



Agency of Sacred Rituals in Natural World: A Study of Ted Hughes' *River* Poems

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Abstract – Ted Hughes weaves a tapestry of verses that transcend the ordinary and delve into the mystical agency of sacred rituals embedded in the natural world. This study explores deep relationship of sacred rituals and the natural world in *River* (1983). Sacred rituals function in Hughes' poems through a fusion of mythic elements, animistic perspectives, and ecological sensitivity. The river, a recurring motif, serves as a metaphorical stage for rituals to unfold in different poems. As expressions of reverence for the natural world, they are transformed landscape into sanctuaries of spiritual significance. Through an analysis of select poems, this study reveals dual character of river as both witness and participant in these sacred ceremonies. Interconnectedness of humankind and natural world is the ultimate consequence. An attempt is made to highlight the transformative power of these rituals and how readers are led to contemplate the spiritual dimensions of environment. This paper further details Hughes' poetry as a compelling testament to the enduring significance of sacred traditions. In shaping human connection to the natural world, this study underscores his unique contribution to ecological and spiritual poetry.

Keywords— *Interconnectedness, Natural World, River Poems, Ted Hughes, Sacred Rituals*

I. INTRODUCTION

Edward James Ted Hughes, a towering figure in 20th-century British poetry, championed the natural world. Hughes is renowned for his profound engagement with the natural world, often imbuing it with a sense of spirituality and mysticism. His poetry, a fervent ode to nature, exposed humanity's destructive impact. He urged a harmonious coexistence with the environment, advocating for ecological consciousness. Ted Hughes' *River* (1983) poems delve deep into the spiritual significance of the natural world, particularly focusing on rivers. His vivid descriptions and evocative language transform rivers into sacred spaces, where ancient rituals and the divine converge. These flowing waterbodies become sites of ancient rites, where the boundaries between the human and the divine blur. The poet explores symbolize the cyclical nature of life and death, mirroring the river's ceaseless journey. By immersing himself in the river's rhythms, Hughes reveals the sacred power inherent in nature, inviting

readers to reconnect with the primal forces that shape our existence.

River expresses subtle dimension of Hughes' environmental vision. Fishing was a life-long passion for Hughes, an extension of his childhood memories of hunting animals. *River* records his reflections as a poet and as an angler. In *Ted Hughes*, Terry Gifford mentions that: "*River* was the last themed collection of his own work to engage directly with human relationship with the forces of the natural world. The iconic figure of the relationship depicted is the most primitive - the fisherman hunter, but in the most self-conscious mode as the twentieth-century poet himself" (56). The element of what Gifford mentions as 'the most self-conscious mode', a reference to his poetic role, enlarges the drives and processes seen in the water bodies of rivers. The river poems reveal an intense fascination with the elemental forces of nature, particularly water, as both a physical and spiritual entity. Rivers in Hughes' poetry are more than mere geographical features; they are living,

breathing entities with their own agency, capable of influencing and reflecting the spiritual and emotional states of humanity.

This research paper seeks to explore the agency of sacred rituals in the natural world as portrayed in Hughes' selected river poems. By examining the symbolic and ritualistic aspects of rivers in his work, this study aims to uncover how Hughes uses these natural elements to express broader themes of life, death, and transformation. The paper will analyse how the poet's depiction of rivers as sites of sacred rituals reflects his belief in nature's intrinsic power and its deep, spiritual connection with humanity. Through this exploration, the research will illuminate Hughes' unique contribution to ecological and spiritual poetry, emphasizing his vision of the natural world as a sacred space intertwined with human existence.

