

CELEBRATION OF AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPE IN THE POETIC

OEUVRE OF JUDITH WRIGHT

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ABSTRACT

Judith Wright, a well known acclaimed writer of Australia, is truly touched by the intricate powers of nature and celebrates the essence of nature in her poetic oeuvre. Nature seems to be one of the greatest moulding factors of her imagination. Her poetry is sprinkled with admiration and celebration for nature's abundance and beauty. Her first collection of poems *The Moving Image* introduces to the visible and unseen realities of land. She celebrates Australian landscape as a whole in a harmonious way considering that the spirit of mother earth is present in this universe and upholds the view that nature possesses all the knowledge man needs to know. Her poetry succumbs that nature is a realm in which mankind can both reveal itself and live as one with the world. Nature occupies a considerable corpus in her poetry reflecting the purity, beauty, grace and tranquillity of life. It is a manifestation of glory and greatness of Almighty which becomes an essential part of her being.

KEYWORDS: Judith Wright, Australian Landscape

INTRODUCTION

Nature has been inspiring writers and poets since ages maybe as an intellectual or emotional folly. Judith Wright, a well known acclaimed writer of Australia, is truly touched by the intricate powers of nature and celebrates the essence of nature in her poetic oeuvre. Judith Wright's visual images of nature represent and evoke powerful feelings as she transforms her personal experiences of nature into poetry with powerful symbols. Tracy Bowden rightly states "Growing up near Armidale in the New England district of NSW, Judith Wright developed a deep love of the Australian landscape" [Internet]. Her first collection of poems *The Moving Image* introduces to the visible and unseen realities of land. Appraising this collection of poem, Vincent Buckley argued that "Judith Wright surpasses all other Australian poets in the extent to which she...reveals the contours of Australia as a place, an atmosphere, a separate being" [Internet]. This sense of identification with the land gave her poetry an intimate and personal feeling. As a child it was her constant companion. The physical landscape Wright celebrates is a real Australian one, consisting of "tree-frog and dingo, rainforest and sea coast, stark cliffs and eroded hills, bushfire and flood, dust and drought, wind and rain, flame-tree and cicadas, gum tree and cyclone" [Hall, 26]. It is not like the green and fertile England. It possesses a different kind of beauty and a different kind of terror. Her childhood experiences at "Walamumbi", her family's sheep ranch in New South Wales, the New England, the subtropical rainforests of Tamborine Mountain, Queensland and the plains of southern highlands near Braidwood attribute for her interest in Australian landscape. Wright admits that "As a poet you have to imitate somebody, but since I had a beautiful landscape outside that I was in love so much and loved so much...it was my main subject from the start. it comes to me naturally" [Internet]. Expressing her love of the land, she wrote to one of her friends:

“my soul home in the eucalyptus forest” [Brady, 511]. Her stay at the Tamborine Mountain brought her quite close to nature and the natural world though her first connection with it was as a place to escape. She would often explore the National Parks down the sides of the mountain. The main part of her nature poetry was written in Tamborine. Wright a passionate gardener loved to cultivate her peas and lettuce which gave her as much joy as her blossoming flowers like bottlebrush, native jasmine and mint bush. She created two gardens in her adult life: one at Tamborine in the hinterland behind Queensland's Gold Coast, and the second at Mongarlowe, near Braidwood, about eighty kms from Canberra on land she called 'Edge'[Somerville,71]. A friend of Wright, the writer Jackie French, commented on her ability to sit for hours at Edge, just watching [Somerville, 71] and admiring nature. As Wright came to understand her landscape, so she searched for the words to encode it and celebrates it in her poetry. In *Because I Was Invited* she affirms:

Nature can no longer be viewed as machine. It has a living aspect, with which we find ourselves identifying. We can perceive, in the change from day to night, from winter to spring, an inescapable correspondence with the processes of our own bodies, and we can see those some changes going on in creatures other than ourselves. [Wright, 67]

Nature occupies a considerable corpus in her poetry reflecting the purity, beauty, grace and tranquillity of life. It is a manifestation of glory and greatness of Almighty which becomes an essential part of her being. Wright compares herself with the “land” in the poem *Jet Flight over Derby*. “This body knows its place, / and longs to stand on land /... / I am what land has made / and land's myself, I said.” (CP, 271-80) Dealing with the landscape in the poem *Reminiscence* Wright pays a tribute to the “coloured country” into which she was born. She exclaims her love for the land and adores the various images of nature:

I was born into a coloured country;
 spider-webs in dew on feathered grass,
 mountains blue as wrens,
 valleys cupping sky in like a cradle,
 christmas-beetles winged with buzzing opal;
 finches, robins, gang-gangs, pardalotes
 Tossed the blossom in its red-streaked trees, (CP,329)

Judith Wright minutely observes the beauty of nature which lends a smooth flow to her poetic attention in the poem *Seasonal Flocking*:

- Last week outside my window
- the tree grew red rosellas,
- berry-bright fruits, the young ones
- Brocaded with juvenile green. (CP,405)

The long association of the poetess' with the world of green, be it trees, flowers, bushes dense forests etc.,

establishes a pious bond with their poetic vision. Wright's poem *The Forest* is such an example where the forest-beauty is sprinkled over a white canvas sometimes in the form of "Murray-lily", "vines" and "flowers":

white violets smudged with purple,

the wild-ginger spray,

ground-orchids small and single

...

the thick-fleshed Murray-lily,

flame-tree's bright blood,

and where the creek runs shallow,

the cunjevoi's green hood.

