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Poetry and Power: Judith Wright's Engagement with the Geopolitical Landscape of Australia

Shilpi Chowdhary

Research Scholar,

Department of English & MEL

University of Lucknow, Lucknow, U.P., India

&

Assistant Professor,

Department of English,

Vidyant Hindu P.G. College, Lucknow, U.P., India

Abstract

This paper explores the geopolitical dimensions of Judith Wright's poetry and activism, situating her as a key figure in Australia's literary and political landscape. Through a close reading of her works, her engagement with the issues of land ownership, disposition of the indigenous population, environmental degradation and National identity is examined. Her poetic voice which is deeply connected to the Australian landscape, challenges the colonial history and the deep-rooted politics of the place. By the inclusion of Postcolonial theory and geopolitics, this paper helps in revealing the true intension of the writer which is both artistic and rebellious at the same time. Her contribution towards the Aboriginal land rights, environmental conservation that provides a solid ground which in turn helps in understanding the relationship of land, language, and power. By examining poetry like "Nigger's leap: New England," "Bora Ring," "At Cooloolah," her efforts in reminding the cruel historical past and the politics surrounding it, actively exposes the dark reality which resulted in the displacement of the indigenous population and the exploitation of the resources. It places her in the broader geopolitical discourse and efforts are made to uncover the challenges she faced while protecting the Great Barrier Reef and her struggle with the government. Her advocacy towards environmental Conservation surpasses boundaries and she became one of the pioneering figures in the field of Environmental conservation.

Keywords: Judith Wright, Geopolitics, Conservation, Indigenous, Australia, Aboriginal, dispossession, identity, National Consciousness, environmental philosophy, Great Barrier Reef

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Introduction:

Judith Wright was born on 31st May in 1915 in New England, New South Wales, Australia. She was a renowned poet, environmentalist and social activist who fought for the Aboriginals and Bush land. Her ancestors, siblings and cousins went on to become pastoralists while she rose to prominence in Australian Poetry. Perhaps, even more impressive is the extent to which her poetry has been read, studied, and anthologized in Australia and around the world. A. D. Hope in his work *Australian Writers and Their Work* reflects on the characteristics of a poet, "Poets are neither born nor made: they make themselves out of two things: a natural gift and fascination for the imaginative effect of words and a passionate detachment from the world of experience such that one does not plunge into and suffer it but stands back, enjoys, loves and understands it"(Hope,4). This is true for Judith Wright as she had the gift of both imagination and natural talent. According to Georgina Arnott, who has removed layers from Judith Wright's untouched life in her work *The Unknown Judith Wright* feels that her formative years resonates with the Australian past and it helped to think about important issues with new perspective. Judith's family was one "which had dispossessed Aboriginal people to occupy and cultivate great acreages of land, which employed dozens of workers who had little control over their working conditions, garnered significant social power from its wealth and connections with ruling class England, and which fought desperately for the maintenance of their privileges" (Arnott,16). Her life story reflects on several topics like colonial-racial relations, a gap between early European immigrants' expectations and reality, early attempts to create new politics, the challenges faced by women in pastoral areas and the historical ties between the city and the Nation. Wright did not see Australia's harsh landscapes-rivers, Eucalyptus, and reefs as resources for advancement. Instead, she saw them as living things that represent the country's fundamental identity. H. M. Green in his work, *A History of Australian Literature* critiques about the style of Judith Wright's poetry as he says that, "Judith Wright has to a very unusual extent the power of entering into the objects of her experience, of becoming part of them and of making them part of herself" (Green,1023). She is basically a writer who loses her identity and becomes part of a world which connects one object to another. She says; "The world is my heart; the world is love or hate.... 'The world is my body; is what my eyes can see and my hands hold;" (Wright, 31).

She, as a voice of the Aboriginals, captures geopolitics by using the landscape of Australia as lens through which the vices of colonial supremacy, the wars and the National Identity is critiqued resulting into these events being transformed into political resistance.

