

## Judith Wright: A Quest for Female Identity

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**Abstract:** *This paper attempts to explore that the poetry of Judith Wright is a quest for female identity. Judith Wright (1915–2000), who got herself involved in the Feminist literary movement flourished in the 1950s and 1960s through her poetry, expresses her personal experiences in a subjective mode with an autobiographical touch. Her experiences are mostly the experiences of pain, suffering and oppression, which chiefly relate to male dominance and male hegemony. Like many of her contemporaries, she writes both as a person and as a representative figure of her gender, and she creates her own image of a woman rejecting the image of a woman portrayed by men. By exposing her 'self' explicitly and discarding the socially created inequalities between men and women, she rebels against the established order of patriarchy and thus affirms her gender identity. The present study, therefore, aims at showing that Judith Wright establishes a female identity in her poetry through the exploration of her private sufferings.*

**Keywords:** *Judith Wright, Female Identity, Male Dominance, Socio-Cultural Setting, Private Sufferings, Universal Appeal*

### Introduction

Judith Wright, a Twentieth century distinguished Australian poet, who witnessed World War II and struggled with both socio-political and personal crises during her lifetime, expresses her private sufferings in her poetry. She writes both as a person and as a representative figure of her gender. Though the poet is mostly recognised for writing poetry about Australian Aboriginal rights, the conservation of the environment and the Australian landscapes, her private sufferings, confined condition within the patriarchal 'zenana' and her self-awareness against such oppression occupy a substantial area of her works. She writes not only from the urge of her 'self' but also about the 'self', i.e. her 'I' in subjective mood with autobiographical touch, for she takes it as a medium of asserting her female identity:

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O bring me out of this house  
 that traps me in my sleep.  
 I lie beside you, close;  
 I writhe and weep. ("The Young Wife" 40-43)

She urges to come out of the house, a symbol of patriarchal confinement that deems to be a trap for her feminine 'self'; "I am lost. I am lost" (29). Hence, this paper is an attempt to evaluate the poetry of Judith Wright as a means of her search for female identity.

### **Lashing out Patriarchy**

The poet shatters the conventional patriarchal approach by disclosing her private sufferings stemmed from the dominance of her husband. She brings to light how she was exploited and tortured by him. A bunch of her poems open up how patriarchy delimits the 'self' of a woman, how a woman has to undergo a tremendous psycho-physical crises due to patriarchal dominance, and how she as a woman responds to that dominance and suppression. The poem "Unknown Water" is one of such a piece. The poet's revealing grief and anguish in this poem delineates not only suffering and frustration but also her self-consciousness. Her self-consciousness and extreme hatred towards her husband's authoritative attitude are clear when she says, "Go easy with me, Old man" (30). The phrase 'Old man' which has been interpreted in several ways by many critics is also interesting to point out here. What does the phrase refer to? Does it only refer to her extreme anger? We the readers can connote and denote multifarious meanings, but when Stephen Harris (2009) says that "the 'Old man' [is] obviously representative of both dominant Western masculine and culturally conservative attitudes" (14), it seems to me very logical. What is noticeable is that the experience she meets is quite common to every woman, for "... all men are one man at last" ("Nigger's Leap, New England" 18), and they are alike in terms of their treatment towards women. The purpose of this society and its masters is to make women subservient. The following quotation from her autobiography *Half a Life Time* will show us how patriarchy dominated the every sector of her society:

Hymns, exhortations, sermons, all seemed to be recycled from male-directed models. Scripture lessons, called Divinity, inculcated masculine values; the female gender was seldom used, except in sewing and cooking lessons. Even in these there were no references to exemplary females, though Mrs Beeton and Coco Chane at least might have been held up as encouragement. (p. 112)

