

The Poetry of Judith Wright: An Ecocritical Reading

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Abstract: *This paper seeks to explore that the poetry of Judith Wright is an essence of her dynamic and radical ecological thinking. The poet shows an inevitable connection between the human and the natural world in her poetry, and figures out how the natural world is extremely endangered by man. Wright, an ecopoet even before the term was coined, transforms the Australian poetic tradition conveying a new and monumental sense of the land and expressing her deepest concern not only for Australian society but also for the planet. In every phase of her poetic journey, she foregrounds nature as a major part of her subject, and represents the bitter-sweet relationship between nature and man. Therefore, this paper attempts to say that Wright's poetry is an embodiment of her green writing project. It also focuses that she is a great ecological thinker who not only represents the relationship between the natural world and human one and vice versa but also expresses her deep apprehension for protecting nature from the constant destruction.*

Keywords: *Judith Wright, poetry, human world, natural world, ecocriticism*

Introduction

Judith Wright (1915–2000), a widely recognized poet for her activism and conservation of wild life, can be acclaimed as a poet of eco-consciousness. The poet demonstrates the inevitable connection between the human and the non-human worlds in her poetry signifying nature as a living whole, which can communicate with a man as a source of comfort and aspiration. By writing poetry on/about land, trees, birds, wild-animals, rivers and creeks; the poet figures out how the natural world is under the threat of human world. One of her goals of writing nature poetry is to create awareness among the people for protecting nature and wild-life. In her poetry, she identifies her 'self' with the land, and feels that like her, the land is also suffering from exploitation and oppression. She tries to ensure her eco-conscious stance by protesting against the exploitation of nature through her poetic works. To her, the natural world has its own harmony, and it is only man who destroys this harmony. Many wild animals which are now under the threat of extinction, rivers which are dead, trees which are indiscriminately cut down, the streams which do not flow anymore, and the landscapes which are polluted cover the major areas of her poetry. Her poetry, in fact, closely illustrates nature - her sense of land, the panoramic world of birds, trees, wildlife, and the relationship between nature and humans. So, her representation of nature in which she not only praises the smooth harmony among the natural phenomena but also criticizes the humans' torture over nature, echoes her Eco-consciousness, for "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" and it emphasises the "earth-centred approach to literary studies" (Garrard, 2012, P.3). This paper, therefore, attempts to pay attention to the poet's celebration of the Australian flora and fauna as well as her deep agony for their annihilation and concerns for protecting them.

Thematic Discussion

Wright's poetry is replete with the celebration of trees. She writes poems on camphor laurel, cedars, the wattle-tree, the flame-tree, the orange-tree, the eucalypt, the pepperina, the scribbly-gum and much more. In these poems, she portrays how harmonious the natural world is. However, she says that man endangers this harmony at every moment. She emphasizes that the trees, which are indiscriminately cut down, should be protected. Every day, trees disappear into the photocopiers, but we do not try to save this valuable gift of nature which contributes on a large-scale to maintaining ecological balance. The poet draws our attention to this reality and brings it into light through her poetry. She, in fact, tries to create the consciousness for a balanced ecosystem. The ecological balance depends on the harmony of the ecosystem. No doubt, the tree is

one of the vital elements of the ecosystem. For her, trees are important, for they endure the weather, erosion and drought. They are certainly faithful to the human needs. So, human beings for their own sake need to protect this invaluable gift of nature. Her concern for trees is portrayed in many of her poems. In the poem "The Wattle-tree", Wright (1994) claims that the wattle-tree consists of four elements and combines four truths in one, "The tree knows four truths - / earth, water, air, and the fire of the sun. / The tree holds four truths in one" (LC.142). The wattle tree combining earth, water, air and fire symbolizes eternal renewal and abundant wisdom, which should be the ultimate quest for mankind. In this poem of twenty-four lines, the poet compares her poetic truth with the wattle-tree, and she believes that "just as the tree in its renewal is true to its nature, 'is forever tree', so she hopes that in her vocation as a poet she can ultimately be true to herself, to speak the truth" (Smith, 2006, LC.4). We see that the poet bonds the natural world with her 'self' and describes her own poetic voice of the truth like the trees.

