CHAPTER - III

WAR AND VIOLENCE

Ted Hughes was fifteen when the great war ended. The young poet had read and heard about the thousands of men killed in the war. Several others before him had written about the futility of war. Among the war poems of Ted Hughes are "Bayonet Charge", "Griefs for Dead Soldiers", "Two Wise Generals", "The ancient Heroes" and the "Bomber Pilot" describe the fate of several soldiers who are victims of national pride and patriotism. The poem "Bayonet Charge" beings in a dramatic way, a soldier's waking suddenly and running towards the enemy. Inexperience and varying, raw-seamed hot cocky and sweating heavily he runs towards a green hedge which dazzled with rifle fire. Hearing the sounds of bullets he holds the rifle benumbed. His eyes are brimmed with patriotic tears which course through his chest like molten iron. He stands still in bewilderment wondering what he is aiming at. He doesn't understand for what good reason he was running and after whom he was running. To his dismay he finds a yellow hair rushing out of the short-slashed furrows. It rolled like a flame with its mouth wide open and its eyes protruding. As though ignited by a dynamite he charges towards the enemy.
Hughes in a series of poems has described violence in the natural world. The violence is not only for survival but in the love making as well. In "Incompatibilities" he suggests that the law of violence is no less in operation in the world of human beings. The man and woman are not so motivated by love as desire. For him "Desire's a vicious separator" although it makes men and women circle round each other. It is this desire that welds hot irons of two selves single. The story of the first man and woman repeats itself everyday. An invisible magnet and a furnace hammer-blos the one body on the another till they become one. The desire is so strong that it drives to plummet through blackouts of impassables ending in long struggle to overcome every obstacle. What remains in the end that each is choked with his or her cry and loneliness. The bemoans the physical aspect of love and such lovers as are described in the poem are incompatible to each other.

"The Casualty" describes the violent death of the airman who falls from an aircraft. An aircraft burning across the blue sky is watched by the farmers in their fields and housewives behind steamed windows. From a distance the falling aircraft is like a fire fly fighting a spider. They know that it is the warplane and they wait for the evening
news. The aircraft has created a commotion in the nearby woods. The stems of the plants are destroyed. The pheasant is astonished by the size.

The hare hops up and madly runs away. The men who saw the aircraft see the smoke at a distance. They don't come out of their houses. They see through the sun beams of their homes. On his part the man who fell out of air alive is groaning. His cries open wheats, leaves and the breeze that blows touches his bones. With his broken spine he is propped up. His limbs are arranged in order by the people who gather around him. Like helpless ghosts they open his eye and stand. In few moments the airman dies but none who gathered there shows that he has a heart larger than the clenched fist. The tears of their eyes are too tender to flow but before they share the grimace, gasp and the gesture of death the life has gone away from the man.

Commenting on this poem, a critic writes The casualty of the poem is not merely crashed airman but humanity itself. The responses to the airman's horrific death or indifference and voyeurism... This poem holds the first of the many images of the incineration which appear in Hughe's work. Death by fire - The martyr's death - formerly the death of supreme meaning has become in the 20th century the most
common form of disconnected—seemingly absurd—death. Incendiary bombs, Nuclear explosion, Napalm and Crematorium oven have consumed millions... It must have seemed to Hughes that the only response to the situation, in English poetry in the 1950's was the clutching of the close complacency of the spectators in the poem"

In "Griefs for dead Soldiers" which is in three parts the poet instead of describing the war describes the consequences of the war. In part-I there is a description of the state morning for the dead. There is unwailing of the cenotaph over the dead bodies of those who were killed in the war. The poet describes the national mourning as the "mightiest". Large crowds which gather at the ceremony are dumbstruck as though some universal cataclysm is approaching their planet. With half a holiday and with birds silent and with an epitaph for each dead person the air turns into storm by monstrousness of the moment. The bugles cry thinly, the dead drums tap followed by columns of soldiers and the seargent major's voice heralded by the wind. The dead are described as magnificent souls scrolled and supporting the sky. There is a declaration of national sorrow.

In Part-II of the poem the poet describes the war widow who receives the death message of her husband. It is as
terrible as a "bomb that dives to the cellar and lifts the house". The words in the telegram tear up her love and disconnects her to what has bound her to someone. It has opened the doors and windows and gates to a hell which is her skull and heart. In the midst of the personal tragedy she cannot give up her life. She cannot transform her personal sorrow and make it a universal fail. The dead husband hangs around her neck although he can’t be felt.

In Part-III it is the battle ground that is described. The truth is that the grass has sprung up in the valley full of dead men suggesting that the earth has been indifferent to the dead. In the world of nature life goes on without any break;

"Under the blue sky heavy crow and black fly move. Flowers bloom prettily to the edge of the mass grave, while spades hack, and the diggers grunt and sweat.

