

Judith Wright: Voice of the Aboriginals

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Abstract: Judith Wright has empathetically taken up the cause of the aborigines in her poetry. As a voice of the aboriginals, she wrote about the violence of long-term colonialism plaguing the land of Australia. She went forth and struck like a warrior at the mightiest white egos, reminding them of the atrocities committed in the continent. It was the struggle of the aboriginal people that inspired her to write. She celebrated aboriginal survival in the face of adversity, lamented prejudice and oppression, and offered an optimistic view of the potential for interracial harmony in the country. She was committed to fight for the land and the aboriginal people, and used her writing as a weapon on behalf of the aborigines. She gave a message to the world about what was happening in her land and thus with her writings opened a new, hitherto undefined area in Australian poetry. Her poems offer an insight into the face and soul of the country. She gave voice to those Aboriginal people who had suffered and died from oppression and dispossession without being heard across the land. Wright is the first white Australian poet to publically name and explore the experiences of the indigenous people. Her work is provocative and emotional.

Keywords: Aborigines, Silence and voice, Usurpation, and Oppression

Poetry is one of the principal arts of life, the most universal which has the ability to connect reason and emotion, relate us to and the country and society in which we live. The present paper attempts to elucidate and analyze the poetry of the leading Australian poet Judith Arundel Wright for the cause of aborigines. She is a major voice who, as a social activist, has emphatically taken up the cause of the aborigines in her poetry. This essay attempts an intensive study of her poetic text, *Collected Poems*.

Australia, the “oldest continent” or the “Last of Lands”, which was discovered in 1770 by Captain Cook, was for ages inhabited by the Stone Age men who had since been exterminated or driven into the interior by English convicts, administrators, and settlers. The original inhabitants of Australia are known as aborigines who were of Asian origin and were without a written dialect for about 40,000 years. Traditionally, more than five hundred tribes were hunters and food gatherers, each with a different dialect. During the colonial and Postcolonial era, gold attracted immigrants of all nationalities to Australia. Overall the Australian aborigines went through several stages of oppression and dispossession as they first lost their land, then their culture and identity, and finally the evidence of their prior occupation. Australian literature is influenced by a combination of British, American, and native sources. The Australian writer probably has to cope with three aspects: as an alien or an exile, as a seeker of new freedom and adventurer in a new land, and as a native person who considers himself a human being to live at

peace with himself and his environment. Prominent Australian writers include A.D. Hope, Kenneth Slessor, Gwen Harwood, Henry Kendall, Les Murray, Charles Harper, Patrick White, and Judith Wright. Kevin Hart a poet and critic remarked that Wright's first collection of poetry, *The Moving Image*, exhibits the importance of Australian history, place, and environment in Aboriginal culture. Australia is a racist country where the poets care for Australian consciousness and cosmopolitanism in their poetry, which can be divided into three main periods: the nineteenth century marked by the efforts of Charles Harper and Henry Kendall, twentieth century up to the Second World War, and the period from 1940 to the present.

The Australian landscape entered the realm of poetry and the movement was called *Jindywarobak* that is a certain kind of consciousness through which it was realized that there was something missing in the landscape. This feeling of something missing in the Australian landscape directed the attention of the Australian poets to the myths and the lore of the Aborigines. For instance, the *Alcher* myth of the *Arunta* tribe fascinated a number of poets. According to this myth, spirits continued to dwell in the places where they had lived their incarnated lives. Thus, the Aborigines found their way into the Australian poetry. Even non-indigenous Australians wrote on Aboriginal themes including Thomas Kennelly, Donald Stuart, and Judith Wright. For instance, Hugh McCrae, Kenneth Slessor, Shaw Neilson, David Campbell, Vance Palmer, Xavier Herbert, Eleanor Dark, Eve Langley, Frank Dolby Davidson, Kylie Tennant, Mary Gilmore, Roland Robinson, Kath walker, and Judith Wright abide deep within the Australian soil and culture. In the modern era, the Aborigines of Australia, the Maoris of New Zealand, the Laplanders of Finland, the Indians of Peru, and the natives of Canada have been ventilating their demands through many literary and socio-political movements.