Australian Land as Subject:

Judith Wright was born in the family of the pastoralists, who migrated to the Australian Sub-continent as settlers but her heart always longed for the welfare of her land and its people. Wright's upbringing had a big impact on her work, and 'history' and 'place' were two of her poetry's main subjects. She was able to write in a unique and personal way as she had to deal with the Aborigines displacement while writing about how her family had obtained the land. She tried her best to shape the National consciousness and has succeeded in her efforts to a

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large extent. She paints the arid expanses of land, its ecosystems, culture, and tradition in her poems as a symbol of colonial invasion and the indigenous dispossession which helped her, in linking the land abuse to the greater power struggle of Colonization. Several poems from her *Collected Poems* illuminates the duality of the settlers and the destruction caused by them resulting in the transformation of the 'virgin land' into the European colony. According to A. D Hope in his work on Australian writers, critiques about Judith that her poetry "gives the essence of what is in her mind, her experience and her imagination is always at the root of her vision of the world and prompts the voice of feeling that runs through all her poetry" (Hope,27).

Swallow the spine of range; be dark. O lonely air.

Make a cold quilt across the bone and skull
that screamed falling in flesh from the lipped cliff
and then were silent, waiting for the flies. (HP, 8)

These distressing lines are from the poem *Niggers Leap, New England* where Judith Wright challenges Australia's colonial cruelty by making a connection between the country's settler origins and a historical execution in which Indigenous Australians were forced to jump over cliffs in New England. This barbarism is captured by vivid imagery where she has used expressions describing the landscape that is swallowed by the night, clouds as boats of invasion, and flies over foreign bodies. She has used several voices which blends with human agony like the 'night tides' and 'the skull that screamed' which further intensifies the horrifying picture. Through the sharp use of sensory impulses, she presents the anguish of the Aboriginals and takes her readers to the period of devastation. The Darkening of the sky hints at the eradication of the culture of the place and 'leap' is the metaphor for the useless struggle. Thus, the brutality of the powerful colonizers to occupy the land and its resources is presented by Wright in a wise manner.

Green Politics:

As an established environmentalist, she sees the state of the land as connected to human ethics, a type of ecological geopolitics, and connects ecological damage to power systems. The core of Wright's environmental philosophy is the interdependence of nature and humanity. She disapproved the humanistic perspective that views nature as nothing more than a resource to be exploited by humans. Rather, her poetry promotes appreciating the fundamental worth and vitality of the natural environment where the mind, body, flora, and fauna are mingled together to form the single ecosystem. Nature is presented as main authoritative power where her beauty and her harshness are recognized without romanticising it. She has used images of several birds and trees to present an environmental collage full of vibrance but man being a selfish being plunders the soul of the ecosystem, of which he is a small component. The harsh elements of the bush land like drought, dust, fierce animals of Australia are metaphors of the tyranny of the colonizers who have exploited the land and its people for personal gains. This important theme is anticipated in her poem, 'Bora Ring' where she depicts an abandoned indigenous initiation site, that signifies the geopolitical erasure of Aboriginal sovereignty brought about by European colonisation. As a fundamental component of Australia's colonial geopolitics, the

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poem grieves about the lost songs, dances and rituals referring to the domination of settler population.

The hunter is gone
the spear is splintered underground
the painted bodies a dream the world breathed sleeping and forgot.
The nomad feet are still. (HP, 2)

Through the images of the grass which marks the 'dancing ring' and trees 'posture and mime a past corroboree,' Wright presents the harshness of dispossessors, shedding light on how colonized territories maintain the traces of geopolitics that justifies displacement of the original population.

Traditional Land Rights:

Judith Wright has always fought for the Aboriginals and launched several campaigns during her life as an activist. She has supported calls for the treaty between the Australian state and the indigenous people by getting deeply involved in Aboriginal land rights' campaigns and the Aboriginal Treaty committee commencing from 1970s. These treaties and the battle for the land fall under the lens of geopolitics as it involves sovereignty, resource management, legal recognition of indigenous nations and Australia's commitments. In her poem 'Australia 1970', Wright addresses geopolitics by criticizing resource exploitation by the colonizers, their conquest, the continuous struggle for the authority of the land. When the land was inhabited by the first citizens,' it had its charm and spirituality intact but after the conquerors invaded the land, it became a 'wild country.' They uprooted the original inhabitants and redrew the borders, establishing themselves as the brutal race whose domination destroyed the soul of the nation in the face of development and technology. This poem 'Australia 1970' from her collection 'Shadow', projects the immense pain of the writer for the country she was born in. Since her childhood, Wright has witnessed and consequently experienced the pain of the Aboriginals caused by colonization and displacement. The original inhabitants were displaced from their land. The atrocities faced at the hands of the colonizers and the intention of poet to humanize the readers can be felt in this poem.

