Unfortunately for centuries it has been considered a virtue for man to suppress the feminine aspect which has had dire consequences for him. Man's callous treatment of women and the gender violence can be accounted for due to non integration of anima in male psyche. In the same way woman has suppressed her animus, the masculine aspect of her psyche resulting in her treatment as weak and illogical.

In Chinese philosophy too Yin, the feminine principle and Yang, the masculine principle are said to be interdependent. Nothing is totally Yin or Yang. Yin contains the seed of Yang and vice versa. Just as there is no energy without matter or there can be no day without night, Yin and Yang are inseparable.

The goddess as seducer is also a dominant theme in *Crow*. "Apple Tragedy" is an important poem in which the "orgiastic character" of the great goddess can be seen at work. In this poem, Hughes presents Eve as a Biblical representative of the feminine principle, who under the spell of God's apple cider "opened her legs" and gave the serpent "a wild time".

The poem "Crow Improvises" throws light on the terrible aspects of the feminine principle. Here Hughes mentions a "seven year honeymoon" which almost explodes the man's genitalia.

Along with other archetypal patterns, Hughes has also made use of the Trickster Cycle. *Crow* begins as an avowed meddler who has been created by the opponent of God to expose him in His Creation, with regard to Man. *Crow* goes through a process in which he becomes less and less an adversary of man and more and more a humanly vulnerable creature himself, sharing helplessly in human predicament. Beginning as something akin to the Devil, he becomes a Trickster-Transformer whose tricks seem nasty to man. Later he is linked, though blasphemously, with Jesus Christ, but ultimately he seems to be approaching merely human status. *Crow*, like Trickster, goes through many misadventures, acting as both victim and victimizer. Burning and dismemberment are often the results of antics of both characters, so in this way, they both share the same shamanic attributes. Like the shaman, both *Crow* and Trickster are primordial beings and have a link to the underworld. Paul Radin writes that Trickster ultimately goes to a place which is under the world and where Earth maker lives. Trickster acts as a king in this underworld. Though it is clear from the *Crow* poems that *Crow* does not possess such supernatural powers, he does have relationship with God, and often seems to be having conversation with God. Hughes' *crow* exists as a traveler who carries within spiritual desert of the post world war scenario. Therefore instead of taking advantage of its dwelling in the grey zone, it becomes a victim of existence.

*Crow* undermines the Christian beliefs and values, and takes a child's naughty delight in playing pranks on God. God, at first, seems to be "rather indulgent" towards *Crow*. Having made Adam and Eve, God faces a problem of getting their souls into their bodies. *Crow*, like the Trickster figure, intervenes and invents sex as an urge which seems to be out of control of man and woman. He mimics God and puts instincts into the flesh instead of soul.

The trickster is also a figure from the grey zone which starts as a clever victimizer but ends as a victim. The structure of the Trickster Cycle also resembles that of the *Crow* poems. Both contain elements of picaresque literature. Here in the *Crow* poems, the misadventures of *Crow* have been chronicled by Hughes. A humorous, satirical tone and loosely connected episodes with no real plot development based on the escapades of an amoral protagonist are the main features of picaresque literature which are evident in the *Crow* poems as well.

Thus poetry becomes an alternative religion in the hand of Hughes who amalgamates the myths of shamanic initiation and the archetype of the Biblical Legend to bring out the inadequacies of the two

divergent explanations of the purpose of human life, that is, Evolutionism and Creationism. The Great Goddess archetype brings to the fore how the modern man has separated himself from Nature, and in destroying her, he is bringing destruction for himself. By adopting and developing the Trickster figure in *Crow*, Hughes has explored human mind. Thus through *Crow* Hughes constructs a myth of the grey zone in our existence which has material dissolution on the one hand and spiritual transcendentalism on the other. The trickster, the feminine principle, the shaman all explore the gap in patriarchal Judeo-Christian mythology and emphasise the need of the modern man to understand himself in both flesh and spirit.

This is a construction of counter myth to explore the existential angst and the inadequacy of the existing myth to explain it and its demands and effects on body and soul.

## ENDNOTES

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