II. RIVER POEMS

Encoding of the mutually transformative exchange between water and earth, human and non-human make poems in *River* a series of ecopoetry. Through water bodies Hughes takes the readers to the internal ecology of multiple life forms in the non-human sphere. The poet actively played the role of an environmentalist to revive different bodies of Devon. For him, environmental degradation of the rivers and fluvial landscapes is in a cultural setting of the Anthropocene. The destructive impact of industrial waste on water bodies significantly shapes his poetic language and symbolic range. This act of seeing water bodies in a continuum of interconnectedness simultaneously at literal as well as symbolic level creates a new poetic space. It allows free exchange between the literal reality of water bodies and life forms and the mythical connections in the poet's mind. In fact, metaphorical language of *River* celebrates cycles of life within and outside water over the course of different seasons. His invocation of the sacred views the obvious factor of water pollution in spiritual terms. Hughes's experience as an environmental activist to protect rivers permeates all the poems. Yet, his love for fishing is quite inalienable from the poetic process. Reddick acknowledges the fact that "without fishing, Hughes might never have become an environmentalist. After all it was the dying of the fish at Old Denaby that first awakened him to an awareness of environmental pollution" (213).

In "Water in Native American Spirituality: Liquid Life—Blood of the Earth and Life of the Community", June-Ann Greeley has noted that humans have perceived water as the primordial source and the essence of all life, both material and spiritual:

Water, as an aspect of the natural world, is itself an hierophany, a "sounding" of holy and numinous

potency, both awe-inspiring and terrible, for just as water is rightfully accepted as both a source of life and an essential component of all creation, an element without which all organic life cannot safely (and spiritually) survive, so also is water recognized as a potential cause of material destruction, a relentless force of enormous power that must be identified as well as an instrument of purging and cleansing and thus renewal. (158-59)

Therefore, for Hughes, fishing was a way of reconnecting with what Ann Greeley explains in the context of indigenous communities as a process of 'purging and cleansing and thus renewal'.

Ted Hughes considered exchange with non-human life as a precondition to fullness of life and homage to its sanctity. His sense of being human comes from a truthful connection with the non-human. In the collection, Hughes unrolls agentic conditions of a variety of animals and birds. They are not animal imagery now, but characters having roles to play in a worlding of their own.

In the poem, "The Merry Mink", the mink embodies play, gluttony and lust to love, thrive and survive. Ted Hughes encodes this specific life form with a reference to Plato and God. This looks unexpected to the reader. This semiaquatic native creature of North America and Eurasia is different in its sexual behaviour. Hughes interconnects the human and non-human, and also the divine and philosophical. The authenticity of Hughes's knowledge of semi water animals and their reproductive cycles is quite evident here as the merry mink:

. . . Make love

Eight hours at a go.

My doings and my pelt.

He says, are a Platonic idea

Where I live with God. (*CP* 648)

Hughes aspires to go beyond the cultural artifice of Western humanism. His imagination aptly transfers the human intervention to the natural world. This brings out a natural-cultural world of water bodies where the images of human and natural suffering become inseparable.

Likewise, in "The Kingfisher", the poet perceives natural rhythms of water bodies through a fascinating irritant and a spirit of chaos. The cormorant is both the antagonist who outshines the fisherman narrator in "A Cormorant" and the cold-blooded figure of death itself "The dinosaur massacre-machine" (*CP* 670) in "A Rival". Reddick's observation is quite significant here when he states that "the poem does not re-unite its speaker with an untouched, pristine 'nature', but envisages a complex web

of interactions between species in which salmon conservation plays a part." (218)

"Four March Watercolours", the poem into four parts, is about water bodies experiencing spring through the imaginative encoding in Hughes's poetics of environment. Each part symbolically describes the progress of river in spring season. In all the parts of this poem, water bodies interact with the air and seek oneness and integration with the earth. The poetic presence on the scene as a fisherman is a candidate for this union with the non-human. The challenges are mapped in these lines describing floods:

The River
 Acts fishless. It is
 Fully occupied with its calisthenics
 Its twistings and self-wrestling. The pool by the
 concrete buttress
 Has just repaired its intricate engine. (CP 644)

Here, Hughes evokes the floodwater as a natural process and integrates the river with other ecological elements including the earth, plants and wild creatures. Ted Hughes's interest in biodiversity on lands alongside the river's course clearly demonstrates the seasonal changes which influence and transforms plants, animals and the poetic language:

Spring is over there
 Tits exciting the dour oak.
 Cows softens their calls
 Into the far, crumble-soft calling
 Of ewes . . . (CP 645)