Judith Wright, one of Australia's most distinguished and best loved poets, is an ardent conservationist who unites in her poetry a vision of wholeness, a synthesis of body, mind, and spirit that stands counter to the alienation of modern life to the literature under the influence of the imagists and symbolist Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, W.B. Yeats, and T.S. Eliot. She was the first woman appointed to the council of Australian National University, President of Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland, and Patron of many social organizations including Amnesty International. She received several awards including Grace Leven Prize (1950), Australian World Prize (1984), and Human Rights Commission Award for her poetry volume *Collected Poems*. Besides poetry, she wrote her autobiography, *Half a Lifetime*, critical works as *Preoccupations in Australia*, stories, children Books, essays, and biographies. She was a prolific Australian poet, critic, and short-story writer, who published more than fifty-six volumes of poetry and short stories in her writing career of more than thirty years as a published poet.

Eve Fesl, a *Gabi Gabi* woman, defines the term in the Aboriginal Law Bulletin: "The word Aborigine refers to an indigenous person of any country if it is to be used to refer to us as a specific group of people, it should be spelt with a capital "A" that is Aborigines." The most popular tribes are *Anangu*, *Bama*, *Koori*, *Murri*, *Noongar*, *Nunga*, and *Palawah*. Judith Wright's poetic mind has a pioneering conscience for the complete understanding of the land and the

European Australians' relationship with the aborigines—the first inhabitants of the country. The dispossession of the aborigines by the White man induced introspection in her poetry as she unveils the shadow over the dark truth full of terrible wrongs inflicted on these original inhabitants: Where does it all begin?/ If evil has a beginning/it may disclose it, meaning” (Wright 324). She confesses, “The ground we walked on as children, in which our food grew and from which we gained a living, once had been wet with Aboriginal blood (34). She was the first white Australian poet to publically name and explore the experiences of indigenous people in her eminent poem “Nigger’s Leap, New England.”Based on a particular incident of European reprisal in New South Wales in 1844, the poem recalls how the hapless Nigger’s pursued to the top of the “lipped cliff,”“screamed falling in flesh” from those heights and then were “silent.”

Swallow the spine of range; be dark, O lonely air.
Make a cold quilt across the bones and skull
that screamed falling in flesh from the lipped cliff
and then were silent, waiting for the flies.

....

Did we not know their blood channelled our rivers?
and the black dust our crops ate was their dust?
O all men are one man at last...
.... And there they lie that were ourselves writ strange. (15-16)

Wright has commented that the story of Nigger’s Leap became deeply symbolic for her. Veronica Brady proposes that although this story is one that most people would rather forget or “shuffle back into a violent and miserable past,” for Wright “that dark cliff head, with the depth of shadows below it in the gulfs, is still a potent place” (Brady 94). The sentiments recorded in these lines are a good example of what J.J. Heal has termed as the “we-phenomenon,” an expanded consciousness that acknowledges collective responsibility for a particular event of history that sees the victim as a segment of the self-inflicted wound. Her poem “Bora Ring” is a splendid expression about the vanishing as well as the vanished race. It deals with the annihilation of Aboriginal culture by White settlement.

The song is gone; the dance
is secret with dancers in the earth,
the ritual useless, and the tribal story
lost in an alien tale. (Wright 8)

The poem “Four Poems from New Zealand” (396) shows her concern for the “Maori” tribe and “Nigger’s Leap, New England” cries and mourns over the vanishing race “Coolamon.”Theme of colonial throes, masculine orientation, and consciousness towards Aboriginal vexation get reflection in a number of her poems, where these humble tribes become objects of wonder and contempt.

Judith Wright celebrates the primary act of imaginative possession, the legendary figures of Australia's white past investing the land with their visions and love, in her pioneering pastorals. These poems are overlaid with biblical association. In the poem "For New England," in a characteristic movement, the focus shifts from the winter landscape to an ancestral figure within the cottage, and forward again to the poet, the bearer of these memories:

Many roads meet here
In me, the traveler and the ways I travel.
All the hills gathered waters feed my seas
Who am the summer and the mountain river;
And the long slopes concurrence is my flesh
Who am the gazer and the land I stare on;
And dogwood blooms within my winter blood,
And orchards fruit in me and need no season
But sullenly the jealous bones recall
What other earth is shaped and hoarded in them. (22)

Even here, a sense of division between poets 'English and Australian inheritances' troubles her identification. She considers aborigines to be the real inhabitants of Australia, who were treated with contempt and condescension by the whites. She shows respect to the struggle aborigines endure for their continued existence and considers the aborigines to be superior beings in context to strength and perseverance.

