

From Routes to Roots: A Study of Selected Poems of Judith Wright

D. Theboral Victoriya, II M.A. English
Chevalier T. Thomas Elizabeth (CTTE) College for Women, Chennai 11

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Australia is a multi-ethnic, multicultural country which has a unique national identity. Australian aborigines had lived in Australia for 40,000 years before the Whites' discovery of the continent on April 23, 1770 by the English Captain James Cook. The beginnings of Australian literature were oral rather than written. When first encountered by the Europeans, the Aborigines in Australia did not have written languages. The songs, chants, legends and mythical stories, however, constituted a rich oral literature since the Aboriginal tribes were enormously diverse and had no common languages (*Webster World*).

In the 1780s, the British parliament decided to establish a large and remote penal colony that is suitable for farming, capable of supporting a financially independent settlement and very difficult to escape. Australia was chosen as the new destination for Britain's convicts in part it was judged to be *terra nullius*, a Latin term and legal ruling meaning 'land belonging to no one', and therefore available for seizure and settlement (Jaikrishnan 2).

In 1788, the first fleet landed in the shores of Australia where the vast majority of early Australian settlers were transported prisoners who wrote about nature, the Australian Aborigines, and their own personal experiences. The literature of the first hundred years of European settlement in Australia has reflected the emotions of those settlers and their relationship with that country. The slowly rising literature of that time reflected the struggle of the new settlers against the wild and natural environment of Australia. These authors focused more on urban themes and they produced their literary works in languages other than English. Their works have increasingly been recognized through international literary awards. Their writings reflect the diversity of Australia's literary community and the diversity of Australia's culture in general (Vallath et al 1).

The growth of Australian literature can be divided into three phases: The first phase is referred as the colonial period from 1788 where the literature was mostly produced by the European convicts. The writing of the period often reflects the dilemma of colonization, colonists found beauty as well as deprivation in the strange country (Jaikrishnan 19).

The second phase deals with a nationalist period terminated by World War I in which the first and second generation of Australians as well as the European settlers favoured huge concerns on Australian people and their issues that marked the beginning of the rejection of Anglo-centric

perception and the third phase referred to as modern period that expressed a solemn, ironic concern for social and moral issues.

From 1788 to the present day, the themes of migration, aboriginality, national identity, and the awesome and awful life in the Australian bush have been widely explored in Australian literature. These are what Judith Wright calls, “the doubleness of the Australian experience”, that is, the sense of exile, of being cut off from homeland, culture or familiar physical surroundings, and the sense of liberty, or hope for the future, of being part of a young society free from the constraints of the old world, of a land of opportunity (“Cultural Politics” 335). The present writer will evaluate this Australian experience and transition as presented in the select early poems of Judith Wright.

Wright’s work exhibits a love of the land, and examines the various aspects of the landscape, and the different ways in which it can be perceived. In particular, her poems express her own understanding of Aboriginal people’s connection with the land and her sense of the different relationship experienced by white poets.

For instance, in the poem “Bora Ring”, Wright points that the Aborigines are slowly losing their roots by losing their rituals and customs. She writes “The song is gone; the dance/ is secret with the dancers in the earth, / the ritual useless, and the tribal story/ lost in an alien tale” (Lines 1-4). Wright says that “Only the grass stands up/ to mark the dancing-ring;” signifying that the Bora ritual has withered away.

Wright uses the allusion to Cain from the Bible when she writes “Only the rider's heart/ halts at a sightless shadow, an unsaid word / that fastens in the blood of the ancient curse, / the fear as old as Cain” (Lines 13-16). In the *Book of Genesis*, Cain is one of the first two sons of Adam and Eve. Cain is a farmer by profession. He murders his shepherd brother Abel due to jealousy.

Early poems of Judith Wright often contain allusions from the Bible. Descending from ancestors who trespassed biblical perseverance her use of such allusions raises doubts. Her allusions are carefully chosen to bring out the alienation felt by the Aborigines in their own ‘native’ land and their longing for deliverance.

In the poem “Bullocky” Judith Wright uses the allusion to Moses from the Book of Exodus. She describes the trials faced by the ‘bullocky’ (one who drives a bullock) and his team in reaching their destination. Explaining the journey of the ‘bullocky’ Wright says that “the long straining journey grew/ a mad apocalyptic dream/ and he old Moses, and the slaves / his suffering and stubborn team”. Wright’s use of biblical allusions is a common theme in her early poems. She uses this device to express her concern and understanding of the Aborigines. She uses the Bible as the vehicle to connect the first humans and the first natives of Australia.