The interactions among other-than-human creatures are part of overall landscape surrounding the river. Cows, ewes, tits, and a crow suggest vitality and dynamism on the riverside. However, reference to the human community occurs with disruptive presence of technology – the jet in the sky. But non-human agencies from the natural world continue to inhabit a world of their own. Enriched by the ecological life of the river and caressed by the air, they give a distinct completeness to the whole setting. The harmony of air, earth, water, and interactive creatures reflect a network of life forms. It is this aspect that prompts Reddick to see this poem as "a testimony of Hughes's view of the power of fishing to restore humankind's damaged relationship with 'the source'" (219):

All debts
 Of wings and fronds, of eyes, nectar, roots, hearts
 Returning cancelled, to solvency –
 Back to the sea's re-think. (CP 645)

Reddick finds that "the force of green fuse and flower is everywhere in this landscape, including within the fisherman" (220). The environmental conditions are not understood in any pristine stage.

However, Reddick considers the poem "Go Fishing" quite biocentric while treating "the process of absorption in ecological cycles becomes physical as well as psychological, environmental as well as ego-dissolving" (224). The poem creates a transitory movement from land to water with a heightened awareness of natural elements. Mud and water are at the point of contact between the angler and his consciousness of the environment.

The poet employs a transformative register to encode the riverine environment "Dissolved in earth-wave, the soft sun-shock, /Dismembered in sun-melt /Become translucent" (CP 652). At the end of the poem, when the world is compared to "a white hospital /Busy with urgency words" (CP 652), the need to communicate is mingled with the urgency of spiritual 'healing'. However, main endeavor of the poet angler is to produce a poetic idiom that bridges the gap between the inner and outer world. The attempted connection and negotiation with the non-human agencies of natural world, as the poem goes, "nearly succeeds" (CP 652).

The poem "Gulkana" shows Hughes's in-depth awareness of the entire ecosystem. His description is vivid and meticulous. Recording of its every detail and imagery of non-human presence in riverscape is quite engaging for the readers. He connects with the Gulkana river with a biblical reference and hypnotic experience "Gulkana – /Biblical, a deranging cry / From the wilderness, burst past us – /A stone voice that dragged at us" (CP 666). The poet continues encoding the overpowering magnetism of the place. Description of Gulkana turns out to be about more than a river:

A scrapyard of boxy shacks
 And supermarket refused, dogs, recks pick-ups,
 The Indian village where we bought our pass
 Was comatose – on the stagnation toxins
 Of a cultural vasectomy. They were relapsing
 To Cloud-like-a-boulder, Mica, Bear, Magpie. (CP 666)

Hughes believes that human attempts to inhibit their primitive selves are matched by the way their civilization has the cultural and spiritual significance of these settlements.

The environmental vision of Ted Hughes in *River* is like the flow that rivers in general symbolize. He addresses the wholeness of the natural world and processes in "A

Cormorant". The poem suggests the poet-angler's imagining of water is transformative its inhabitants. At the core of the poet's experience here is the ecological adaptability which characterizes behavior of river as well as the creatures in or outside it. The poet angler's persona is no exception. The poem opens with a well-equipped angler wading into the river and observing the cormorant diving into the river to catch fish. Though the angler is wearing "waders" and "Barbour Jacket" and is "paddling / Precariously on slimed shale" (CP 650). The subjective and cultural location of the angler is clearly anthropocentrism. This is because he has modern coverings of swimming auxiliaries. Hence, he is not in real contact with the natural world. Hughes juxtaposes the angler with a cormorant which does not hesitate to become wet. The cormorant plunges into the river and absorbs its healing energy:

He sheds everything from his tail end
 Except fish-action, becomes fish,
 Disappears from bird,
 Dissolving himself
 Into fish, so dissolving fish naturally
 Into himself . . . (CP 651)