The aboriginal theme in the poetry of Wright acquired a moral dimension and became a symbolic interrogation of exploitation and dispassion as illustrated in the poem "They": "They look like people/ That's the trouble" (349). Judith Wright transfers her imaginative and poetic values – of wisdom, intuition and creativity – across to the dark tribes; the aborigines are dark in a symbolic as well as a literal sense. As a sensitive person, Judith also projects upon certain graveness in the colour and attitude of aborigines in the symbolic poem, "The Dark Ones":

On the other side of the road
the dark ones stand.
Something leaks in our blood
like the ooze from a wound,
the night ghosts of a land
only by day possessed
come haunting into the mind
like a shadow cast (354-55)

Judith Wright shares a poetic, symbolic, and metaphysical appreciation of aboriginal culture. The Poem, "Two Dreamtimes," is a magnificent example of her real concern and honest feelings towards her childhood friend, Kath Walker, an aboriginal:

Kath my sister with the torn heart....You were one of the dark childrenI wasn't allowed to play with -riverbank campers, the wrong colour,(I couldn't turn you white). So it was late I met you,late I began to knowthey hadn't told me the land I lovedwas taken out of your hands. (315)

Though she was never allowed to speak and play with the aborigines, yet she makes conscious effort to observe and depict their thought process in her oeuvre. She emphatically takes up the cause of aborigines in her poetic world. Wright intimately observes the life of the aborigines and shares her poetic, symbolic, and metaphysical appreciation of their culture. "Brigalow Country" portrays a lonely world of the tribe and their grief over the loss of the joy of life:

Never get no money
for when I go hungry,
never get no kisses
for when I feel sad-
rooted like the brigalows
until I'm dead. (135)

Judith Wright emphasises in clear terms the fundamental disjunction between white and black Australians, a gulf which is described as being nearly impossible to bridge as the whites are "born of fire, possessed by darkness" (426). She condemns the whites as "twisted to the hearts of men - dark powers possess them". She appeals to them to "Burn the distant evil doer, the unseen sinner" (426) but "it is man who leans a deafening ear" (319). Wright brings out the pain of the aborigines that will disturb the peace of the whites. She questions "how shall mind be sober,/ since blood's red thread still binds us fast in history?" (12). She wonders whether the whites realize the impact of the invasion on the lives of the aborigines and "Does each repent the thing the last has done/ though claiming he rejects it?" (241). Assessing the impact of the encounter with a primitive culture, she writes, "Why should the blacks, with that soft obstinacy that was almost gaiety, thus invite their own murder?" "Kill us, for we can never accept you," the blacks said; "Kill us, or forget your own ambitions" (156). The description of an empty landscape full of memories of the Aborigines increases the sense of usurpation and the feeling of guilt is intensified. Wright's indication of interference and suppression of her white ancestors express the savageness that has made the aboriginals "Haunted and alone" (135). Cross-culturally speaking the feeling of arrogant guilt of the white's inhuman attacks in contrast the Aboriginal's love for a peaceful life is depicted in "At Cooloola"

Those dark-skinned people who once named Cooloolah
knew that no land is lost or won by wars,
for earth is spirit; the invader's feet will tangle
in nests there and his blood be thinned by fears. (140)

Judith Wright articulates her sympathy while depicting the plight of the aborigines. In the poem “Trapped Dingo” she writes, “they crushed out your throat the terrible song/ you sang in the dark ranges” (9). Those “dark” tribes after being dragged out of their land took refuge from the squatters and the mounted native police, in the great scrubs and ranges of Dawson, Mackenzie, and Isaac rivers. Left to wander, lost and alone in the annals of Australian history, their escapes sprang up into mythical stories. The bushes in the forest seem to become a place of escape, a place to find peace, a place to find work and pride in oneself. Brutal killings and forced exile of the indigenous people by the Whites take picturesque image in “Trapped Dingo.” It is the picture of the “Wild singer” whose verse dies away with the race:

and clay stops many a warrior’s mouth, wild singer.
Voice from the hills...
..
death ends the verse you chanted; here you lie. (9)

“Australia 1970” displays the weight of denunciation in a venomous society of conquerors. “For we are conquerors and self-poisoners/ more than scorpio or snake/ and dying of the venoms that we make/ even while you die of us” (288). Wright’s ironical remarks over the shameful acts of her ancestors in “Victims” reveal her anguished soul:

They are ageing now, some dead.
In the third-class suburbs of exile
their foreign accents
continue to condemn them. They should
not have expected more.
Their faces, common to human kind,
had eyes, lips, noses.
That in itself was grave
seen through such a flame. (402)

“They” are the doomed society which remains buried in the dust and “They were already/ a coat of ash seared in” (224). Aborigines’ peaceful living is ironically reflected in “To My Brothers.” “The previous owners put up little fight,/did not believe in ownership, and so were, scarcely human” (406).

