

The Solipsism of Empire: A Postcolonial Reading of Ted Hughes's "Hawk Roosting"

Azizullah Khan

Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Science and Technology, Bannu,
azizullah50@yahoo.com

Muhammad Osama Bin Hameed

Visiting Lecturer, Department of English, University of Science and Technology, Bannu,
osamahameed912@gmail.com

Abstract

The poem "Hawk Roosting" by Ted Hughes is an allegory that symbolizes power, dominance, and the natural world. It reflects upon the solipsistic perspective of European colonialism and imperial authority. Through the analysis of the monologue of the Hawk in a Postcolonial theoretical context, the rhetoric of the hawk highlights the central ideologies of British empire, the ideology of natural superiority, the divine right to dominate, the violent establishment of order, and the obliteration of the subaltern Other. Moreover, this paper contextualizes Hughes's work during the mid-20th-century era of decolonization and engages with the postcolonial theories of proponents like Edward Said and Frantz Fanon to deconstruct the voice of the hawk. It argues that the hawk represents the imperial subject who makes imperialism appear justified through a self-naturalizing discourse that renders the colonized territory and its inhabitants passive and voiceless, while subjects have a use value. It goes beyond general statements of power and reveals the particular mechanics of colonial discourse, offering Hawk Roosting as a critical but indirect commentary on the long-running psyche of imperialism.

Keywords: Ted Hughes, Hawk Roosting, postcolonialism, imperialism, Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, colonial discourse, British Empire

Introduction

The *Hawk Roosting* poem was published in Ted Hughes' 1960 collection '*Lupercal*'. The poem, over the time, has sparked intense debate and various interpretations. Its monologue in the first person as a bird of prey sitting on a perch has been most often interpreted as a chilling account of the pitiless nature of nature (Gifford, 2009), as a metaphor of totalitarian power (Sagar, 2005), or as an uninspired description of existential presence (Hirschberg, 1981). These readings are helpful, but they tend to work on too abstract a level, which may easily weaken the political and historical particularity of the poem. The more specific approach suggested in this paper is to read "The Hawk Roosting" as an elaborate allegory of the ideology and practice of European colonialism. Through the postcolonial lens, the soliloquy of the hawk is unraveled not only as the proclamation of crude force but also as the exact rhetorical structure of imperial defense. In this sense, the hawk is turned into the mouthpiece of the colonizer, and his self-proclaimed greatness, the right of God to own, and his violent organization of the world fully reflect the reason behind the existence of the British Empire. By performing a close reading of the word-play of the poem, its construction of a passive Other, and its insistent thematic stasis, this paper will show that Hughes, author in twilight of empire, produced a damning critique of the colonial mentality - the mentality that sees the world as a lifeless source through which he can affirm himself in solipsism.

This interpretation depends upon the historical background of the poem in which it was written. Hughes penned '*Lupercal*' in the late 1950s when there was rapid decolonization. The Suez Crisis of 1956 was a national humiliation for Britain, clearly demonstrating the decay of its imperial authority and the vulnerability of its self-perception as a world broker (Howe, 1993). This gave a nostalgic cultural pivot, suggesting to some that a previous time of supremacy had passed. The poem by Hughes, in which its creature pronounces that nothing has changed despite the inevitability of historical change, can be interpreted as a reaction to this climate. It embodies the psychology of empire throughout time as its material forms dissolved.

Literature Review

The debate on "Hawk Roosting" has been dominated by discussions on power and nature. Early critics such as Keith Sagar (2005) have strongly placed the hawk in the pantheon of animal poems that Hughes wrote, believing the bird to be a pure expression of the Nature of Nature, an animal that transcends human morality. To Sagar, the Hawk is not evil; it is merely actualized, a state of being in which everything is perfect and nothing has to be justified (p. 78). Stuart Hirschberg (1981) also concurs with this ontological interpretation of the hawk, insisting that the hawk is the embodiment of a Heideggerian sense of Being, so self-present that it has its own nature to defend (p. 112).

The most widespread is the political one. This is easily associated by many commentators as the voice of a hawkish dictator. Terry Gifford (2009) admits it, but warns against a reductive interpretation, since the strength of the poem is in its vagueness: *"Is it the nature of the hawk or a human oppression projected onto the hawk?"* (p. 54). The poem has often been republished as a response to fascism, and its final line, "Nothing has changed," has been frequently quoted. I shall hold on to the parts of this sort, reverberating the eternalist arguments of totalitarian governments.