Wright's "Camphor Laurel" is another important poem that we can illustrate in this regard. In this poem, the poet connects nature with the human. However, the contrast between the foolishness of the human beings and the simple and persistent life of the camphor laurel tree is interesting. The tree is a "symbol of permanence, sweetness and native honesty compared with man's short-term foolish, facile and unethical ways" (Smith, 2006, LC. 5). A clear distinction between the world of human and the camphor laurel is obvious when Wright (1994) writes in "Camphor Laurel":

Under the house the roots go deep,
 Down, down, while the sleepers sleep;
 Splitting the rock where the house is set,
 cracking the paved and broken street.
 Old Tim turns and old Sam groans,
 "God be good to my breaking bones";
 and in the slack of tideless night
 the tree breathes honey and moonlight. (LC.35)

Critics like Smith point out that through the metaphor of the camphor laurel, the speaker of the poem criticizes the evils of society perpetuated by men. Like the American Transcendentalists, she also believes that institution and society are responsible for destroying natural habitats. The root of all the evils is the institution, society and people, but the natural world is the world of peace and of discipline. She says that even the stationary tree has its logic against the foolish enmity and willful injustice to men. In this poem, the poet feels "to eradicate the deep-rooted evils in the society" and "the need to deep-rooted installing of the cardinal virtues" (Amutha, 2013, LC. 30). The poem "The Cycads" also highlights the same theme. Here, the poet insists on cultivating the virtue of togetherness amidst men. She suggests that man has to learn from the trees. She finds a similarity between the old man and the cycad. Like the old cycad tree whose agedness is inevitable, a man also has to face old age. However, the old man is unhappy and gloomy because he is left alone amidst a crowd of people. However, he can learn from the cycad how to be happy and how to enjoy the growth. So, trees appear in her poetry as one of the means to show how to stay calm and happy and restore the broken life just as the trees restore the eroded hills as Wright (1994) expresses in "Eroded Hills" "When the last leaf and bird go / Let my thoughts stand like trees here". (LC.81)

In the poem "The Scribbly-gum", the poet notes that she "heard the mountain, palm and fern / spoken in one strange word" (Wright, 1994, LC.131) while passing on a forest, and the message that she gets is "the written track / of a life I could not read" (ibid). Through this poem, she portrays the wonders of nature and the disrupted, fragmentary written words of human history. Again, we see a contrast between the harmonious world of nature and the corrupt world of man.

The poem “The Orange-tree”, in addition, highlights that the orange-tree is able to “transform the darkness of earth into resilient of life, and the coldness of winter into fruit in its season” (Smith, 2006, P.2), because the tree has the native simplicity to reconcile. Like the orange-tree, the flame-tree and the eucalypt are also reflecting the musical and noblest qualities of trees which the modern Australians and all other people of the world need to practice. In her “The Eucalypt and the National Character”, Wright (1994) writes:

Ready for any catastrophe, every extreme,
 She leaves herself plenty of margin. Nothing is stiff,
 symmetrical, indispensable. Everything bends
 whip-supple, pivoting, loose, with a minimal mass.
 She can wait grimly for months to break into flower
 or willingly bloom in a day when the weather is right. (P.362)

The poet expresses a new sense of the environment in the above-quoted lines. The eucalypt reflects the most desirable traits of Australia’s national character in its flexibility, so human beings must learn from the Australian natural trees like the eucalypt. Here the eucalypt is a medium to “critique a human society which tends towards ‘militarism and class-system’ and thus the poem calls for a humility that might learn from the tree” (Gifford, 2010, LC. 78). Hence, the poet idealizes trees in her poetry not sentimentally but in high admiration. For her, everybody needs to pay attention to and work in a body to stop clearing the bush and denuding the landscape if they want to breathe fresh air, an indispensable element for survival.