She is instructing the landscape to fight against the brutality of the Europeans and to not surrender easily. She has used evocative images of animals like eagle-hawk, tiger-snake, and soldier-ants to exhibit the fighting ability of the country despite knowing that the country is going to 'die.' The anaphoric device used in the subsequent stanzas suggests how as a poet she herself has surrendered to the situation.

Die, wild country, like the eagle hawk,
dangerous till the last breath's gone,
clawing and striking. Die
cursing your captor through a raging eye. (HP,152)

She commands the land to 'fills the killer's dreams with fear like suicide's invading stain.' She is guilty of the fact that, unknowingly, she herself is somewhere responsible for the plight of the Aboriginals 'though 'we' corrupt you with our torturing mind.' Her awareness

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that her forebears and conquerors have filled the beautiful land and the lives of the local population with venom makes her less culpable for the crime but she wants to spread the idea of humanism in the readers. In the last stanza, she is praising the land for its courage to fight until the last breath and she is remorseful of the dying conscience of the colonizers,

I praise the scoring drought, the flying dust,
the dying creek, the furious animal,
that they oppose us still
That we are ruined by the thing we kill. (HP,152)

Wright's poetry has frequently employed wars as a geopolitical force that portrays the struggle of countries dealing with it, the violence, technology, and power to subjugate people and territory. It is a widely known fact that these wars are the results of large global systems of Empires, military economies, dominance, alliance that corrupts the humankind and Nature. She has always been a staunch advocate for the preservation of the natural resources. She has produced various poems that project the aftermath of the wars like the World Wars, the Pacific Wars, and the Vietnam War. Nations strive for supremacy and they have transformed the World into a battleground. The poems like 'The Trains' use vivid imagery of train, cities, and the mourning crowds to show how the global conflicts shape the everyday life of a common man.

Strange primitive piece of flesh, the heart laid quite
Hearing their cry pierce through its thin-walled cave
Recalls the forgotten tiger
And leaps awake in its old panic riot;
And how shall mind be sober,
Since blood's red thread still binds us fast in history? (HP,6)

Another poem 'At Cooloolah' from her poetry collection *The Two Fires* (1955) which describes the time when the Aboriginals were displaced from their land forcefully and violently where once they lived in harmony with nature. The foundation of the White Society was based on the capitalist system, which led an individual to take charge of a place and its resources through hard work. Money was the basic criteria on which this hierarchy was formed. Contrary to that the Aboriginals were happy with their lives revolving around their natural resources as they received spiritual strength from it. If looked from the lens of post-colonialism, one can observe that the 'first citizens' have resisted against their domination but their fear of failure was evident. This poem comes from the 'inherent guilt' that the author lives with and she feels as a stranger who has disturbed the silence of the place. She is aware of her ancestral history, 'I know that we are justified only by love, but oppressed by arrogant guilt.' The spirit of the place is lost,

But I'm a stranger, come of a conquering people
I cannot share his calm, who watch his lake,
Being unloved by all my eyes delight in,
And made uneasy, for an old murder's sake. (HP,83)

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The life of Aboriginals used to revolve around Mother Nature and they were far from the vices of the society as they lived in groups in harmony with environment. Wright in her prose work *The Cry for The Dead* praises this aspect by writing, “ the Aboriginal population adjusted...The women has ways to lighten the burden of bearing too many children for the food-supply; but their love for the children was devoted...groups were reported to carry their old, sick or crippled members from place to place on sapling litters, rather than leave them to die alone”(Wright, 20).

Post-Pastoral Eco poetry and Ambivalence:

Post-pastoral poetry is a theoretical framework that addresses the ongoing environmental concerns rather than criticizing and celebrating Nature. Wright’s poetry has been recognized by literary scholars as an example of ‘post-pastoral’ poetry which celebrates the painful complexity of living on the ‘conquered land’ while ignoring both idealized celebration and judgements. Her famous poem, “Bullocky” shows an ironic image of settlement in which the language of the national destiny conceals the violent transformation of the landscape for agriculture production.