The above passage succinctly shows that male-dominance is prevalent in every phase of society. Even the sermons and religious scripture are male directed. Masculine values are over-emphasised everywhere. The phrase 'sewing and cooking' is a tool of dehumanising women. Even the noteworthy women who played a significant role in various ways in the socio-economic development of the country were ignored. Women writers were not equally valued. The above incident suggests the general disinclination of men in terms of acknowledging the contribution of women. The poet realises that in a patriarchal society "through family, church and academy men secure consent of the very women they oppress and each institution justifies and reinforces women's subordination to men with the result that women internalize a sense of inferiority to men" (Mandell, 2001, p. 16). Patriarchy believes that "men are without any question, the masters of the world" (Beauvoir, 2009, p. 352), and surely under such circumstances a woman feels "oppressed and submerged", for which "she becomes a stranger to the rest of the world". (353)

Wright tells the sad tale of her life through poetry to relieve herself from the burden of suppression and to create awareness among her fellow women to raise their collective voice against patriarchal value system. In "The Trap" she says how all women are trapped in the labyrinth of patriarchy. She writes: "We must be / their prisoners . . . and in a bitterer cage/ endure their lifelong rage" (12-14) in which the pronoun 'we' refers to all women and 'their ... rage' refers to the rage of men. Men are always furious to women. They cannot but satisfy their psycho-physical desire by any means. She demonstrates how she loses her 'self' by fulfilling his demands, following his orders and appeasing him [her husband]:

I am the garden beyond the burning wind,  
I am the river among the blowing sand;  
I am the song you hear before you sleep.  
In being these, I lose myself in these.  
I am the woman-statue of the fountain  
out of whose metal breasts continually  
starts a living water; I am a vase  
shaped only for my hour of holding you. ("The Watcher" 7-14)

The poet has to forfeit her personal longing to satisfy her husband. She must mould herself on the basis of his pleasure. She does all to mitigate his psycho-physical needs while she represents her own lust, and thus loses her

individualism. She becomes a 'woman-statue' having no power to respond. However, what the poet says here about herself is a universal experience. Every woman is like a statue under the patriarchal canon, for it reduces a woman to an object, a thing like a vase. A 'Vase' is a traditional gender-biased symbol with reference to female biological organ. If men do not find the female body fit for physical gratification, they no longer find it useful. The poet's reference to a 'Vase' for holding her husband highlights her commoditized condition. She views that her husband is a betrayer who values her body, and not the mind, to accomplish his 'skin's lazy hungers'. Wright's clear description of how she loses her 'self' points up her feminine consciousness.

The poet figures out the wicked strategies of men through which they curtail women's freedom. She evinces how women are watched like dummies. To her, men play with women as a baby plays with a doll. Men believe that they are the "Ruler [s] of women" ("Easter Moon and Owl" 9), and so they dominate and sexually colonise them: "Men spy you out with eyes. / [ . . . ] / and they plan colonies (12, 14). The poem "Woman in Orchard" is even a better illustration in this regard. With the progress of the poem we see that the woman who pleases herself with the reflection of her body in the pool is warned. It is said that the witches are behind her and she will also be a witch one day. A quotation from the poem "Easter Moon and Owl" substantiates the issue very much:

Look, look, you fool –  
 who but the man that painted it?  
 He sees the orchard – woman  
 and sees the witch behind her  
 casting the old and jealous spell. (20-24)

The speaker in this section of the poem notifies that it is a man who has designed the mechanism of controlling and subduing women. He casts his 'old and jealous spell' to her. He monitors each of her movement and plans accordingly to suppress her. So, she is tied up with a hidden chain – the chain of domination, the chain of enslavement – and "confined to the narrow room" where she has been given "a deadly brainwashing" (Cixous, 1976, p. 877). Wright further demonstrates that in the male-dominated world nothing depends on the impulse of women. Male-dominance truly delimits women's power. In the patriarchal world, men are the decision makers; they are entitled to do whatever they like. In the poem "Ishtar" the poet writes:

It is all one whether I deny or affirm you;  
 It is not my mind you are concerned with.  
 It is no matter whether I submit or rebel;  
 the event will still happen. (9-12)