In a description of horror the poet tells us how the earth throws up mutilated parts of the human body, Then the diggers dig up the earth to bury new dead bodies which are already buried. Its a moment that would annihilate a watcher, cursing the unending labour of digging and the black flies which bite their wrists. The grave diggers go
about their job like craftsmen, "weighing their grief by the ounce and burring it". In contrast to poems like "Bayonet charge" and "Griefs for Dead Soldiers" in both of which the poet never doubts the integrity of the soldiers, in "Two Wise Generals" there is an account of selfishness and cowardice in Generals. In the title itself there is the indication that the generals are not heroic but are clever. They are not prepared to lay their lives but are eager to share the spoils of the war. Unlike Black Douglas who "Bannered", "trumpeted", who flung to the enemy, "letting the whole air flow break neck with blood" till he fell astride, the two wise generals, two "timid" and "ageing" Generals sit before the map and begin to divide the territories. While they are in their tents the respective armies where like safe towns away and in darkness. They began to drink and joke and complimented themselves on their wisdom. They were not afraid of being killed because they were so heavily medalled. After the night during which they drank and signed their treaties they returned to their respective armies. To their utter dismay they find that the sleeping armies are massacred.

Hughes has written poems on war and the consequent destruction. In English poetry there had been poets who had
glorified war, sentimentalized the war and satirized the war. Wilfred Owen found nothing but pity in the war. Alfred Houseman was ironical in his descriptions of war. Hughes in contrast to all the war poets is neither sentimental nor satirical. In "Six Young Men" he describes six young men who are no more. Looking at their photographs the poet finds that the young men have no wrinkled faces and wore cooked hats. Their shoes shone which suggested that they are all very smart each of them has his own characteristic. If one has an intimate smile, one is bashful. If one is ridiculous the other is very informal. From the photograph one gathers that they are all trimmed for the weekend entertainment. They often gathered by a river bank, sit under a tree or lean on a black wall. There they would hear the water of seven streams fall. The photograph shows their expressions of listening to the waterfalls and the leafy valley.

After describing the six young men on the basis of the photograph taken when they were alive Hughes now describes the death. One of them was shot by the enemy and while was trying to call for help he died. His best friend was killed in the act of helping him. The third was shot dead by rifle shots. The remaining also died but poet doesn’t know how. So, the poet towards the close of the poem compares the
man's photograph, "the locket of a smile" turns into "last agony and hours", the deadmen for the poet are more alive than those whom we confront, "and shake by the hand, sea hail, here speak loud".

Keith Sagar commenting on the poem says, "In his introduction to the selected poems of Keith Douglas, Hughes wrote of the truth of a man is a doomed man in him or his dead dead body... The murderous skeleton in the body of girl, the dead men being eaten by dogs on the moonlit desert, the dead man behind the mirror, these items of circumstantial evidence are steadily out arguing all his high spirits and hopefulness.

In 'Six Yong Men' Hughes adds his own evidence, a photograph of his father's, six young men on a Sunday jaunt, each as alive as any man you can confront.

And shake by the hand, see hale, hear speak loud yet they all died within six months and forty years ago to regard the photograph might well dement. Such contradictory permanent horrors here smile from the single exposure and shoulder out one's own body from its instant and heat. 'Exposure' perfectly chosen word. The camera which cannot lie exposed
them as forever alive and young. Six months later they were exposed to the horrors of the war which exposed their bones. And one's own vivid life, for all its bulk and weight, is equally flimsy. We are no more alive then they were, than, here in their photograph, they still are, as by bilberied bank, a thick tree, a black wall 'which are there yet not changed' they listen to the waterfall that roars yet in that valley. Yet we know that they are all dead as dinosaur or dodo, dead and rotten. If I have my photograph taken today, someone will look at it forty years hence and be looking at the photograph of a dead man. It is like seeing one's own tombstone, like becoming aware of one's own skeleton which will one day shrug of its flesh.

Among the virtues of the poem may be mentioned its expression of an affection for ordinary life, a recognition of bright vitality where Hughes more characteristically detects complacency and inertia. The change from the vitality of life described in the first three stanzas of the poem to the intimacy of the death described in the latest stanzas is sudden.

The poem cannot be described as morbid just because it
deals with death. In such of his best poetry Hughes’s preoccupation with death is parallel by a pre-occupation with the real.

"Six young men owes some of its strength to to the details of the trench warfare in the third stanza, but war itself is an occasion rather than the subject of the best war poems".

