Judith Wright's Poetry: A Case for Redefining Sensibility

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White settlers had developed a variety of attitudes towards the aborigines. Many a time, they felt threatened by the aborigines; on other occasions, their behaviour reflected a violent prejudice against them, looking down upon them as an inferior race whose land they had rightfully snatched from the original inhabitants of the land. The white settlers in Australia did not feel at home for the reason that the new country did not accord much importance to Christianity or the broader European culture. 'Eventually many white poets came to envy the blacks [for] their 'inwardness' with the country' (O' Connor 31).

The nomadic life of Aborigines as hunter-gatherers brought speculation in the mind of the first settlers and they imagined them to be vagabonds with no fixed addresses. The white society was based on the system of capitalism in which a person could help himself to gain control over that which he had acquired through hard work. This happened under capitalism on the principle of individual enterprise. Money was the centre of such an enterprise. Contrarily, the aborigines had no concept of money. To them, trees and animals were representatives of ancestor spirits and not resources. Europeans did not understand this notion of relating so closely to the geographical surroundings. In their opinion, nature was to be worked upon and experimented with, as money was the main objective in life. Europeans considered nature to be a resource that they were meant to exploit. They wanted to clear the bush because they were obsessed with the word 'development'. In addition, they thought that their mission in life was to bring civilization to the 'uncivilized' world of the Aborigines.

The opposition of the Aborigines resulted in pitched battles fought between the aboriginals and the whites, in which many died on both sides. The former received harsh treatment at the hands of the whites on stations or reserves. This resulted in mutual hostility. In this background, writers such as Judith Wright made immense effort to express deep understanding of the Aboriginal world with respect to their history and culture.

Judith Wright came from a pastoral background. She was born in 1915 into a prominent family that settled at Wongwibinda station North-east of Armidale in the Northern tableland region of New South Wales. Her great grandparents the Wyndhams had settled on the Hunter River establishing a vineyard and winery called Dalwood in 1830. Wright's grandparents May and Albert Wright settled in Central Queensland but were unable to withstand the difficulties prevalent at the place. In consequence, they returned to the New England district of Wongwibinda. After her grandfather's death the grandmother continued looking after the family property and acquired others with the passage of time. Judith Wright's father Phillip Wright was the youngest child of her grandmother May Wright. Having a pastoralist history Wright's writing was greatly influenced by her background and the major themes of her poetry were 'history' and 'place'. She was able to write in a manner that was personal and particular. While writing about how her family had acquired property, Wright had also to deal with the dispossession of the Aborigines.

This led Judith Wright to be actively involved in working towards an Aboriginal Treaty, working while being a member of the Aboriginal Treaty Committee. Wright was also co-founder of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland and went on to become its president from 1962 to 1976. She also protested against oil drilling on Great Barrier Reef, sand-mining at Cooloolah and at Fraser Island. She was also concerned about the dangers and destructive capacities of nuclear development. In an interview she expressed her one of her concerns saying 'We know we're going to cook or choke to death if we go on as we are—but still we don't do anything. Greed wins out every time (http:/colloquy.monash.edu.au/issue 012/kohn. pdf).

Judith Wright belongs to the decade in which Australian poetry came of age taking up the concerns of the forties and fifties of Australia. Robert Brissenden has said that 'Wright was the first poet to show from the beginning a balanced, easy and completely unaffected acceptance of Australia — both the land and its people…….' (*Critical Essays on Judith Wright,* 1986). For instance, in her poem 'At Cooloolah' Wright apologizes to the Koori and Murri people saying: 'To all of the peoples of the old and true Australian and whose land I have trespassed and whom, by being part of my own people, I have wronged, I plead for forgiveness. To all of them I owe that overweighing debt of life itself, and to all of them I now bend my head and say sorry, sorry, above all, that I can make nothing right'(Clarke 296). The point is further strengthened by a number of statements she has made from time to time. She recollects, for instance, saying: 'I was born in the country of those who spoke Aneuwan. My mother's people had ignored their claim to the land on the Gara River, and had displaced them and built the house I knew as Thalgarrah, by the lagoon we called 'the Lake'. They, and the speakers of Bigambul, Bandjalong, Marbal, Djanbadi and Eneewin tongues, on whom others of my forebears had trespassed and built their houses, had little if any foothold on their lands by the time of my birth, and were almost unregarded by their usurpers. Many had died, some lived in exile from their places. They might camp on the dumps of Armidale or Gurgra**,** Uralla or Ebor, but could have no claim on that land (Clarke 295). Expressing her thoughts in her poem 'At Cooloolah', she expresses her sense of guilt in the following manner:

The blue crane fishing in Cooloolah's

twilight has fished there longer than our centuries.