**The excerpt** draws our attention to her husband's obstinacy to fulfill his wild sexual activity which is mostly impassive. He does not bother whether she submits or rebels, for what will happen is fixed: "I had no voice to speak" ("The Wattle -Tree" 23). This kind of experience is a common phenomenon for any women in a patriarchal society. Most of the husbands here even don't feel that they need consent of their wives before making love with them; "once married, a woman does not have the right to refuse sex to her husband" (Farhad, 2013, p. 12). Hence, the poet here addresses her experience of marital rape which is an "unwanted intercourse or penetration (vaginal, anal, or oral) obtained by force, threat of force, or when the wife is unable to consent" (ibid, p. 12). Why does a husband behave in this way with his wife? Is this to show off his power, authority to control and dominate his wife? I do agree with Shah Ali Farhad (2013) when he says that "husbands rape mostly to reinforce their power or control over their wives or families, or to vent anger or aggression" (p. 12). The poet, thus, discloses how she was forced and sexually abused by her husband. She again articulates in "For the Loved and the Unloved":

Love in his alteration  
 invents the heart to suit him:  
 its season, spring or autumn,  
 depends on his decision. (1-4)

The poet puts her emphasis on the issue that her husband neglects her approval while having sex with her. Isn't she treated only as an object of pleasure? Isn't her power delimited? Isn't she mute? The answers to all these questions are not far to seek. We can effortlessly discover the answers in her poetry:

You neither know nor care for the truth of my heart;  
 but the truth of my body has all to do with you.  
 You have no need of my thoughts or my hopes,  
 living in the realm of the absolute event. ("Ishtar"13-16)

The speaker speaks up how sordid her husband is about the 'thoughts' and 'hopes' of her own. She, in fact, shows here how a man never forgets to be satisfied with the bodily pleasure. To her, all women, like her, live in a 'wind of ghosts' when they live in a phallogocentric society: "I lived in a wind of ghosts; a storm of hands / beat at my flesh. The Lazarus at my gate / demanding life, redoubled his demands" ("The Promised One" 1-3). The poet brings the Biblical reference of 'Lazarus' to describe her death-like sufferings. We know that only 'Lazarus' had the ability to taste both life and death and the poet experiences the death-like taste living in a patriarchal world. Being a forced subordinate in society, she feels forlorn as she cannot but endure the oppression imposed on her. Hence, she is living like a life-in-death. This is how she discloses her confined condition. The depiction of her husband's ruthless approach in her poetry reflects her rebellious attitude towards the socially set structures and thus shows her hatred towards and protest against patriarchal repression.

The poetry of Judith Wright is an evident of exposition of how women are identically tortured in the patriarchal world. For example, a woman either black or white has to face almost similar destiny in patriarchy. In this contour, we can mention her poem "Two Dreamtimes" where she tells how both black and white women are under the threat of patriarchal exploitation: "we too have lost our dreaming" (44). The pronoun 'We', suggests the same experiences that women undergo in the man-made world. Wright shows in her poetry how women are treated as commodities by men: "And you and I are bought and sold, / our songs and stories too" (73-74). In this poem, the pronoun 'I' refers to the poet herself and 'you' refers to her friend Kath Walker, a black. We see that women are bought and sold and even their dreams are not free from patriarchal attack. They are not free to think, dream and act. The poet, in fact, highlights the oppressed, suppressed, exploited, tortured and neglected condition of women by analogising women's helplessness with that of the black. To her, both are socially downtrodden and exploited. She believes that sexism and racism are interlinked systems of oppression. The analogy, therefore, emphasises the subjugation of women. Toril Moi (1985) in her *Sexual / Textual Politics* says that the values and strategies which are applied to devalue the black and delimit their power are the same values and strategies by which women are devalued and their freedom is delimited. In her words: "[T]he values and strategies that contributed to keeping blacks in their place mirrored the values and strategies invoked to women subservient to men" (p. 21). To the poet, the "sad tales of

women" either "black or white" ("Two Dreamtimes" 78, 79) will not be represented by anybody if they themselves do not represent them. By disclosing women's denigrated condition under existing social structure, she unveils how much viciously women are treated by men.

