



## EMBLEMATIZING HOPE, INSPIRATION AND THE CALL TO RECONSIDER: AUSTRALIAN FLORA, FAUNA AND LAND IN JUDITH WRIGHT

Susan Alexander

Asst Prof. & Head, P.G.Dept of English St Cyril's College, Adoor, Kerala . 691521

### Abstract

*Australian poetry of the contemporary era can trace its origins to the bush ballads. They explore themes relevant to the times and also probe into the much debated topic of the times – namely environmental problems. They offer complementary insights on protecting the nature as well as learning from nature rather than presenting poems which have the non-human environment as a mere framing device. It makes possible a literature of indubitable goodness which not only delights but also instructs. A reading of the select poems of Judith Wright clarifies why she has been hailed as the conscience of a nation and here is an attempt to sketch how she self-consciously frames an ethics of environmental justice to the non-anthropocentric world*

**Keywords:** Australian poetry, environment, fauna, flora, land,



Scholarly Research Journal's is licensed Based on a work at [www.srjis.com](http://www.srjis.com)

Poetry played a very crucial role in laying the foundations of Australian literature. The enormous collection of vibrant folk songs and ballads might have been the reason for providing such a strong foundation for poetry. Australian poetry can roughly be divided into three periods- the nineteenth century which endeavoured to create an indigenous literary poetry, the early twentieth century lasting up to the period of the Second World War and the later twentieth century extending from the post war period to the present. Australian Bush music is the most popular and is a narration of people's experiences of living and surviving in the Australian bush. The colourful slang of bush life has now matured to the voicing over of contemporary events and experiences. Modern Australian poetry has a cosmopolitan outlook marked by unbridled variety, international context and a poetic significance which pierces into the soul never to leave it again. Innovative and experimental, it is laconic and at the same time lucid. Judith Wright is one such poet who has won wide critical appreciation and acclaim. Her poems are the products of one endowed with unusual sensibility, one whose encounter with nature is "meditative, intuitive, emotional, and strong metaphysical searching" (McAuley 160). An active advocate of aboriginal rights, Wright's poems are marked by local history, memory of aboriginal tribes as well as public themes. She endows people and landscape with an extra dimension of reality which gives new significance to the

Copyright © 2017, Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies

Australian contour. She becomes an ecological advocate and proto-ecophilosopher. This paper titled *Emblematizing Hope, Inspiration, and the Call to Reconsider: Australian Flora, Fauna and Land in Judith Wright* aims to look at the select poems of Judith Wright and evaluate why she has been called the “conscience of a nation” and how through her poems she instills in the readers a love for the Australian landscape, exhorts them to learn from the land, and urges them to protect it.

Born in a grazer family with paternal connections going into early settlements at Dalwood, Judith Wright’s encounter with nature and rural life is not reproduced in the usual romaniticism or dramatization mode but rather, it is a lyrical expressions of honesty and intensity of vision about the earth’s plenitude and its people, often crossing into the realms of a strident revivalistic rhetoric. She wrote of “tree-frog and dingo, rainforest and sea coast, stark cliffs and eroded hills, bush fire and flood, dust and drought, wind and rain, flame tree and cicadas, gum tree and cyclone” (qtd. in Hall ). The reality that Wright had experienced forms the bridge between her and her words thus endowing the people and the landscape with a new significance, imparting to those around her ecological wisdom and eventually trying to transform the conscience of the nation. Wright’s poetry mainly spoke of two themes- the destruction of the natural environment and the dispossession of Australia’s Indigenous inhabitants. “Like other parts of the British Empire, Australia had been subjected to innumerable environmental appraisals of varying reliability in the formative years of white settlement” (Powell 6). Growing human settlements have impacts on the environment through land use conversion, the development of physical and social infrastructure, the consumption of water and energy, and the generation of waste. Excess human settlement results in climate change. Many animal and plant species have adapted to the new stresses, food sources, predators and threats in urban and suburban environments, where they thrive in close proximity to humans. Bird species are the most studied in an effort to gain insight into the abilities of animals to adapt to urban habitats:

Birds abound in our literary and religious culture. The Noah story celebrated the dove and the raven as harbingers of safety at the end of the Flood. The dove appeared at Jesus’ Baptism as a sign of God’s favor. Jesus’ parables extolled the birds for even they are important to God; birds do not gather or store in barns, and birds are not anxious because they trust God. Keats’ nightingale, Shelley’s skylark and

Coleridge's albatross are all powerful symbols of salvation and rescue, from loneliness, insensibility and death.