...

Now that its vines and flowers

are named and known,

like long-fulfilled desires (CP,185-186)

Judith Wright shares her own experiences in her poetry. Walking "barefoot" into the cool flow of water and collecting the stones are moments that replenish her as in the poem *Beside the Creek*:

Under the wavering water shine the stones,

rounded in ruby-colours and clouded white.

Once I walked barefoot into that cool

never-ceasing flow. I gathered once

pebbles and ripples, the skimming rounds of light,

and took them home. (CP, 226)

Sea is mighty. It is the "anonymous pilgrim" who stands and stares the changing civilizations. No one can mark the history and origin of the vast ocean that is "free of time and place". The sea is considered sacred as it cleans everything as in the poem *Sea-beach*:

Sea, anonymous pilgrim

made free of time and place,

from the unhistorical poles

and the shores of Asia and Greece

...

The sea cleans everything,
 a sailor said to me:
 and these white empty shells
 come out of the scour of the sea. (CP, 138)

The beauty of earth wrapped in the darkness gravitate the poetic-eye of Wright as depicted in the poem *Breath*: “I turned to the dark window;/ outside ere stars and frost./ My breath went out to the night / shaped like a cloud or a mist” (CP,131). In the poem *The Moving Image* night, wind, stars all join together to add beauty to earth: “Over the airfield looms the idol of night. / In its shadow the earth is spun by a stellar wind / in an eddy of spiralled stars” (CP, 6). Even the dry rocks attain more beauty and grace during night when stars sprinkle their “bright trails” across these hills and also over the earth’s surface, as expressed in the poem *Night*: “The contours of night are like/ the contours of this rock,/ and worn by light as by water” (CP,136). In the same poem night also emerges as an emblem of the mysterious dark, the unknowable that somehow keeps up the phenomenal dance and negates all our dreams:

Night is what remains
 when the equation is finished.
 Night is the earth’s dream
 that the sun is dead.
 Night is man’s dream
 that he has invented God-
 the dream of before-creation;
 the dream of falling.
 Night blocks our way, saying
 I at least am real. (CP, 136)

Earth sleeps in the dark lap of night when moon, who is “Earth’s Secretive dog”, keeps an eye over it. The beauty of sleeping earth blazes with the glowing beams of moon which “grins sidelong through the pane”, as in *White Night*:

Earth’s secretive dog, the moon
 grins sidelong through the pain.
 ...
 Some meteorite’s hot flake
 Rips blazing down, is gone—
 ...
 Light-years of stars pour in

on to a sleepless bed;
 the years fray, the threads weaken,
 cloud crosses, corners darken. (CP, 324)

The light of the stars quietens her as in the poem *Connections*: “when I look up at the stars I don’t try counting, / but I know that the lights I see can pass right through me” (CP, 421). In *The Prospector* the “Full moon” is considered “too bright for sleeping” (CP, 136). The struggle between “night” and “sea” is depicted in *Nigger’s Leap: New England* where “Night runs an obscure tide round cape and bay/ and beats with boats of cloud up from the sea/ against this sheer and limelit granite head” (CP, 15). In *Interplay* the stars forming into constellations symbolises the beginning of love:

Look how the stars’ bright chaos eddies in
 to form our constellations. Flame by flame
 answers the ordering image in the name.

World’s signed with words; there light-there love begin. (CP,190)

Sun becomes the measuring device of life in the poems of Judith Wright where “with their countless suns the years spin on” (CP, 40). The philosophy of life gets a clear projection through the metaphor of sun where “All are but shadows between the earth and sun” and “their shadows lengthen in the light of noon” (CP, 64). In the poem *The Wonga Vine* the sun is personified: “I gather you/ Out of his withering light. / Sleep there, red; / sleep there, yellow and white” (CP, 61). In the poem *Shadow* the beauty of the sun is expressed eloquently:

I stood to watch the sun
 slip over the world’s edge
 its white-hot temples burning
 where earth and vapour merge. (CP, 292)