Hughes, particularly interested in the creature's environmental adaptability, locates the angler in the cormorant's position and is aware of the riverscape's fluidity and of the bird's physicality. Accordingly, the poem affects the readers with its symbolic encoding of different modes of interconnectedness and adaptability in a mutually dependent and shaping world. Fishing is a primitive way of sensing the environment. When the angler positions himself in solitude, this act opens a channel to self-actualization in an alternative way than imposed by anthropocentric point of views and attitudes in Western and global culture. In an interview with Thomas Pero, Hughes comments:

[A]ny kind of fishing provides that connection with the whole living world. It gives you the opportunity of being totally immersed, turning back into yourself in a good way. A form of meditation, some form of communication with levels of yourself that are deeper than the ordinary self. When I'm fishing alone – I don't know whether it's your experience, but when I fish alone for hours – as I come out of it, if I have to speak to somebody, I find I can't speak properly. I can't form words. The words sort of come out backwards, tumbled. It takes time to readjust, as if I'd been into some part of myself that pre-dates language. (qtd. in Tongsukkaeng, *Ecocritical* 249-50)

It is the non-human world beyond an anthropocentric framework that allows Hughes to contemplate his own

psyche in relation to fishing and a fresh poetic idiom of communion. In his poetics of environment humankind is inseparable from a sense of animality shared with more-than-human life forms on the planet earth. This is the basis of Hughes's spirituality which takes its roots in the materiality of natural world. For this purpose, he develops a metaphorical idiom and renews imaginative contacts with cultures and practices gradually becoming integrated with his understanding of environmental crisis.

In "Salmon-taking Times" Hughes narrates a riverscape during the flood and post-flood scenario. The remnants of water bodies and living creatures block the flow of water. The flood is defamiliarized as extraordinary environmental condition encountering the wild inhabitants with the 'unknown' in natural world. The poem describes the moment when the flood is strongly chaotic:

. . . Tumbling hooligans
 They jammed the old bends. Diabolical muscle,
 Piglets, tusky boars, possessed, huge sows
 Piling in the narrows. (CP 649)

But after a "warm shower" the river recaptures its beauty and sanctity. The disruptions of the flood subside and the devastation caused is slowly substituted by reappearance of river's natural pace and organic character. The poet describes this moment in a distinct vividness and symbolic ritualism "the river emerges / In glistenings, and gossamer, bridal veils, / And hovers over itself – there is a wedding / Delicacy – (CP 649). Environmental and spiritual themes in Hughes's poetry are inalienable from each other. His use of wedding imagery, bride and groom occurs with contextual variations. Here in particular, he chooses to perceive and project the experience of water at hand like "a religious moment" and "a shower of petals of eglantine" (CP 649). Not only he succeeds in defamiliarizing the setting of ordinary floods and flooded rivers, but he allows his ecological consciousness and poetic language to be re-constituted.

Hughes uses his fishing experience to envision the river as a living organism, though only in symbolic sense. This element is pervasive in "After Moonless Midnight" and "Last Night". Both the poems reveal the mind and body language of an angler who keeps his insightful eye centered on the animal agency of the fish and river at the same time. In a vividly pictorial manner, "After Moonless Midnight" addresses the otherness of aquatic creatures and discomfort the alienated speaker in given riverine environment. The paradoxical reality of other-than-human creatures is symbolized in the poem. Relationship with one's ecosystem is seen through the fish which overcome apparent blindness in their own specific manner. Instead of eyes, they have

other senses such as touch and smell that integrate them with their ecosystem organically. The poem opens in a moonless midnight when the angler-poet enters the river. Soon, he realizes that he is "listened" to and "watched" (CP 659). The monitoring creature is none than the river:

They waited for me. The whole river
Listened to me, and, blind,
Invisibly watched me. And held me deeper
With its blind, invisible hands.
'We've got him,' it whispered, 'We've got him.' (CP 660)