Wright's poetry describes her non-conformity to the traditional definitions of the feminine. It depicts that the figures of 'Mother', 'Earth' personified in the figures of 'Eve', 'Ishtar' and 'Mary' stand for more than traditional maternal impulse in women. Poems like "Eve to Her Daughters", "Eve sings", and "Eve Scolds" highlight the patriarchal system of thought. The symbols of Eve, the apple, the serpent and the sword in "Eve to Her Daughters" are interpreted variously from the patriarchal viewpoint. This poem offers challenge, fascination, and humour in dramatising the fictional Eve's parental advice to her daughters. In the poem we see that Eve denies the traditional blame on her for the original sin as being her own fault only, for "Adam was, after all, as much to blame for the Fall as Eve" (Walters, 2005, p. 9). The speaker of the poem highlights how she has to follow her husband who is the master of society: "Where Adam went I was fairly contented to go. / I adapted myself to the punishment: it was my life" (6-7). 'Adam' who is considered to be a lover or a husband or a father figure is in the centre of everything whereas 'Eve', the speaker of the poem is not given any choice. She has to go after 'Adam' who demands unquestionable submission. This is the very typical nature of 'Adam' /man, the master. The term 'master' is connected to its binary opposite 'slave'. A simple analysis of the poem shows that 'Adam' being master, 'Eve' is merely a slave: "it is not women but men who are the masters of the world" (Beauvoir, 2009, p. 311).

The poet illustrates that the man who "was always mechanical-minded" and "had always been jealous" made himself "the centre" of everything ("Eve to Her Daughters" 30, 38, 39). The word 'centre' again has a close connection with its binary opposite 'margin' or 'periphery'. The binary opposites centre/periphery here in this context show women's marginalised condition. The final stanza of this poem further clarifies the situation of man-woman rapport in society: "He has turned himself into God,/Who is faultless" (61-62). Wright pictures the patriarchal world-view where a male is just like 'God': "he is God" (Beauvoir, 2009, p. 312). It is obvious that the term 'God' is used to represent male authority and power. Hence, the speaker of the poem feels depressed and finds no way to free herself as well as her next generation from this confined condition: "You are my daughters, you inherit my own ...

character: / You are submissive, following Adam" (48-49). The quoted lines stress on women's endless subservient position in the world of patriarchy as we see that the daughters of the speakers will also have to follow 'Adam' mutely. The poet, however, being aware of her feminine identity, cannot let it happen. She declares that "it's time you [all women] took over" (47). For her, the daughters of 'Eve' should take control over every social phenomenon, what exposes her insurgence against patriarchy. It also shows that her "own struggle for independence as a woman made her sympathetic to the whole range of needs facing women". (Brady, 1998, p. 295)

### Quest for Freedom

One of the most common aspects of Wright's poetry is to seek women's freedom. For her, women need to write to represent them and their longings, because the texts are directed by 'phallogentric representationism'. In the patriarchal world, "there's no room for her if she's not a he" (Cixous, 1976, p. 888). Wright's poems raise her strict sense of fury against this phallogentrism. She, like many other women writers, combats a kind of silence and speaks out to resist such aspects which are in essence dehumanising. Laurie Kutchins (2007) says that "she [Wright] is a poet of kinship and protestation in their most literal senses and in much of her work kinship and protest must function side by side" (p. 44). Her artistic work involves seeing, listening and voicing the 'dark ones' as, for her, one of the primary functions of art is to move and to protest certain human patterns including discrimination between male and female, orthodox attitudes of male-dominated society, legacies of invasion, ruin, silence of women and so on. She believes that the function of poetry is to construct new shapes i.e. positive, hopeful images through which we might renovate our attitude. She finds her experiences as a guide to discover and rediscover that revolt is the best way out to come out of the patriarchal captivity, to claim her female identity. What we see, her poetry is an embodiment of her rebellious tone: "No logic, artifice nor chance / could silence my protesting heart" ("Clock and Heart" 5-6). So, we can consider the poet as a voice of her community, for she fights to ensure the equal rights of women and to establish their valued social position through her poetry. It is said that her "outlook derives ... from her life experience, her sense of how things are" (Bennet, 1976, p. 76). To her, a "writer is a human voice; literature is a mirror, sometimes even a source of our values and our actions, our problems and our attempts to come to terms with them", so through her poetic language she attempts to be free and "the aim here is liberation through language". (ibid, p.79)