He is the certain heir of lake and evening,

and he will wear their colour till he dies.

This is followed by her admission to the effect that she has remained all along an alien, a person who cannot relate to the life of the people who were the original inheritors of this land:

But I'm a stranger, come of a conquering people.

I could share his calm, who watch his lake,

She knows that the land in which her ancestors settled down, was the land of the Aborigines:

'Those dark-skinned people who once named Cooloolah

knew that no land is lost or won by wars.'

('At Cooloolah')

She feels extremely guilty to have displaced the aborigines claiming their land as her own and says:

I know that we are justified only by love,

but oppressed by arrogant guilt, have room for none.

('At Cooloolah')

Wright hardly met the true owners when they came to work for her. Still she observed that they were 'gentle and sorrowful' contrary to the tales which described them as 'despicable savages not worth shooting.' Reminiscing about her childhood she says: 'But sometimes as a small child I thought I saw old men, dark-skinned and shadowy, standing with spears in their hands among the few trees left standing on our sheep-ridden land, and it may be that I did [meet them], it was a feeling rather than an encounter' (Clarke 296).

This is how she puts her fearful childhood thoughts in the poem 'At Cooloolah':

'And walking on clean sand among the prints

of bird and animal, I am challenged by a driftwood spear

thrust from the water, and, like my grandfather,

must quiet a heart accused by its own fear.'

A sort of guilt haunts her as she goes down the memory lane: 'But I felt them myself, when as a small child I believed I saw those dark bearded faces moving among the trees, dispossessed and silent' (Clarke 296).

'Since that time,' she says, 'I have travelled over many stolen lands and lived in some, too many to name, but particularly the country of Yugambeh, where I lived twenty long and happy years on Tamborine Mountain. For those, I have to apologise even more deeply (Clarke 296). To counter her guilt of snatching land from the Aborigines, she chose to become an environmentalist and social activist campaigning for the land rights of the aborigines. She thinks that it is her responsibility towards Australia where she was born and brought up.

Judith Wright's sense of the past is associated with a sense of wrong for the harsh treatment and hostility meted to the Aborigines and their land. The whites have invaded and colonized them, grabbing their land after dispossessing and murdering them. Her awareness of the past has overtones of embarrassment, and shame

Judith Wright expresses herself on a variety of issues with force and conviction. Her awareness of issues and her essential concern is expressed in the poems 'Report of a Working Party' and 'A Document'. Designed politically, these poems contain sharp ironic overtones as she shifts her attention from the immediate social surrounding to the overall ecological pattern of Australia that was at once fragile and

valuable. She persistently questions the ills of her times: narrow individualist materialism of the white settlers and their personal gain. This gets further connected with the white man's burden to civilize the Aborigines which is in fact a big pretension on their part: they have merely come to another country to oppress and displace its people from their lands. This harsh treatment meted out by the Europeans to the aborigines haunts the mind of the poet and disturbs her.

The poem 'Report of a Working Party' satirizes deprivations caused by supposed progress and development pursued by the whites. In the late 1980s Judith Wright, Dorothy Green and a few others formed a group called Writers for an Ecologically Sustainable Population to show their concern about the sudden increase in Australia's population and the harm brought by humans to the environmental resources. She read this poem in the first public meeting with politicians and economists pointed out the 'exponential slope' in the country in the following manner:

The final peaks are impossibly steep.

It took us all our mathematics

to climb those exponential slopes.

We finally had to turn back

because we were starting too many avalanches.

We feared for your safety below.

She is concerned about the over-population that has already reduced huge portions of lands of the earth to ecological deserts wiping away greenery and the native species. 'A mathematical calculation will show that if the human race had begun from just two ancestors a mere 10,000 years ago, and had been able to grow at a steady average of about 1 per cent a year, it would by now be a ball of flesh several light years across and expanding at the speed of light! Yet many countries today consider it desirable to increase their population by over 1 per cent each year. From 1955 to 1995 Australia averaged 1.75 per cent per year' (O' Connor 172).