The poet often says that the aroma of natural life is gradually decaying because of humans’ interference. In her bird poems, she appeals the value of the simplicity. To her, birds are doing justice to other birds but in the world of human, it is typically absent. She says that the humans should learn from the birds to be good to others. Everything in nature has its own character and it is always true to its nature. Like the tree poems, she distinguishes between the world of birds and that of the humans in her bird poems. Greg Smith (2007) in his “Salvation Imaged in Nature’s Amazing Directionality” rightly comments when he says:

The wisdom of nature is that it lives within its own limits; it is what it is and seeks no more than that. This principle has even greater relevance today when society debates stem cell research, organ donation, gene technology, in vitro fertilization, cloning, and genetic manipulation of human gametes. Unlike people, nature does not despoil itself by excess. (P.2)

However, nature is not free from wreckage because men are ruining every aspect of ecology by their selfish and foolish activities. Judith Wright’s stance is certainly against such activities. For her, none should intrude the harmonization of the natural world. In the poem “Birds”, Wright (1994) declares that “Whatever the bird is, is perfect in the bird” (P.86) and “all are what bird is and do not reach beyond bird” (ibid) by which she suggests that birds support their lives within their limits and do not cross the bar, but the greedy human beings obliterate everything including nature to meet their thoughtless momentary satisfaction/gain. The poet herself is mourning for being a part of the human world, “I am torn and beleaguered by my own people” (ibid). The poet hereditarily belongs to the white settlers, so she herself feels guilty because Australian natural world and landscape and even the aboriginal people, who used to live a simple life connecting with nature, are mostly tortured, exploited and destroyed by the white settlers. As the poet’s ancestors were white settlers she cannot but blame herself for destroying nature and landscape of Australia. So, her nature poetry declares her consciousness of and concern for preserving the natural world

and its wildlife. She urges the people to “be simple to myself [herself] as the bird is to the bird” (ibid), which impliedly suggests that we the human beings need to be simple and sympathetic to the natural world.

Wright’s concentration on birds is largely expressed in the poems included in her poetic collection *Birds*. The poet finds delight when she relates herself to different natural species like birds. She writes poems on Peacock, Migrant Swift, Magpies, Oriole, Blue Wrens, Winter Kestrel, Currawong, Swamp Pheasant, Thornbills, Egrets, Dove, Parrots, Wagtail, Pelicans, Silver Terns, Black Cockatoos, Lory, Dotterel and so on. Besides showing the simple life of birds in these poems, she describes that most of these birds are now under the threat of extinction. Human beings not only hunt them whimsically and habitually but also damage their dwelling places regularly. The thirty poems included in the anthology *Birds*, in one way or the other, expresses the poet’s concern for the extinction of these birds. The endangered condition of the birds is portrayed in this way in “Oriole, Oriole”: “Oriole, oriole, / I whistle you up, I wait to hear. / No orioles sing to me this year” (Wright, 1994, LC.318). Again in the poem “Extinct Birds”, she says birds are getting extinct gradually because of callous activities of human beings. The gradual extinction of birds is very clear when Wright (1994) writes in “Extinct Birds”, “There was a bird, blue, small, spangled like dew. / All now are vanished with the fallen forest” (LC.179). Forests are cleaned periodically by humans, but these forests are the perfect dwelling places for birds. The inhuman activities of humans are responsible for the extinction of birds. So, for the poet, the human world is mostly liable for the imbalanced ecology.

The poet patently expresses her view about the environmental crises. No doubt, the purpose of her nature writing is to create responsiveness to the ecological imbalance which is, of course, created by us (human beings) as said in “The Peacock”: “Shame on the aldermen who locked / the Peacock in a dirty cage!” (Wright, 1994, LC. 161). On the other hand, the love-life that one can notice in the world of birds is also expressed in this poem when she says that “[I]ove clothes him still, in spite of all” (ibid). Here, we can assume that despite being trapped for the idle entertainment of human eyes, birds are tolerable and calm, so “the peacock shines alone” (ibid). We, again, see a clear contrast between the world of birds and the world of humans in this poem which is common to many other poems as well. Greg Smith (2007) precisely comments about Wright’s poems on birds in “Salvation Imaged in Nature’s Amazing Directionality” when he says: “The nation should learn from its own birds’ humility, simplicity and acceptance of limits in joyful obedience to the laws of their nature. Her bird poems suggest that our continuity and survival as a culture and even as human species depend on living simply, constraining greed and respecting nature” (LC. 7). So, the poet, in her anthology *Birds*, juxtaposes the panoramic world of birds to the human’s cruelty on the birds, and thus focuses on how most of the birds are going to vanish day by day. Her particular attention is given to protect the birds and to ensure a perpetually healthy bond between the world of nature and the human world.