The poem “Eli, Eli” “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani” is drawn from Matthew 27:46 means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” these opening lines can be equated to the painful cry of the colonized Aborigines. The poem presents the situation in which Jesus is crucified and the people

who are just passive onlookers. 'that was his cross, and not the cross they gave him'. (Line 5) Simply watching and not trying to save the sufferers, the pain aggravates: "knowing that no one but themselves could save them - this was the wound, more than the wound they dealt him".

She tries to narrate the suffering, pain and displacement that the natives felt in their own land. Wright attempts to give a voice to the 'voiceless'. From her life we also understand that this has been her life time passion. In order to express her sincere love for the Australian landscape and its embedded culture her later poems shifted to presenting nature at its best. Thus, her poetry becomes a combination of personal and social issues. On the personal front, Wright used her ancestral routes to define her roots through the use of natural imagery.

In her later poems, Wright replaces Biblical allusions with nature imagery. Along with the Australian landscape, fauna, and flora, she discusses other themes like senses, passion, love, etc. This shift to nature in her poems coincides with her personal interest in conserving nature. At this juncture, it is to be noted that she is an environmental activist.

Wright's nature poems reflect her concern for ecological preservation which is related her intense love for the land of Australia. In the poem "Drought Year" (1953), Wright describes the drought and destruction using nature imagery. Wright finds herself witness to a drought in the Australian outback, a witnessing that becomes a warning, one repeatedly punctuated by the cries of dingoes, wild dogs indigenous to Australia. She writes:

That time of drought the embered air
burned to the roots of timber and grass.
The crackling lime-scrub would not bear
and Mooni Creek was sand that year.
The dingo's cry was strange to hear (Lines 1-5)

Wright represents the drought as powerful and intimidating. She portrays frightful drought, tormented animals, and opportunistic wagtail that renders nature too complex to easily sum up. The cry of the dingoes, the indigenous Australian dog is a reminder that natural resources have to be preserved for a sustainable life.

The poem presents the crudities of natural devastation which can be connected to the Australian landscape being affected due the colonial impact. The phrase 'spent world' indicates the withering away of native land, culture and tradition.

In the poem "At Cooloolah" (1954), Wright describes the serene beauty of Lake Cooloolah and portrays how it is being destructed by the colonisers.

The blue crane is the national bird of South Africa. Wright refers to the blue crane as 'the certain heir of lake and evening' revealing that the Africans have also invaded Australia. In this context, Wright present herself as a 'stranger, come of a conquering people' which indicates her link

to her past. From the biographical note from the book *Born of the Conquerors: Selected Essays*, it is understood that

“The author was born...into a pastoral family whose link with the land spanned five generations. Keenly aware of her background as a member of the ‘pastoral aristocracy’, Judith Wright strove to uncover the real history of the land, dispossession of the Aboriginal people and the destruction of the environment.” (n.d)

In the poem “Magpies” (1968), Wright describes how the little birds move along the Australian landscape. She writes “Along the road the magpies walk / with hands in pockets, left and right. / They tilt their heads, and stroll and talk. /In their well-fitted black and white”. (Lines 1-4) She refers to the black and white feathered magpie birds that walked on the land with arrogance. The colour ‘black’ and ‘white’ is a clear indication of Australian colonial history. The first intrusion of Blacks and Whites into the continent can be traced back the First Fleet to the Penal Colony of 1788.

In the poem “Flame-Tree in a Quarry” (1971) She observes the physical object, empathises with it, and the tree becomes the symbol of life’s fiery spirit defeating an uncongenial environment.

Wright uses phrases like ‘wrecked skull’, ‘earth’s mouth’, ‘scarlet breath’, ‘fountain of hot joy’, and ‘living ghost of death’ to describe the Australian landscape. Words like ‘skull’ and ‘ghost’ relates to the land being devastated by the invaders. In many ways this poem sums up the angst of Wright who reverts back to her ‘pastoral’ past by using the pronoun ‘I’. Words like ‘skull’, ‘flesh’, ‘blood’, and ‘death’ indicate her physical longing to connect to her land.

She does this by identifying with her own ‘routes’ to championing for the causes of her people who remind of her ‘roots’. Judith Wright's focus is clearly concerned with voicing the less heard inner thoughts and concern for the Australian Aborigines. Wright expresses these concerns in a language that is simultaneously down to earth and mystical. However, as her understanding of land and people evolves, Judith Wright questions existing natural, historical, and social narratives, concerned with the dispossession of Aborigines, the despoliation of the land, and the growing materialism of Australian society. Wright struggles to connect to her roots, and her poetry becomes a journey through her European *routes* to her *roots* of belongingness in Australia.

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