Australia is facing environmental problems such as climatic change because of the stripping of its forests, thus increasing the green house effect. Problems of soil erosion, drought, salinification and soil-acidification are also among its major concerns for Australia. She says in the same poem:

Frankly we don't think you'll even make the top.

Hidden by cloud (or smog) we were unable to see it,

there's vertigo in those verticals.

She is again concerned about Australia's future environment. The 'smog' has already hidden the 'verticals' of the mountains that would have otherwise brought dizziness to the onlooker. The word 'vertigo' would also mean breathlessness in result of the polluted air.

She signals a warning in these lines saying the population has swelled to a point of explosion. If one does not do something about the rising population now, one will have to face severe repercussions later.

Her poem 'A Document' takes up the issue of environment and conservation as well. The first line of the poem shows uncertainty and discomfort that is in the poet's mind. To quote:

'Sign there.' I signed but still uneasily.

I sold the coachwood forest in my name

remember that I signed uneasily.'

The forest that had once belonged to the poet, inherited from her ancestors under the social and legal system, (distribution of ownership was allowed in Australia because of which the poet had owned the woodland). She recalls that she had inherited it when she was 'much younger than any tree matured for timber.' At the same time, the poet is ill at ease after having sold the trees, almost eight hundred of them, 'to help the nation' build bomber planes. The poet's conscience pricks her and her heart burns like 'those pale-red calyces like sunset light' and the plywood made out of coachwood that would look rather like flesh of a wounded human being. The 'flesh pink pliant wood' humanises and once again implies interdependence.

In Wright's opinion, the right to individuals of distribution of ownership has allowed the chopping down of rainforests even as remote as the Pacific islands. These reappear as furniture in shops in Australia. Short-sighted individuals are not hesitant to destroy the flora and fauna of Australia for commercial activity. Not to be left behind are the politicians who justify any activity related to economic gain.

Judith Wright one of the activist writers of the late twentieth century questions the legality of ownership, the usage of which the land is put and the results of that usage according to her is of utmost importance to any landscape ensures that through her poems the conservation issues are urgently taken up and she has been successful in contributing for finding ingenious solutions.

Judith Wright was one of those few poets who remained free from the European biases and thus did not see Australia as harsh and forbidding; instead she found beauty and richness in the land her family had adopted. With this as her asset, she was able to discern a number of close parallels between the landscape back home, so to say, and Australia. In her poem in 'The Cycads' she describes plants commonly seen in Australia that look like palm trees of smaller size. To others, these plants were just part of the meaningless bush, whereas to her, they symbolized a merging of different attributes of nature caught in ancestral and personal memory. In the first stanza of 'The Cycads' she has noted their

smooth dark flames flicker at time's own root:

Round them the rising forest of the years

alter the climates of forgotten earth

and silt with leaves the strata of its first birth.

They are part of the oldest trees in Australia and have survived vast swamp of vegetation buried with the coal seams, the changing climates, the forests around them. The 'antique cycads' have been 'cursed by age' and 'watch the shrunken moon but never die.' They have been growing from the time the earth was formed and when as the 'scientists believe, the moon was closer to the earth than it is today (O' Connor 90). 'In the Cycads' she says, 'time forgets the promise he once made.' She finds them 'less efficient because they come from a time when the metabolic competition was less intense' (O' Connor 90). In addition, Judith Wright gathers information from the fossilised rocks that there were 'brilliant birds that cry in air one moment, and are gone'('The Cycads'), and yet, the cycads still leaned together 'with their countless suns the years spin on.'

In the poem 'Woman to Man' Wright sees love as a unifying force of life. She talks about foetus, the 'shapeless child' a woman holds. The poet has compared the child with a labourer working hard to grow, waiting for 'its resurrection day' in darkness with 'eyes closed'. While the seed is 'silent and swift and deep from sight' inside the womb, it still 'foresees the unimagined' light of the world outside. The foetus has not yet taken the shape of a child and it has no name, yet the mother and father know its strong existence in the womb. The seed is the product of their love: 'this is our hunter and our chase'. For the poet, the seed is 'the precise crystals of our eyes' Here, a paradox is employed to describe the seed: the seed is 'swift' like a wild tree till it takes shape to form a delicate rose.