Nevertheless, the Postcolonial outlook has not been studied thoroughly. Although critics such as Neil Roberts (2006) have addressed the issue of Hughes and his involvement with the history and violence, a long-term postcolonial examination is uncommon. Much of the criticism that considers empire in the work of Hughes is inclined to his later and more overtly historical works, such as *Crow* or *Gaudete*. The following paper attempts to address this gap by impartially using Postcolonial theory tools to analyze "Hawk Roosting," stating that the representation of power in the poem is not merely general but rather imperial in nature. It is based on the foundational work of Edward Said (1978) on *Orientalism* and Frantz Fanon (1961) on the psychology of colonialism, using their theories to deconstruct the hawk discourse of ownership, examination, and governance. This method does not aim to discredit the previous readings but to enrich them by placing the terrifying image of power described in the poem within a tangible historical and ideological context. Ghazzoul (2021) analyzes the hawk's monologue as a "mask lyric" that uses first-person dominance, polysemy, and deviant constructions to convey despotic psychology. This demonstrates how a static, self-justifying worldview is enforced through stylistic elements such as the simple present tense.

In recent years, scholars have begun investigating Hawk Roosting through ecocritical and linguistic perspectives, offering a different perspective on how Hughes depicts domination. The framework used by Perveen et al. (2024) is the eco-critical, which assumes that the hawk's voice manifests dehumanization and ecological narcissism. They argue that Hughes attacks the anthropocentrism urge to dominate nature and uses the hawk as an object of environmental presumption. Their research focuses on how the hawk's selfish statements reflect human tendencies to conquer ecosystems without regard for ethics.

From an ecocritical perspective, Inan (2018) offers a ground-level analysis of the natural image in the poem, highlighting how Hughes blurs the boundary between the instinct of nature and the agency of morality. Inan states that the voice of the hawk is a call to celebrate the wild force of nature as well as a faint disclosure of uncontrolled power that is based on biological determinism. According to Parvin (2024), the Hawk represents the "Occident" in Said's *Orientalism* - a godlike, all-powerful Western authority that rules and owns colonized "others."

Analysis and Discussion

The Language of Imperial Justification: "The White Man's Burden" in Avian Form

The monologue of the hawk does not begin with a mere statement of authority; instead, it follows with a grand account of how the hawk itself has come into being, which directly reflects the ideological foundation of colonialism. The gist of this justification is the lines, *It took the very Creation / To make my foot, my each feather: / Now I have Creation in my foot* (Hughes, 1960, lines 5-7). In this case, the hawk establishes itself as the teleological climax of history, as the final destination to which all of the Creation has been working. It is the biological equivalent of the colonial doctrine of historical destiny, which held that European civilization was the most advanced stage of human evolution, tasked with bringing its light and uplifting the "primitive" peoples of the world (Kiernan, 1982). The logic of the hawk is culmination and entitlement: as the finished product, it has a natural right to possess and control the very process that brought it into existence.

Such a superior fact is smoothly converted into a doctrine of ownership and right. The blunt statement of the hawk, committing a killing wherever he likes because it belongs all to him (line 15), is the final word of colonial extractive logic. It removes all the pretense of reciprocal commitment or good governance and shows the harsh truth of conquest: the possession of power and the power of possession. No reference is made to some higher law or common morality; the will of the hawk is the law. This is reminiscent of the *realpolitik* of empire, in which military and technological superiority was directly converted into a self-proclaimed right to territory and resources, and that such a right was often expressed through legal fictions such as the doctrine of Discovery or the notion of *Terra Nullius* - land that was considered empty and thus could be filled (Lindqvist, 1996). The world of the hawk is his own *Terra Nullius*; the other animals have no right to say that it is obedient to their demands.

Additionally, the way the hawk has explained its manners by "tearing off heads" (line 16) is a barbaric parody of the civilizing mission. The colonizer often justified violence as a necessary tool to establish order, development, and civilization among native populations, which were considered chaotic (Fanon, 1961). The hawk also justifies itself in its ruthlessness, not as simple savagery but as the rule of the law that it promotes. For the one path of my flight is direct/Through the bones of the living (lines 19-20); the inelastic, violent advance of the imperial project, that, without any consideration of its destructive impacts on the lives and structures it damages, makes its way forward. It is not the aberration, but the functional mechanism, of its rule, the violence.