The winding circle of seasons like spring, summer, autumn and winter captivates her attention. As a keen observer, Judith Wright sees the different aspects of nature. “Autumn” and arriving “winter” show the phenomenal growth and change as in *Lichen, Moss, Fungus* in which, “Autumn and early winter / wet this clay soil with rains./ Slow primitive plantforms / push up their curious flowers” (CP,417). In another poem, Wright shows the working of autumn, “Autumn swings earth round sun / at the invisible lasoo’s end,/ turning this latitude south and winterward” (CP,397) and in *Autumn Fires* the “Old flower-stems turn to sticks in autumn,/ clutter the garden” (CP,211). The rotating seasonal cycle reaches the stage of winter where, “Frost crumbles the dead bracken, greys the old grass” (CP, 74) and also the “winter and summer would burn the grass white” (CP, 82). Minute observance and mature vision gets reflected in *Pressures* where “winter games, spring gales, summer- under such/ pressures/ the contours of things crouch, their angles alter” (CP, 424). *Dry Storm* talks about “valley’s crops” and ‘seed’ during the season when “spring’s months are thirsty. The valley’s crops are sown/ and the seed waits”. (CP, 191) In the poem *The Cedars*, “spring” is the awakening energy, “knocker at the iron gates” of winter: “spring, returner, knocker at the iron gates,/.../ spring, impatient, thunderer at the doors of iron” (CP, 74-75). With the coming of spring “the road is pushed with tender dust” (CP, 228) and the beauty and charm of

Spring in the form of “may-tree” blossoming with “wild honey” is delineated in *The Child*: “Spring is always the red tower of the may-tree; / alive, shaken with bees, smelling of wild honey, / and the blood a moving tree of may” (CP, 34). A sense of connectivity moves on between various seasons of nature, sprinkling their respective colours and shades into the world of flora. They “change” as in *The Forest*, “When first I knew this forest/ its flowers were strange. / their different forms and faces/ changed with the seasons’ change-” (CP, 185). In the poem *Easter Moon and Owl* the “spring’s northern dawn” keeps its “old appointment” to “bring in autumn” (CP, 341). Colourful spring changes into summer, burning “grass” and other leafage with its scorching beams, as in the poem *Typists in the Phoenix Building* where “The city burns in summer’s heat,/ grass withers and season’s late” (CP,238) and “Now as the summer ends,/ slowly, day by day,/ it opens those ant-sized bells” (CP,415). The feeling of summer is described in the poem *A Song to Sing You* as:

When I went out in early summer
 the creeks were full
 and the grass growing;
 the bat’s-wing coral-tree stood in flower
 and the lake of my heart
 was clear and peaceful. (CP, 103)

Symbolically, every season rotates and flowers shrink and “retract” into lifelessness. The hot environment of summer burns the green, blossoming flora into a “blue smoke”, signifying the arrival of “another season” in the poem *For M.R.:*

All summer the leaves grow dense, the water-lilies
 push up arrowhead, after arrowhead,
 burst into smoke-blue, hit the central gold,
 and then retract themselves into bulb and mud.
 Coming round the world, another season begins. (CP, 381)

A deep study of Wright’s nature-poetry brings out the idea that nature preaches moral and ethical values. *Midnight* teaches that death of one object indicates birth of another in a new, fresh and promising season.

As a plant in winter dies
 down into the germ, and lies
 leafless, tongueless, lost in earth
 imaging its fierce rebirth;
 And with the whirling rays of the sun
 and shuttle-stroke of living rain
 weaves that image from its heart

and like a god is born again- (CP,59)

Nature permeates in all its animate as well as inanimate forms in the poetry of Judith Wright. The poem *Dark Gift* is a genuine appeal to the mother-nature. "Open, green hand and give/ the dark gift you hold" (CP, 71). It reflects that nature provides food and shelter to humanity Shirley Walker describes Wright's attitude towards nature as 'one of reverence for life; a reverence which will treat both nature and ourselves in the consciousness of nature as one interacting miracle" [Walker,86]. In relation to the poetry of Judith Wright, Shirley Walker has written:

Australian nature provides her with the potent new images- the coral atoll, the wattle-tree, the flame-tree, the conch-shell- for the specifically feminine concerns of fertility and generation, both physical and imaginative. In later poems the lake, the camp beside Split Rock, and even a tadpole or pebbles taken from a creek provide her with potent images for her more complex philosophical lyrics. [Walker, 15]

The poetry of Judith Wright depicts deep and perpetual bond with nature. She is sensitive to almost everything in nature and looks at all the objects of natural world with an inquisitive mind. She recognises that the landscape is imbued with spiritual and metaphysical properties. As a keen observer she expresses and personifies it in her poetic oeuvre. Although the landscape of Australia is dry and grim as compared to the fertile England yet Wright does the poetic justice and makes it more attractive and beautiful. She veils it with her poetic imagination and makes it enchanting. Wright brings forward her dream to identify with the objects of nature as it is suffused with values of natural piety. She turns to nature for solace and deeper understanding of man; for through it she believes that one can reach the exploration of the individual being. Wright strongly upholds the view that man should spend time in green outdoor environment which will nurture lifelong positive attitudes. Her poetry mirrors the varied species with a sensual delight and brings to highlight the relationship of togetherness and closeness between human life and natural life. She regards the natural environment to be a source of great blessing to mankind, the bringer of life and gladness to all creatures and thus needs to be preserved.

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