In the poem "To Another Housewife", the apt use of words once again indicates the intensity with which Wright portrays how men behave like 'hungry dogs' which "father kept as rabbit hunters" (19). She gives an idea about how women are to cut off their all desires and choices because of "hungry men" (3). The poet here describes that though women promise "to touch no meat forever" (15), they have butchered themselves several times over. Through her metaphoric use of 'hungry dogs', 'rabbit-hunter', 'steaming knife', and 'death-in-life, the poet here in this poem highlights a thorough rendering of a state of mind that depicts mixed expressions of subjugation and revolt. The revolt is against the male's superiority, against the patriarchal power. It is a refusal to male-dominance. Consequently, it is a realisation of the power of the 'self', a gradual movement towards freedom. Thus, she challenges the prevailing practices of patriarchy and tries to find a functional means of envisioning new forms of awareness in her poems.

The poem "The Other Half", where the poet visualises the reaction of her two split selves is another illustration of her poetic rebellion. The speaker of this poem divulges how her 'enlightened self' awakes while she is asleep. This 'enlightened self' subconsciously tries to make her aware of patriarchal repression. In the beginning of the poem, she writes:

The self that night undrowns when I'm asleep  
travels beneath the dumb days that I give,  
within the limits set that I may live,  
and beats in anger on the things I love. (1-4)

From the quote we can understand that the 'self' belonging to the night 'undrowns' and 'travels' deep into the 'dumb days'. The phrase 'dumb days' pictures how she spends her days in conjugal confinement. The days are dumb to her because of the 'limits' set by patriarchy. The enlightened 'self' shows its anger on the things she is forced to do since she does all these things by refuting her free will. Hence the 'enlightened self' is her free will. It empowers her to come out of the bondage imposed by patriarchy. The 'daylight self', which is considered 'dumb self' cannot revolt. On the other hand, it follows the restrictions imposed on her, for "she was taught to accept masculine authority" (Beauvoir, 2009, p. 655). Besides, the "[d]aily cooking teaches her patience and passivity" (ibid, p. 654), which make her realise that women "are integrated into the group governed by males, where they occupy a subordinate position" (ibid, p. 653). However, the poet feels that the

passivity and subordination are interwoven, and so she struggles to come out of this subordination and passivity. She can understand her inner voice in the darkness of night since “[d]ay sets on me [her] the burdens that I [she] carry” (“The Other Half” 6). However, she tells women how to get rid of such condition: “I face the light, the dark of me I bury. / My silent answer and my other half, / we meet at midnight and by music only (8-10). The poet boldly buries the dark within her and protests against the conventional masculine values through music, i.e. her poetry. She believes that there will be a time when her ‘dumb self’ and ‘enlightened self’ will meet to make her a complete being having strength, determination and power to speak out against the injustice and violence of men over women: “So we may meet at last, and meeting bless, / and turn into one truth in singleness”. (14-15)