Another poem that closes upon more or less the same theme is 'Woman to Child' where the poet has referred to the seed formed inside the woman as she conceived:

'Then all a world I made in me,
all the world you hear and see
hung upon my dreaming blood.

The seed is the central point of the earth, 'node and focus of the world. The woman nurtures the 'crescent cell' till it matures and then breaks from her. The incidence of the two parting company does not sadden the woman. The resulting moment of pride and fulfillment is described thus:

'I am the earth, I am the root,
I am the stem that fed the fruit,
the link that joins you to the night.

('Woman to Man')

The woman is a part of nature who once bore the 'fruit' and is proud of being able to participate in creation like the trees and other living creatures of the earth. The poet's basic interest in these poems is creativity and fecundity, with love as the creative force in nature and humanity and the future is viewed from a strong feminist angle. The poet has insisted that women are 'more in touch, as it were, with life in the raw … women have to rely and should rely a good deal, on their emotional reaction to life; and I feel that one has, one's really walking a knife-edge there' (Thompson 38).

Still another important theme in Judith Wright's poetry is the process the white settlers underwent in the course of relating to new environs. The poem 'The Old Prison' takes up the early British Society comprising convicts, ex-convicts, guards, administration and free settlers that were an unstable lot belonging to the British system of upper and lower classes. These rough and uncouth people came to Australia that had been so far the land belonging to the Aborigines. The poet imagines how these prisoners were released from prisons to be taken across the sea to a land of the Aborigines – Australia in the following lines:

The rows of cells are unroofed,

a flute for the wind's mouth,

who comes with a breath of ice

from the blue caves of the South.

('The Old Prison')

In the poem, the prisoners are excited as they sing in fresh air after being taken out of their cells to travel to a new country. The day in Australia is 'dark' with wind blowing fiercely 'like an angry bee [that] hunts for the black honey in the pits of the hollow sea.' The sea-waves lack appeal and could be compared with 'the empty shell bone-bare' creating a sound that is not soft or sweet to the ears. Conversely, nature is sympathetic to the aborigines whose 'cold nest is broken' by these outsiders to displace and dispossess them:

Who built and laboured here?

The wind and the sea say

Their cold nest is broken

and they are blown away-

('The Old Prison')

The view is projected that the outsiders were stone-hearted people who did not engage with vital human acts of creativity wider sympathy. They did not know how to produce conditions of happiness celebration and enjoyment. Even their singing appeared 'as the wind [that] now cries through this flute of stone.'

'They did not breed nor love.

Each in his cell alone

cried as the wind now cries

through the flute of stone.

('The Old Prison')

On the other hand, Judith Wright located in the life of the aborigines a sense of closeness with nature. Her empathy with natural things went beyond the physical, geographical world and encompassed human emotions and passions. In fact, the two areas of existence were inseparable. The woman, child and man together constituted

a wider form of life that evolved with the passage of time and yet remained rooted to the cause of living and sustaining. This is amply clear from the poems that we have discussed here in brief. Was she happy with the way the twentieth century societies interacted with one another on the world scale and to which poetry could contribute significantly? This was answered realistically and rather negatively by her in the course of an interview where she said:

Writing poems is something you need a lot of emotional energy for, and after 70 you don't have that compulsion- a compulsion which really springs from physical passions, a sort of overflow of feeling and energy…I've also stopped because…..The fact of the matter is that the world is in such a bloody awful state that I cannot find words for it. The whole situation we've got ourselves into is too immense, too insane as it were, for verse to encompass…. I feel incapable of dealing poetically with what is happening now(Glover 36).

To my mind, this is a significant outburst and reflects sharply on the state of affairs in the contemporary world. Yet, the anger shows quite clearly her sense of priorities that indicate the opposite of 'a bloody awful state'. Her whole poetic endeavour remained committed to simplicity and natural flow of life where values of a different order prevailed. We can call her life a long quest for poetic perfection during which she wished to effect meaningful changes in society, landscape and environment. Her poetry is marked indeed by urgency, innovation and change. She emphatically protested against war, social clashes and violence through her poetic career. This is amply borne out by her poetry that stands for harmony, peace and sanity in our world.

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