Grass is across the wagon-tracks,
And plough strikes bone beneath the grass,
And vineyards cover all the slopes
Where the dead teams were used to pass. (HP, 9)

Her poetry is marked by sustained ambivalence and she herself defines her work as ‘double vision of love and dispossession.’ Extreme tension can be felt with most of her works where she is seen struggling with the two opposite realities of her life: on one hand her love for the land where she was raised and, on the other hand the moral voice that reminds her family’s ownership of the land which was obtained by the violent dispossession of the indigenous people. The two poems which presents this duality in a clear style were ‘Niggers Leap’ and ‘Bora Ring’ as discussed above. These poems present the land as an entity that cannot be wholly possessed.

The Conservation Movement:

Judith Wright was not only a prolific writer but also a dedicated environmentalist who fought for the Great Barrier Reef protection and preservation in the 1960s And 1970s. The twelve years struggle to protect the Great Reef from economic exploitation is documented by her in her book *The Coral Battleground*. It presents the detailed journey of Wright to protect the Reef and is considered as one of the major Geopolitical battle and conservationist movements in Australia, as prior to it, this term was unfamiliar for the people of Australia. Initially she was alone in her fight but as the movement gain momentum, she received support from the labour unions, the media, and other environmentalist and activist like John Busst. They had threat from the oil companies who were staking out locations to drill wells while miners sought to extract lime from the reefs to use as fertilizer.

According to Wright, the World has lost a significant amount of Natural World because of greed but “ the story of the rescue of the Great Barrier Reef still throws a light on the present

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and gives hope for the future, and because of the rescue many people have been able to experience and enjoy the marvellous stretch of sea, reefs and island, and the intricate pattern of living beings, which make up its existence” (Wright, xxi). She had a beautiful vision for the future generations and capability to accomplish it. After years of public campaigning and political struggle, Judith’s group was able to get the Great Barrier Reef, recognized as the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park in 1975 and the government was ready to take up the responsibility of its preservation, after which the region was named a United Nations World Heritage Site.

Conclusion:

Through this article, it becomes clear that Wright has created an Australian canvas which is profoundly political, formed not as an impartial background rather developed in the environment of Colonisation, Dispossession, and National myth. Her poems explore how power functions through stories of land, history, and identity, asking who has the right to name and claim Australia. Throughout her life, she has carried the burden of being the part of the race that has exploited the indigenous people. She argues that any genuine Australian identity in this country could only acknowledge the presence of Indigenous people, the violence of settlement and its ongoing effects. This conclusion emphasizes that Wright's invocation of landscape poetry is a call for historical responsibility, not sentimental celebration of nature. Wright takes poetry to be a kind of ethical power, one that has the capacity to reveal the costs of economic “progress,” environmental exploitation and state-sanctioned forgetting.

She highlights that her work is destabilizing the dominant ideologies by providing a platform to those whose voices are muted, and wounded places. Her work in environmental and Indigenous-rights activism is evidence that poetic vision and political action are not distinct, but rather interwoven. Wright uses poetry to transform Australia into a nation based on acknowledgement, care for the Country and more equitable relations between peoples.

Her love for writing about her people and the guilt laid with her made her poetry unbiased and truthful, revealing the dark sides of Global politics. Her criticism highlights the framework where colonial mapping and resource extraction causes injustice and calls for a biocentric point of view. She advocated for the Aboriginal identity and her battle for the Great Barrier Reef stresses upon the fact that for survival of any race, land and Nature should be conserved. Her poetry and prose work comprehensively include these aspects and therefore will be read by the future generations. Judith Wright, finally expresses her emotional state in her prose work *Half a Lifetime*, edited by Patricia Clarke where she is apologetic for the koori and murri people as she says, “To all the peoples of the old and true Australia on whose land I have trespassed and whom, by being part of my own people, I have wronged, I plead for forgiveness. To all of them I owe that overweighing debt of life itself, and to all of them I now bend my head and say Sorry, sorry, above all, that I can make nothing right” (Wright,296).

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