For the portrayal panoramic beauty of Australian landscape, Wright is widely recognised among his contemporaries. It is said that her poetry shows her sense of land linked with her sense of self. Her relationship with the land is eternal. In the poem “Woman to Child”, Wright (1994) says: “I am the earth, I am the root, / I am the stem that fed the fruit” (LC.28). The poet’s analogy between herself and the land can lead us to a deeper discourse. She realizes that both women and the land are dominated and treated as the ‘Other’. The suffering of the land and that of women are alike. Her biographers claim that her love of place began in the New England during her childhood. In the poem “South of My Days”, she speaks of the buildup of a sensibility and of an aesthetic feeling for the place of “the high lean country / full of old stories that still go walking in my sleep” (Wright, 1994, LC. 20). Nonie Sharp (2007) says that her “love of persons grew into a love of place” (LC. 25), as she finds no difference between the love of the land and the love of persons. Her poetic

imagination truly comes from “her blood and bone” (ibid), and it takes different forms in different periods of her life. Her love of the land emerges as an intense subjectivity prescribing respect for both self and nature, because Wright (1991) in *Born of the Conquerors* says that “violence towards our fellow human beings is inextricably linked to violence towards the land, and much of the destruction caused over the two hundred years of European occupation of this continent has stemmed from ignorance – ignorance of the realities of Aboriginal life and ignorance of the land itself” (P. XI). We see, man uses and often abuses both land and women in the same way. Wright (1994) writes in the poem, “Jet Flight over Derby”:

I am what land has made
and land’s myself, I said.
And therefore, when land dies?
Opened by whips of greed
these plains lie torn and scarred.
Then I erode; my blood
reddens the stream in flood. (P. 279)

Sue King Smith’s evaluation of Wright’s poetry is quite relevant in this context when she says that “Wright’s poetry is, in part, trying to foreground her personal specters, which relate to the loss of the idealized country of her childhood” (2007, LC.117). The poet believes that “there are interconnections between the oppression of women, the oppression of the ‘Other’... and the domination of nature” (Sinha, 2008, P. 10). No doubt, sexism, racism, class exploitation and environmental destruction are four interlocking pillars on which society stands. In Brigid Rooney’s words, “Wright’s poetry of feminine experience whose power came partly from a feminine awareness of land as the body, slotted Wright as a woman poet into masculinist national framework” (2009, LC. 26). Jennifer Strauss and Ivor Indyk contend that Wright’s early poems are pastoral and feminine. In Strauss’s reading of “South of My Days”, the suffering body of the earth connects to a female body. Wright’s “relationship to the land is innate and moved by the heart than head, and tied by blood to the land in a relationship that is not always pleasant” (Rooney, 2009, LC. 26). The Australian landscape pictured in her poetry also echoes her ‘self’ linked to the land as Wright (1969) stated in “The Upside-Down Hut”: “Australia is still for us not a country but a state of mind” (LC. 301). By representing Australian landscape which is now under the threat of destruction, the poet confirms her stance against not only environmental destruction but also women’s exploitation. Actually, the poet’s target here is to focus the torture on land by the human world. We are aware that men dominate over women and women are traditionally exploited almost in every sphere of life by men. In the case of land or landscape, the condition is worse because women are tortured and exploited by men and land is exploited, tortured and destroyed both by men and women. Here, condition of land is just like that of the black women or the ‘dalits’ women who are doubly oppressed and denigrated. Thus, the poet connects the non-human world with the human world manifesting one’s integral relationship with the other and thus describes how the human world tortures the natural world.