Judith Wright also portrays the attitude of aborigines to adapt to the situation. She has profound respect for the sacred dimension of ordinary life and ordinary Australians. Upholding the ethical and gracious sense of human dignity, she advises the whites to be like a tree that “leaps up and makes a world/to reconcile the night and day,/to feed the bird and the shining fly” (87). Wright gives a message to both the races to unite and forget the wrong doings. She states her point, “Perhaps nothing exists but our faults?/At least they can be demonstrated.” She further writes, “we invent both light and dark: that is man’s fate” (251). In “The Builders,” she salutes the

surviving spirit of life, “This is life’s promise and accomplishment- . . . Seeds falls there now, birds build, and life takes over” (45). She asserts that time has come “to be out of this dream” (276) and “to learn and to unlearn,/absorb and fight” (327). In the poem “The Body,” Wright hopes for harmonious co-existence of whites and blacks as they both appreciate their interdependence:

I am your blundering kind companion.
I am your home that keeps out bitter weather.
I am the perilous slow deposit of time’s wisdom.
You are my threat, my murder. And yet, remember.
I am yourself. Come, let us live together. (146)

Wright states that her purpose in reintroducing the aborigines into the mind of Australians was not so much to recall the violence of the European take-over but to make white Australians realize that “You must go by the way he went” (113). Judith’s early poems “Australia 1970” and “At Cooloolah” on aboriginal theme are laments and they gain urgency from the sharp influx of “guilt” experienced by the Whites. The poems like “Brig low Country,” (“Carnarvon Range,” “The Ancestors,” “The Lost Man,” “The Beach at Hokitata,” “Jacky Jacky,” “Victims” deal with Aboriginal past, their tribes, and rituals.

Guilt, as the burden of history, is felt in the division between the settlers and the land itself, despoiled by greed and incomprehension of the white settlers. Judith Wright confesses:

These hills my father’s father stripped;
And, beggars to the winter wind,
They crouch like shoulders naked and whipped-
Humble, abandoned, out of mind. (140)

In her poetry, the guilt of living on a land filled with the ghosts of those who had been murdered is evident in the poem “Walker in Darkness”:

The sea he swims in is the sea where other men drown;
the shore he walks is the white sand of their bones.
The forest is full of monsters and mad ferns,
and no man comes there but those who die, who mourn,
or who desire to be bore. (110)

Her poem “Double Image” is about the recognition of the darkest aspects of the human nature, feelings, and impulses that are in common with the ancestors and presumably all humanity. It is a visceral poem that recounts the speaker’s vicarious participation in the most brutal, almost bestial fight to the death with another when she was within her “kinsman’s flesh” and experienced his wounds as if they were her own:

“My kinsman’s flesh, my kinsman’s skull
enclosed me, and our wounds were one”

....

Till from these centuries I wake,
naked and howling, still unmade,
within the forests of my heart my dangerous kinsman runs afraid. (196)

Her poem “Eli, Eli” reads as a transhistorical lament for the consequences of human acts of violence. It shows the lack of sense of responsibility the whites had towards humanity which caused the gap between the two cultures and made the blacks adamant to not accept the whites, “to hold the invisible wand and not to save them-/this was the wound, more than the wound they dealt him” (44).