The Erasure of the Subaltern: The World as a Passive Object

One of the key principles of the postcolonial theory, most notoriously expressed by Edward Said (1978), is that imperialism is not only a process of amassing and seizing but also is underpinned by a strong discursive formation, a specific mode of speaking, writing, and thinking, which makes the colonized Other inferior, stagnant, and requiring to be administered. This construction is carried out with horrible effectiveness in *Hawk Roosting*. The whole poem is a monologue; the "sun," the "earth," the "air," as well as the possible prey, remain silent. They are deprived of voice, agency, and subjective existence. They are projected as parts of the landscape of the hawk, and they only exist in terms of its needs and perceptions.

This is best revealed in the line, "And the earth's face upward for my inspection" (line 8). The world is brought out as an object of passive feminization, that is, it presents itself to the active, masculine look of the imperial subject. This is what is involved with the colonial "inspection" - the ability to map, categorize, name, and hence control. The earth has no voice, but is spoken. It is not a thing that acts, but acts. This relation is exactly the reflection of the colonial one, in which the native population was simply rendered mute, their history rewritten, and their cultures recontextualized as subjects of research or impediments to development (Said, 1978). The hawk is a creator of meaning in its world as well as the colonizer. The subaltern here is the whole non-hawk world, and he or she is unable to speak (Spivak, 1988).

This power relationship is also supported by the physical stance of the hawk, which is: I sit at the top of the wood, my eyes closed (line 1). The closed eyes are an indication not of carelessness, but of great solipsism. The hawk is not required to see the world, but it already has it in its head. It has self-referential and complete knowledge. This shows how the colonial administrator believes in his omniscience, the idea that he knows the colony and its people better than they know themselves, even without any actual experience of their lived reality. Inaction of the hawk is the state of utmost control, the certainty that the set of rules it has established will operate in the manner it plans, with no visible assistance. Repose is the god-like of the imperial center, which is so sure of its domination over the periphery.

The Stasis of Empire: Rejecting the Inevitability of Change

The final and most permanent insistence, when read through a postcolonial lens, is perhaps the poem's most politically charged Part. The last accusation taken by the hawk is that "Nothing has changed since I began/My eye has permitted no change/I am going to keep things like this." (lines 21-24) is the voice of the empire going against the stream of history and against the power of decolonization. It is the doctrine of the Pax Britannica or of the Pax Romana, the pretension to have put up a last, perfect order which will last immortally. It is a rejection of historicity, the denial that any system, oppressive in particular, is not fertile with the seeds of its own destruction.

Hughes wrote in 1960, and he must have clearly understood the seismic shift redefining the world map. The hawks' insurrectionary shout of stasis can be interpreted as an expression of imperial nostalgia, the desire to return to a perceived golden age of unquestioned rule. The hawk represents the psychological incarnation of what Frantz Fanon (1961) called the intransigent colonizer who, confronted with the growing liberation movements, holds all his privileges and his perception of the world even tighter. The censorious gaze of colonial power, which has not allowed any changes, is the hawk, particularly its eye, that has forbidden any other version of the story, any political movement, or any cultural manifestation that endangers its hegemony.

This urge to have endless control is inherently unnatural, as is the whole irony of the poem. Although the hawk claims itself as the ultimate natural manifestation, its ideology is that of frozen art. Ecological systems are dynamic, adaptive, and in balance of succession. The vision of the hawk is not of an ecosystem but of a hierarchy, frozen in its upper part. This is similar to the project of colonization, which aimed to put colonized societies into a state of unending subservience and to interfere with their organic growth to suit the stagnant economic and political objectives of the metropole.

Engaging a Counter-Argument: The "Natural" Hawk

Another possible objection to this postcolonial reading is that it is a critical usurpation, an anthropomorphic coercion, which disregards the plain fact that the hawk is merely a hawk. One criticism is that the poem focuses more on the non-human world, which is a basic misinterpretation of human political forms (Sagar, 2005).