Many of Wright’s poems fuse their lyric intensity with ecological and human activism. She has the exclusive eye in seeing conservation and human rights as integral to poetic craft and artistry. The poem “Australia 1970”, which “embodies a palpable, indeed painful tension, between holding onto ‘wild country’ and letting go of it at the same time, of being ruined by the things we have ruined, and of being sorrowful and sorry even as we cast that last ruthless command of death” (Kutchins, 2007, LC. 44), is an evidence of how human activity ruins the land. Wright (1994) in her poem “Australia 1970” says:

Die like the soldier-ant
 mindless and faithful to your million years.
 Though we corrupt you with our torturing mind,
 stay obstinate; stay blind. (LC. 287)

So, it is the human world that corrupts the non-human world. Australian landscape is dying like the soldier-ant, “the eaglehawk” “the tigersnake” and “[is] suffer[ing] ... like the ironwood” (ibid). People exploit the land / earth in the name of progress and thus the wild beauty is destroying gradually. So, the poet mourns in “Two Dreamtimes”: “our grief for a lost country, / the place we dreamed in long ago, / poisoned now and crumbling” (Wright, 1994, LC. 315). Here, the poet expresses both the social and environmental consequences of unmitigated exploitation of the natural world. Her stance is against the exploitation of natural world. She demonstrates her country to her readers criticizing the early European settlers who exploit her country and who she addresses as ‘rum’ in the poem, sounding a note of grief and guilt for poisoning the Australian fertile lands. She presents the Australian contour and her emotional response to it. This is how her poems are imbued with moving lyricism while retaining the impact of the physical reality. The intense sense of place suggests the poet's attachment to the retrieval of her country by endowing every presence with poetic significance. She articulates the existing situation of the Australian landscape in the vast arena of her poetic world for she herself claims that “these hills and plains, these rivers and plants and animals were what I had to work with as a writer” (qtd. in Brady, 1998, LC. 13). In the poem “Bora Ring”, the poet echoes the same theme:

The song is gone; the dance
 is secret with the dancers in the earth,

 Only the grass stands up
 to mark the dancing –ring: the apple-gums
 posture and mime a past corroboree,
 murmur a broken chant. (Wright, 1994, LC. 8)

It is obvious that the poet speaks out against the land-violence and she makes her poetry a pictorial world where her sense of environmental justice is consistently expressed. The poet persona can realize that the relationship between her ‘self’ and the natural world is integral. Like her, the land is also abused by the human world, so she suggests not looking at the natural world as a mere machine, which we mostly abuse for our materialistic gain. She finds that nature is interwoven with her ‘self’ what Wright (1977) further delineates in “Because I Was Invited”:

Nature can no longer be viewed as a 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 same changes going on in creatures other than ourselves ... So it was this revived sense of a correspondence between man and his world that revitalized poetry in the early nineteenth century. (LC. 67)

The poet is conscious of preserving the environment. The origin of her apprehension is her love of the world. She believes that nature itself is a living being. So, her poetry is an imperative document of how she expresses her concern for the decay and destruction of the natural world because of the unfeeling activities of human beings who only value nature for their own benefits. Her analogy of ‘self’ with land suggests her deep attachment with and concerns for the natural world. She,

throughout her poetry, laments for saving the endangered natural world. Hence, the poet's nature writing can rightly be considered to be a part of the worldwide ecological project.

Conclusion

To recapitulate, we can say that one of the essences of Wright's poetry is her ecological consciousness. Her poetry on trees, birds, land and the like expresses her close link with and deep love for nature. She represents how we the human beings are destroying the natural habitats very casually. She presents a contrast between the peace and simplicity of nature and the evils of the human world. She suggests that the human world needs to be simple to life and be sympathetic to wildlife. Destroying land, drying out of the streams, cutting down of the trees, and killing wild animals become the vital part of her poetry. She highlights that men consider the natural world only for their own benefits. Her conservation movement through her creative work is not that nature should only be saved because of the easy life of human beings, but rather nature needs to be saved for its own sake. Throughout the paper, an attempt has been taken to say that the poet innately connects nature with humans in her poetry claiming that her poetry is an epitome of her Eco-consciousness, for "Ecocriticism analyzes the ways in which literature represents the human relations to nature" (Alam, 2011, LC. 13). The poet in *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* states that a poet "must be at peace with his landscape before he can turn confidently to its human figures" (1965, LC.253), what illuminates that her love and concern for ecology comes from her consciousness of 'self'. Therefore, we can say that Wright's poetry is a venture of her Eco-consciousness.

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