Another splendid description of the unacknowledged historical past of the blacks and the prevailing hatred between the whites and black people due to their colour get a historical

Projection in “The Dust in the Township”:
and now with the tribes he is gone down in death.
to us who forget the sweat of Dick Delaney,
and the humpy and scalding sunlight and the black
hate between the white skin and the black. (63)

Wright considers racial discrimination as “Our enemy” (292) because it creates the feeling of superiority. Like Toni Morrison, she realizes the pain suffered due to colour discrimination. In the poem “Half-Caste Girl” she depicts how the girl like Pecola longs to enjoy her life but the “wallaby skin” stands as a hindrance:

Little Josie buried under the bright sun
would like to open her eyes and dance in the light.
Who is it has covered the sun and the beautiful moon
with a wallaby skin, and left her alone in the night? (19)

The dispossession of the aborigines by the white men induces introspection in her poetry as she unveils the shadow over the dark truth full of terrible wrongs inflicted upon the aborigines. In the poem “Homecoming” she addresses the whites to take the blame and make amends: “Brother, we dare not fail our load. Now brace/.../Shoulder the weight. Stride on. Open the door (228). In her revolutionary poem “For the Loved and the Unloved” Wright blames the whites completely for their ill-doings. She also makes them recognize their darker aspects which is eventually ruining their lives, “The roads unwind within us... the thread by which we travel”(126) She believes that by simply ignoring the fate of the natives, white Australians will never be able to rid themselves of an uneasy guilt for what they did to the former inhabitants of Australia. Wright makes the whites realize the “sully wound” of the aborigines and “that the

sting going in/hold's the poison from other's sores" (223). Wright cannot tolerate the affliction and misery of the aborigines. In the poem "Vision" she declares that it is just "knowledge" that can "teach him more humility" (200). Her poem "Two Sides of a Story" is a naked projection of immoral attacks and shameful strategies of whites and the vicissitude of the natives at the hands of their cruel oppressors:

We see you still through a mist of sentiment,
Galmahra, songman, born at a time so unlucky,
In your tribe's last days, and you the last of their poets'
And doomed to be given the nick name Jacky Jacky. (256)

Being sensitive, she cries out pathetically in the poem "Halfway": "I am neither one thing nor the other, nor here nor there" (290). She confesses in an interview to Ramona Koval that a poet has an artistic-cum-social duty to perform and resolve the various conflicts and evils of society: "I have always wanted to make up to people for the ills they suffer ... what we have done to the aborigines is definitely the worst thing we have done since we came here, and we have done plenty of bad things (30 June 2000 not mentioned in the bibliography).

Judith Wright makes cognisant efforts to bridge the existing gap between the whites and blacks. Wright makes a statement that the natives are human beings who deserve respect and humane treatment. Critics like H.P. Heseltine support the vision of life depicted in her later poetry and assert that "she has made the harder choice of seeking, through private struggle, to writing from poetry a new vision of the world" (Wilde 829). In the poem "Carnarvon Range," she resorts to singing for the tribes who have now become silent: "Carnarvon Creek / and cliffs of Carnarvon, / your tribes are silent" but "I will sing for you" (Wright 134). Comforting the tribal fellows, she says, "I hold your hand,... I cannot mend-/ your time's not mine, your place strange to my place" (124). In the poem "Letter to a Friend," she shares her feelings with the aborigines:

the mourner speaks to the mourned,
the murderer speaks to the murdered.
To you whom I have killed,
...
to you at least I should speak the truth. (56)

In the poem "Walker in Darkness," she depicts the query in the heart of the aborigines: "where shall I look for my light, and how shall I find/ my heart in your dark land?" (110) Wright also depicts the state of mind of the aborigines and reflects upon the darkness that empowers them. The poem "To a Child," she states her concern for the aborigines who are losing faith: "I think of this for you./I would not have you believe/the world is empty of truth/or that men must grieve" (107). Her advice to them is to live fearlessly: "Walk your dark streets alone but without fear," (85) even though you "go by the darkest road" (100). To show her concern for the aborigines, Wright in 1991, resigned as a patron of the Wildlife Preservation Society because of its failure to

support aboriginal land rights. Strong in her denunciation of mistreatment of the aborigines, undermining the social fabric of Australian life, Wright attended a march in Canberra for a reconciliation between white Australians and the aboriginal people shortly before her death at the age of eighty-five. She tried to kick-start a movement for reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians in the 1980s which gathered steam in the 1990s. However with her experiences she learnt that reconciliation is not a matter of charity for the oppressed but rather a realization. As true humanists, she fought adamantly for the rights of the aborigines and strove for the integration of both the cultures. The poetry of Judith Wright depicts the urgency and exigency to bring the whites and blacks on the same platform where there is no ban or bias. The aboriginals are also expected to view the culture of the whites with veneration. This shall bring in a new phase of cultural communication and help to build a majestic life. Her poetry is a plea for a peaceful co-existence of whites and blacks in the marvellous land of Australia.

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