This objection, though, lacks the essentiality of metaphor and the very project Hughes has of poetry. Hughes did not write documentary verse as a naturalist; he used animals as metaphorical channels to the deep-seated elements of the

human condition: consciousness, violence, power, and creation (Gifford, 2009). The mere fact of giving the hawk speech, and a speech that refers so much to familiar human matters of defense and theory, begs a political interpretation. It is the very frightening similarity of the biological instincts of the hawk and the logic of human tyranny that is the strength of the poem. The hawk is not a fascist or colonialist, but rather an animal whose natural role when applied to our ideological world furnishes an ideal allegorical ship to think about fascism and colonialism. According to the poem, the rhetoric of empire is a refined mask on a more primitive, predatory instinct, the instinct to manipulate, possess, and dehumanize the Other.

Modality and the Syntax of Empire

Continuing on the declarative distinction of the hawk, we might analyze how the modality, the statement of the certainty, obligation, and possibility, supports the imperial logic of the poem. The high modality verbs used by the hawk multiple times (I kill, I hold, I am) create a linguistic world in which there is no place for doubt and no power. This is not an issue of tone only, but grammatical domination.

This grammatical absolutism is what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) describes as the linguistic violence of empire, the imposition not only of laws and boundaries but also of speech and thought, as well as ways of speaking and thinking, that obliterated the native epistemologies. The hawk does not just talk with confidence; it has an imperially built voice, a syntax of supremacy.

Ecological Imperialism and the Myth of Natural Order

Although the hawk claims to be the embodiment of nature, his view of the world is anti-ecological. Recent ecocritical commentary (Perveen et al., 2024) indicates that the reasoning of the hawk resembles what Alfred Crosby called ecological imperialism - the notion that the colonial spread was correct in the light of the superiority of European flora, fauna, and agricultural systems. The hawk's claim that it owns everything is a reference to the settler-colonial mentality of perceiving landscapes as blank, wild, and waiting to be filled in or tamed.

This aspect makes the hawk's naturalness claim tricky. Instead of being a force of neutral nature, the hawk turns out to be a symbol of ecological superiority, where nature is not a harmony but a hierarchy with the predator at the top. This is also consistent with Jason W. Moore, who criticized how capitalism and empire have rendered nature cheaper and cheaper. The world of the hawk is not a biodiverse ecology but a monoculture of domination.

Digital Colonialism and the Surveillance Gaze

The hawk and his aerial view, "And the earth's face upward for my inspection," can be reconsidered in the context of 21st-century digital imperialism. The eyes of the hawk look forward to the surveillance logic of contemporary empires: satellites, drones, and data-mining technologies that scan, surveil, and govern populations above. Other academics, such as Zuboff (2019) and Couldry & Mejias (2019), have suggested that the empires of the day no longer conquer them, but extract data and govern them through algorithms.

The god-eye surveillance capitalism is reflected in the hawk's omniscient posture, its closed eyes, and its complete awareness. There is no need for it to act and interact with the world and be in command of it; it merely knows, and knowledge is power. This gives the poem a chilling contemporary touch: the hawk is not only a metaphor for past glories but also serves as an ominous embodiment of the algorithmic masters of the present.

Colonial Hawk: Memory, Myth & Erasure

The voice of the hawk does not merely constitute a proclamation of power, but contains the imperial memory. The claim that Nothing has changed since I began is not merely a denial of historical movement; it is a rewriting of history. According to postcolonial theory, empires tend to create mythic discourses of permanence and origin to legitimize their rule. The proclamation of time by the hawk resembles the character of the colonial archive to overwrite the history of indigenous peoples and substitute it with a hegemonic time. This is in line with what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) refers to as silencing the past, in which the process of creating the narratives of history and deciding who to silence and whose history will be erased is the domain of power, and this process is further explained by Stoler (2009) in her reflection of the colonial archive as an instrument of imperial memory. The monologue of the hawk turns into a myth-making process in which its existence is approached as the source and the fate, and another voice and another history is not possible.

The Hawk and the Cartographic Gaze: Mapping as Domination

Colonial cartography can be applied to the line, the Earth's face upward, in my inspection, in which mapping is viewed as an instrument of conquest. Mapping has never been neutral in postcolonial studies; rather, it is a political gesture that turns land into property, people into subjects, and cultures into data. The hawk's aerial view resembles that of an imperial surveyor, breaking complex geographies into manageable zones of control. This resonates with Harley's (1988) point that maps represent statements of power rather than merely representations of space, a claim that also lies at the logical core of imperial domination and the cartographic imagination, according to Said (1993, pp. 58-61). The hawk's

scrutiny is not curiosity; it is surveillance, classification, and appropriation. In this connection, the poem by Hughes predicts the logic of empire, in which to see is to possess, and in which visibility is a preliminary to conquest.