In these lines Hughes reverses the angler's situatedness in *River* poems. Thoughts and experience of river unfold in a dramatic way in water bodies replete with life forms that the poet angler wishes to connect with to get them in possession. But his detachment and distance create practical hurdles. A sort of tension and conflict temporarily dominates the narration of the episode. At the beginning, the speaker 'waded' in the water but at the end the river 'got' him, holding him deeper. River becomes a living organism and the angler like the troubled persona in "The Hawk in the Rain" trapped in muddy earth struggles to get free. Reddick acknowledges this turn "On this dark river, the angler is caught bodily in the river's hands. The fisherman is so captivated by the river that he sees himself as prey" (229). Like in "An Eel", the poet critiques the notion of blindness which falls into an anthropocentric understanding of 'visibility'. In fact, the fish and the river have 'senses' beyond 'sight' in darkness that humans might not 'know'. Visibility or invisibility is tied with Hughes's imagination of the riverine environment which creates a powerful metaphor in his poetry. The poem offers a particular 'riverscape' differently interpreted by a human being; the angler is an interloper who experiences the fluvial world's mystery.

River as a physical phenomenon in Anthropocene epoch of climate change and environmental degradation suffers ailments and draw characteristic comparisons with similar human conditions. Internally too, its water bodies are not always static and the creatures experiencing its perennial flow are also subjected to changes by the onslaught of an evil. Facing this unexpected challenge of body and spirit, Hughes, the poet-angler is placed and places river in "Last Night" in a setting of the full moon night. He relates to the moon, moonlight, winds, earth and the full range of non-human life forms in a novel way. This poem portrays a river drastically damaged and reduced to the level that it only reaches the poet-angler's knees. It means its depth and the life in it has also suffered or altered location. The river is depicted as a deadly environment

when "the summer night/ Turned on its pillow" (CP 665). The river-god becomes old, sick and badly affected by a nameless evil. Here the intensity of darkness in the unfamiliar river represents 'otherness' in the non-human world:

Evil came up
Out of its stillest holes, and uncoiled
In the sick river, the drought river of slimes —
Like a sick man lying in the dark with his death. (CP 665)

The riverscape is 'dark'. Degenerating in changed climactic conditions of widespread ecological imbalance, like a dying man, the river is projected as nearing death "Rusty peaty blood-dark, old-blood dark" (CP 665). This symbolic imagery reinforcing a deep sense of decay correlates with the opposite of floods – the river's physical condition in times of draught. The dark and decaying river, an apt metaphor of water pollution and environmental contamination betrays human intervention and adverse impact on its natural processes. The poet-angler is a silent spectator of a condition where his helplessness aggravates the internal and external plight. If the river is sick and fish are evil in this degraded environment, the angler is without any clues about healing measures, he "stood in a grave / And felt the evil of the fish . . . Deep fish listening to me / In the dying river" (CP 665). His anthropocentrism has to bear the burden and loss of the crimes his human species have committed. It is in this context that Reddick's observation becomes very pertinent "the poems about drought successfully articulate Hughes's concerns about the vast problem of climate change and the localised problem of water pollution, without losing their poetic sophistication and becoming protest verse." (231) But knowledge and practice of fishing having intimate association with personal memory of place, people and myths form his environmental drives and poetic production. It is also associated with religious belief in indigenous cultures and rituals, inspires Hughes to perceive rivers in their ecosystem with a sense of optimism.

This concern informs some of his most moving poetry on water bodies and non-human life forms. Reddick is particularly right as she affirms that "from 1983 onwards, the year when *River* was published, Hughes was to become increasingly engaged in defending Devon's river environments from suffering such a sad fate" (240). Thus, the imagery details a regenerative saga of the non-human life forms in water bodies.

III. CONCLUSION

Ted Hughes's sensitivity of environmental changes clubbed with drastic inconsistencies in climate and seasonal interruptions to the aquatic creatures is quite noteworthy in these poems. In fact, the whole of *River* poems can be read this term as a kind of central motif integrating the literal landscape with the mythical connections in Hughes's mind. It refers to the split in modern human consciousness and a denial of the inner self. In his vision, the internal and external disconnectedness is inseparable. So, environmental reality is also a metaphorical indicator of the inner world and its turbulence. Thus, in *River* poems, Hughes appears to nearly reach his environmental and spiritual vision. River is definitely a step forward in Hughes's poetics symbolizing the merger of the human and the non-human agencies.

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