The poet, thus, voices to reclaim her lost identity; lost on account of colonial attitude of patriarchy and of imperialism. We find an analogy between colonisation and patriarchy when Mcleod (2007) says that “[l]ike colonialism, patriarchy exists in the midst of resistances to its authority” (p. 174). Both the postcolonialists and the feminists want to explore their radical revolutionary potential in relation to the politics of power and dominance as “Feminism and Postcolonialism share the mutual goal of challenging forms of oppression” (ibid, p. 174). Both focus the complex relationship between the oppressors and the oppressed to a rigorous, sustained scrutiny though in different ways. We can say that the dominant patriarchy in feminism is equal to the colonisers, and the oppressed women to the colonised. The decisive result is women are ‘doubly colonised’ what “refers to the fact that women are twice colonized—by colonialist realities and representations and by patriarchal ones too” (ibid, p. 175). Wright’s poetry is evident to imprint feminism, and it also creates a national awareness that challenges the European cultural dominance. It seeks out to reclaim the canonical voices suppressed and de-legitimised under the British rule, and patriarchy. The poet depicts how women are struggling against the power politics of patriarchy, which “invest[s] power in men and marginalizes[s] women” (ibid, p. 173). Her poems explore to represent the hidden consciousness of her ‘self’. As a poet, she has a unique power of penetrating beyond the surfaces. Her poetic ‘self’ is the expression of her psychologically tortured ‘self’. By representing her own mind, emotions, personality and the world around her in her poetry, she attempts to decolonise patriarchal power: “We live through the past and today perhaps we’re tending to forget that – to get cut off from the past” (Thompson, 1971, p. 39). The poem “Naked Girl and Mirror”

**shows** how a woman's individuality is getting destroyed with the company of **a man**. The speaker of the poem had had every opportunity "to laugh and run/ **and stare at stars and tentatively dance / on the fringe of foam and wave and sand and sun**" (2-4), before she met her husband. She now sees her reflected **body in the 'mirror'** and it seems to her that the body is an unknown one. It is **not hers**; it becomes the 'Other'. Earlier everything happened based on her **will as she says**, "I was gone by my own currents" (6). However, she does not **have** such opportunity now. What she feels is "this is not I" (1), which **focuses** her sense of the loss of 'self' because "I have been betrayed" (15). **She has** to conform to the traditional outlook of man, "I am betrayed by **someone ...**" (22), to whom she is a marginalised subject. Her poetry, thus, is **the gateway** for the 'doubly-colonised' women to come out of their captivity, **raise their voice**, establish their rights in society and reject the view of **invented aspects** of women's group identity as weak, fragile, introvert and **dark**:

Set free at last in human time \_\_\_  
 that long-rejected tyranny \_\_\_  
 I found in ordinary love  
 the solitudes of poetry. ("Clock and Heart" 19-22)

### **Conclusion**

We can claim that Wright's quest for female identity is the ultimate result of her marginalised 'self'. The poet explicitly portrays her rebellion against female oppression – both physical and psychological. She is successful to describe that her plight is the plight of every woman of patriarchal society. She demonstrates how every man is a representative figure of patriarchy and every woman is a scapegoat under the set rules of it. Her stance is against the commoditised condition of women. Her comparison of women with the black and the colonised intensifies her argument in portraying the fragile condition of all women. Her poetry can be called a pristine document of how in the make-belief world of patriarchy, women are always ignored, overlooked and colonised: "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of woman disappears" (Spivak, 1994, p. 102). So, Wright's pen is a weapon to protest against patriarchal domination. By representing the oppression of patriarchy and raising her voice against it, she renders her female identity. She instigates her community to come out of their cocoon and to raise their collective voice against phallocentrism. To her, the most important imperative in the world of writing literature is

disapproving and helping to mitigate the violence of human behavior towards another sort of humans. In this sense, the poetry of Judith Wright speaks up of an artist torn between her faith in the liberating power of poetry and consciousness. Hence, she longs for convincing her fellow women by showing that they have the power to change the world by changing their ways of seeing and relating themselves to it. Her poems are, in truth, an expression of an enlightened realization, as they best investigate the concealed consciousness of the 'Self'. Therefore, it can be said that one of the major and finest characteristics of her poetry is the representation of her female identity.

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