"The Ancient Heroes and the Bomber Pilot" is yet another poem of Hughes which deal with the war and the nothingness it leaves. The poets mind is obsessed with the violence of war and the number of deaths it causes. The war heroes have nothing to boast of excepting the huge bodies they have built, eating the belly full of boar flesh and drinking ale without any limit. They expect some poets to sing about their heroisms in war. In this imagination they visualize swishing their swords. They also imagine driving their chariot wheels on the necks of warriors, "In the glory of hair and beard". They have thinned down their blood in war and replenish their bread and board after it. They make news of their achievements having got their dear firm with "sacks full of heads". What happens to these warriors and their achievements after their death is anybody’s guess. The archaeologists find "bits of bone rust". The modern bomber
pilot by a turn of his wrist can make the enemy capital shudder. He can shake the frame of the earth but when he imagines the warriors who are waiting to fight the war his heart becomes cold and small. Whether it is the ancient war or a modern one the horror and the fear are not different, the difference being while the ancient heroes never cared for those who fought in the war, the modern aware of the enormity of destruction reflects before he acts.

Several writers have worked on the theme of martyrdom in their works. Infact the conflict between temporal power and spiritual authority is fascinating subject which tempted even such great writers as Bernard Shaw, T.S.Eliot, Charles Williams, not to speak of Alfred Tennyson and Christopher Fry. It is not surprising therefore that Ted Hughes is struck by the theme of persecution. In his 'The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar' there is an account of a bishop who was chained to the stake and burned in Wales by Bloody Mary's men. In the name of Mary the bishop was burnt by the curling venomous flames. His bone, foot, ankle, knee, thigh are charred. His bowels are boiled. His heart dropped down as a cinder. The Welsh town's people heard the dying man cracked in the fire's mouth. They saw the black woozing of stuff and found there lungs filled with tarse and retches. The dying
man never held their attention with his pulpit oratory as he is now. His agony seems to be more interesting than his wit. Bloody Mary appeared to have caught this shepherd and "knoted him into this blazing shape" and punished him. Seeing their bishop punished for his lessons their silence appear to disown him. No one would dissent with the judgment of god ("Blasphemous father struck by fire from heaven"). While dying the bishop spoke to the people that his words did not get the honour from the shrewd town's folk. In the last stanza of the poem the poet summarizes what Bishop had done in his life and what reward he got.

Gave all he had, and yet the bargain struck To a merest farthing his whole agony, His body's cold-kept miserdom of shrieks He gave uncounted, while out of his eyes, Out of his mouth, fire like a glory broke, And smoke burned his sermons into the skies.

In "Every Man's Odyssey" Ted Hughes makes use of the Homeric myth to suggest its relevance to modern times. Telemachus, son of Odysseuss, goes in search of his father and during his journey on the seas meets with a number of adventures. After overcoming Perilious and Fatal experiences he returns home and kills all those who are after his
mother. The Hughes’s poem describes boistrous princess who gather round Penelope, Telemachus’s mother, "cushioning the going of her feet with the glow of their eyes". They have brought trinkets and "hoisted the jugglers and the dancers" onto his mother. On her part Penelope "white, a woe freezing a silence" ignored the impertinence of her suitors by pretending to knit. They have their banquet and adulation. Since Telemachus was only a boy he did not realize the sufferings of his mother. Once he grows into a man ("the day you saw the spears on the wall") he decides to take vengeance on all those who offer to marry his mother. His father's honour served as a motivating power. He takes vengeance on the enemies. Infact anyone would take up arms and kill the gluttonous and those who dishonor a hero.

Hughes has often written about war and violence. This poem "The retired Colonel" is a homage to a colonel who had fought many wars. The colonel is not identified but the description suggest that the person is not imaginary but real. The poet often saw him. Though he had fought battles before he still has a stiff neck and a brow which is very piercing. He is loner with his wife dead and daughter's gone and lives to honour his old frame. Although he has been shot in the heart he still held on to his habits. He is a
contrast to the rabel starlings who roar in the Trafalgar square. But this British Lion is mounted beside the great English for people to admire.

This poem is in tune with Hughes's eagerness to praise those who have had temporal experience and cultural advancement. The Hawk In The Rain end with Bishop Farrar's Fayer'sss martyrdom. Lupercal ends with an expression of faith in the Luperca's ritual efforts to rempower man age to age while the body hold. "The majority of the protagonists, in Hawk were heroic, action oriented figures from England's past, lovers are assertive rural types, If they either wrestled like the Dow-Breeder, with experience and invasions of libidinal energies from the unconscious, or were satirized like Egghead, for failing to do so. In Lupercal the accomplishments of Dick Straight, Nicholas Farar, Thomas Browne and the retired Colonel were saluted as admirable, each remained self-assure in life, comfortable in articulating his historical age, and fulfilled in death.
1. Annie Schofield, "Hughes and the Movement", Ed. K. Sagar
   The Achievement of Ted Hughes, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), P. 31