Birds pose quite a challenge to the writer by their very otherness and difference from humans. (Smith 2)

Wright writes about the feathered friends of Australia in *Birds* (1962). The nest building and rearing of young ones elicited wonder and insight in her. In writing about the bird the telos was to “whet a social conscience about the natural environment.” The poet sees in the bird a battler, one who keeps fighting till its last breath to attain what it wants. It may be fair conditions of life, suitable environment, or even food and shelter. It is also a veiled plea to take care of one’s own land. In “The Migrant Swift” this fighting spirit of the bird is seen:

Head still strove to rise

And turn towards the lost impossible spring. (*Collected Poems* 167)

Australian environment is no exception to the damage done by colonial impatience, miscalculation and malice. Attempts to confront the damages of the past for the sake of more reconciled future became the genuine attempt in the writings of Wright who was staunch public defender. The resilience found in the Australian fauna is what is portrayed here. The forming of the national consciousness about the environment according to David Malouf is the greatest achievement of Judith Wright. She wrote of what was typical in Australia. The early nineteenth and twentieth century Australian literature was confined and based on other models, but with Wright there was a coming of age for what was purely Australian. The currawong and the banskia or the black cockatoos and the wagtail started making their appearance. The country that was till then spoken of from the “outside”, through her poems, began to be spoken of from “inside.” Wright makes this clear in *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*: “We are becoming identified with this country; we are beginning to know ourselves no longer exiles, but at home at home here in a proper sense of the term” (xxi). “Seasonal Flocking” is another example where Wright lists out the feathered friends of Australia. There is the mention of rosellasscoloured like “berry bright fruits, the young ones/ brocaded with juvenile green”, “black cockatoos with tails fanned to show yellow panes, uncounted magpies and currawongs” and “sharp- edged welcome swallows” (405). Wright camouflages within the bird poems the call to live a simple life.

Wright makes use of the Australian flora to emblemize hope and inspiration.

Then upward from the earth  
and from the water,  
then inward from the air  
and the cascading light  
poured gold, till the tree trembled with its flood

Now from the world's four elements I make  
My immorality; it shapes within the bud  
Yes, now I bud, and now at last I break  
Into the truth I had no voice to speak:

Into a million images of the Sun, my god. (*Collected Poems* 142)

The tree's transformation to the "flood of gold" is what the poet wants to see her nation transforming to. By imaging the golden rays of the sun and spreading its fragrance the wattle tree serves as the harbinger of spring. It has the capacity for regeneration even after fire. It may be seen as a genuine attempt to confront the historical legacies of past evils and erase bad memories which includes the dispossession of the aborigines or anything that cannot be conscripted into the service of national unity. The poet understands that there is still an opportunity for regeneration. In their resilient struggle and patient waiting trees are seen by Wright as corollaries to birds. The Murray-lily, the cycads and the camphor laurel are also taken up to propagate thoughts such as the need for eradicating deep rooted social evils and fostering thoughts about protecting the nature and enjoying its plenitude.

According to Wright's biographer Veronica Brady, the way Wright started writing about the Australian landscape effected a great change in Australian writing itself. The critic Kevin Hart claims that it was Wright's poetry that enabled him to understand his country and its people. Seeing the landscape is a way of seeing oneself. While the settlers see opportunity for exploration and exploitation, the natives find in the landscape their conscience.

Before one's country can become an accepted background against which the poet's and the novelist's imagination can move unhindered, it must first be observed, understood, described and as it were absorbed. The writer must be at peace with his landscape before he settles down to write confidently about its human figures.

(*Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* xi)

“The Train Journey” which appeared in *The Gateway* in 1953 is one such poem where the poet describes the landscape in a way no one else could do it.

I looked and saw under the moon's cold sheet  
Your delicate dry breasts, country that built my heart. (75)

The “unapologetic concentration of those regions that she knows intimately and can therefore evoke vividly and precisely- the tablelands of northern New South Wales and the rainforests of coastal Queensland” (Dorena Wright 149) made her the true conscience of Australia. She sees in the land to nourish itself and make it what it originally was.

Clench down your strength, box tree and ironbark  
Break with your violent root the virgin rock.  
Draw from the flying dark its breath of dew. (*Collected Poems* 75)

The growth and change in the nation’s notion of nationhood from colonization can be tracked in the lines of Wright’s poetry. An ecological activist she also stood up for the protection of the Great Barrier Reefs.

Even as nature remains the mainstay of her poems, poems like “Bora Ring lament the lost culture of Australia’s original inhabitants. Her attempts to uncover the real history of Australia helped her understand the dispossession of the natives. She believed that violence towards fellow human beings is violence towards land and the European era of colonization stemmed from ignorance of land and its people. In the poem Wright sees the aborigines as part of nature. But the western civilization which is unable to decipher their culture transforms it to a legacy of fear and evil. The tribal story is now “lost in an alien tale.” The aborigines believed that the world was created in what they called the dream time. Sacred landmarks were a testimony to that. Bora ring – the sacred site of aboriginal initiation ceremonies served as examples. By paying a tribute to the lost culture, Wright is exhorting the readers to examine what has happened to Australia’s own children

### **Works Consulted**

- Hall, G.V. “Judith Wright (1915-2000): Australian Poet and Prophet.” *Outlook* 22.9 (2000): 26-27. Print.
- McAuley, James. “Judith Wright.” *A Map of Australian Verse*. Melbourne: Oxford UP, Print. 160-177.
- Powell, Joseph Michael. *A Historical Geography of Australia: The Restive Fringe*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988. Print.
- Smith, Greg. “Salvation Imaged in Nature’s Amazing Directionality.” *Australian eJournal of Theology* 9 (2007): 1-8. PDF file.
- Wright, Dorena. “Judith Wright.” *Australian Poems in Perspective*. Ed. Peter Kingsley Elkin. Queensland: U of Queensland P. 1978. Print.
- Wright, Judith. Introduction. *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*. Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1965. Print.
- . *Collected Poems: 1942-1985*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1994. Print.