Conclusion

The beauty of Hawk Roosting by Ted Hughes lies not in merely depicting a bird, but in the chilling echo of human systems of domination present in the monologue. Reading the poem through a postcolonial perspective, we can go beyond the generalized concept of power to examine the specific discursive strategies of imperialism. The voice of the colonizer becomes the voice of the colonizer itself; it is creating a story of its own ultimate purpose, of its divine right to possess, and it is simplifying the world into an object that it can inspect, which it is compelling to do with violence, and which it is enforcing with violence, to maintain its own solipsistic end. This exegesis adds depth to the analysis of Hughes's work, situating it within the historical context of a Britain struggling with the demise of its empire. The poem is a classic attack on the imperial psyche, a psyche that seems safely topical in an age of neo-colonial economic domination, cultural hegemony, and the new nationalist discourse. The hawk on the branch is a reminder forever: the craving to make Creation stay in your foot, to allow nothing to be changed, is a passion that will not bring life, but a fatal, complete mastery. When Hughes gave voice to this urge, he did not glorify it; he revealed the terrifying and ultimately false reasoning it had, and made us aware that the omnipotent is, in fact, the most desperate thing, a drama played in the head of the one who wields it in a world that is stirring with the compulsions of change.

References

- Bhola, H. S. (1987). Ngugi wa Thiong'o: *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature* [Review of the book *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature*, by N. wa Thiong'o]. *African Studies Review*, 30(2), 102–103.
- Couldry, N., & Mejias, U. A. (2019). *The costs of connection: How data is colonizing human life and appropriating it for capitalism*. Stanford University Press.
- Fanon, F. (1961). *The wretched of the earth*. Grove Press.
- Ghazzoul, N. (2021). A linguistic and stylistic analysis of Ted Hughes's "Hawk Roosting." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 11(7), 798–805. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1107.05>
- Gifford, T. (2009). *Ted Hughes*. Routledge.
- Harley, J. B. (1988). Maps, knowledge, and power. In D. Cosgrove & S. Daniels (Eds.), *The iconography of landscape: Essays on the symbolic representation, design, and use of past environments* (pp. 277–312). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/635410>
- Hirschberg, S. (1981). *Myth in the poetry of Ted Hughes*. Barnes & Noble.
- Howe, S. (1993). *Anticolonialism in British politics: The left and the end of empire, 1918–1964*. Clarendon Press.
- Hughes, T. (1960). Hawk roosting. In *Lupercal* (p. 18). Faber and Faber.
- İnan, D. (2018). *An ecocritical reading of Ted Hughes's "Hawk Roosting."* Balıkesir University. <https://www.academia.edu/112871303>
- Karishma Parvin. (2024). Exploring the Hawk as A Postcolonial Occident in Ted Hughes's Hawk Roosting. *International Journal for Social Studies*, 10(6), 29–34. Retrieved from <https://journals.eduindex.org/index.php/ijss/article/view/20489>
- Kiernan, V. G. (1982). *European empires from conquest to collapse, 1815–1960*. Leicester University Press.
- Lindqvist, S. (1996). *"Exterminate all the brutes."* The New Press.
- Mahid, P. S., Farhan, M. D., Yuanda, N. E., & Purwarno, P. (2024). Exploring Dehumanization in Ted Hughes' Poem Hawk Roosting Through an Eco-Critical Lens. *International Journal of English and Applied Linguistics (IJEAL)*, 4(1), 97–105. <https://doi.org/10.47709/ijea.v4i1.3784>
- Roberts, N. (2006). *A literary life: Ted Hughes*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sagar, K. (2005). *The laughter of foxes: A study of Ted Hughes* (2nd ed.). Liverpool University Press.
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.
- Said, E. W. (1993). *Culture and imperialism*. Knopf.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
- Stoler, A. L. (2009). *Along the archival grain: Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense*. Princeton University Press.
- Trouillot, M.-R. (1995). *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history*. Beacon Press.
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. PublicAffairs.