

Imagining Self: Judith Wright's Womanhood in Her Poem's *Woman To Child and Request to A Year*

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Abstract

While teaching at the University of Kashmir, Department of English, I encountered Australia's one of the most phenomenal poets, Judith Wright and her captivating poetry. This paper is a detailed and a critical study of her poems *Woman to Child* and *Request to a Year*. The paper aims at acquainting readers with the vision of her mother country, Australia, her idealised portrayal of womanhood and self-actualisation. This paper also focuses on the clarity of language she uses, the depth and transparency of her imagery and symbols she utilises to bring home the theme of her poems. Judith Wright's poetry has a unique characteristic and a typical style when it comes to the utilisation of her two crucial and relevant subjects concerning her mother country: 'Australian Aspect' wherein she frequently relates to the old traditional style of Australia's history and the harsh landscape as a peculiar Australian trait and the feministic side of her thought process gets reflected from her 'Woman's View' which becomes her favoured theme in most of her poems, where her creativity relates the historical and contemporary realities a woman perceives in a certain way different from that of the male counterpart.

Keywords- *Australia, Human Relations, Identity, Tradition, Womanhood, Commonwealth*

Introduction

Commonwealth literature was criticised for continuing with the historical inequalities between the coloniser and the colonised. As a matter of fact, the idea of Commonwealth was introduced by the European critics to stop English Literature proper from mutating into New Literatures in English. Commonwealth Literature always maintained a hierarchy of political commonwealth with British literature at the centre and rest of the literature emerging from the erstwhile colonies placed at the periphery. Commonwealth writers were supposed to write within the context of the English literary tradition as it was stated that their literature has humanistic superiority and universal validity which

the former colonies lacked. However, writers from Asia, Africa, Australia, and commonwealth questioned the claim of their superiority and validity of euro-centric tradition because they were not convinced of their humanistic superiority given to the harsh memories of the colonial past. Their objections revolved around certain claims. One claim was to see and analyse the overseas writings within the framework of the context of which they are part of because that would give the audience the narrative of the authentic and true local colour the westerners were uninformed. The other was about their culture and tradition which was not necessarily inferior or superior rather was different, different from the Queen's culture and tradition. The normalcy and superiority ascribed to the British literary culture was questioned which paved the way for the establishment of an alternative to commonwealth literature in the form of New Literature in English. Australian literature although has a different position to share because it experienced both the aspects of colonisation, that is, colonised and the coloniser. When it comes to its literature, prior to the written literature that has the dominance these days, it had a huge body of oral literature that somehow was suppressed by the British narrative. However, the modern authors pulled it hard to showcase the aboriginal culture or the native culture, their manner of challenging the tradition and reworking it to provide an ironic commentary. The peculiar position of Australian literature is established by taking up some of the myths and motifs and reshaping them by manipulation of tone and a particular point of view, quotation and allusions. The two distinctive techniques that work in Australian poetry are the ironic tone and the dialogic method. These techniques are specifically prominent in poets like A. D. Hope and Judith Wright. Dialogic structures are visible throughout Judith Wright's poems, for example, in her earlier collection of poems *Woman to Man*. However, one thing should be borne in mind, Australian poetry is not replete with ironic technique only, rather the poems show a sense of passion, sensuousness, and a 'brittle intellectual verve'. It is the acceptance of the country with all its flaws and alienness that finds a beautiful portraiture, consequently evolving their own culture and tradition.

Judith Wright is a powerful voice which echoes to raise the issues concerning women rights and suffragette. She gives the voice to voiceless women- ignored in a male dominated society. She is a poet-activist, an environmentalist, a true lover of nature, a conservationist, a campaigner. She was born in 1915 in New South Wales, was immediately hailed as a powerful voice of Australia. Her poems appearing in rapid succession found place in the accepted heritage of Australian verse. *The Moving Image*, her first collection is seen as a landmark in the history of Australian literature with effortless mastery over her technique. "Man to Woman", her second collection substantiated her position as one of the best poets with tremendous poetic flair. She uses 'Nature' as a key element to comprehend deeper human experiences. Her interest in conservation of wildlife also began to take its

roots and this can be seen in her poetry as well. She has her own particular reaction against the dehumanised society which according to her is at the brink of catastrophe.

In the first stage of her writing, Judith Wright introduces us to her nation, Australia, through her complex pattern taking us to the visible and unseen realities of her land and aboriginal people. She offers a deep insight into the soul of her beloved nation. The reason she starts off her writing journey by referring to the past of her country and giving a clear emotional response to the past experiences is present in her collection of articles published in a book form titled, *because I Was Invented*. This is the book in which she offers us her philosophical explanation to her social concerns. When referring to the relationship between self and place, she states, "Australia is still for us not a country but a state of mind. We do not speak from within but from outside. From a state of mind that describes rather than expresses its surroundings or from a state of mind that imposes itself upon rather than lives through landscape and event." (1969: 301)

She also believes that Australia is a necessary panacea for overcoming the conflicting attitudes of love and rejection towards the land. She firmly believes that one should reconcile with his or her nation before turning to some other topical discussion. She says, "Before one's country can become an accepted background against which the poet's imagination can move unhindered, it must be first observed, understood, described and, as it were, absorbed". (1965: xviii)

Therefore, the collection *The Moving Image* becomes an imperative task for the reader to read it so that one penetrates deep into the complete comprehension of the workings of her mind.

She left this world in the year 2000. After her death, John Tranter expressed his admiration for her oeuvre. He states, "What she has left us is a spirited body of writing and a model for a humane and committed concern for the future of the human race."

Critical Analysis of the Poem, 'Request To A Year'

'Request to a Year' remembers the past figure in the form of the poet's great-great-grandmother who represents the times past and whose attributes the poet wants to own. Through this poem, the poet makes an attempt to get herself involved with the situation where it becomes quite difficult for her to take a single course. Instead, she sidelines herself from the clutches of her conjugal obligations in order to make an impact with her art and let the dormant side of her artist scream with a loud cry, i.e., allowing herself to appear self-assertive, renovative and self-creative.

Judith Wright's poetry derives its inspiration from the natural objects in her immediate surroundings. Not only nature or natural landscapes find expression in her poetry, her poetry is replete with characters from her real life situations. Her parents, siblings, uncles and aunts, and sometimes Judith Wright herself becomes the character in her autobiographical poems. They play a particular

role of a narrative voice. Characterisation for Judith Wright is important with certain shifts, as she herself comments:

I think through life you change all the time. Sometimes you know you are changing; sometimes you don't. Sometimes you just find that something isn't there any longer that was there. It isn't sad. It's just right. It wasn't worrying me at all. I realise I've been several different people in the course of my life, as we all are. And you have got to give into that. (Judith Wright)

Upon first impression, the poem "Request to a Year" appears a ballad telling a story of times past. It tells a story of a real life character, Judith Wright's great-great-grandmother. The title itself is very thought provoking as it invokes a muse in the form of 'Year' of the title. It is a prayer, a request that the writer implores while addressing the muse. The very opening lines of the poem seem to be the verses written in reflection.

If the year is meditating a suitable gift,
I should like it to be the gratitude
Of my great-great-grandmother,
Legendary devotee of the arts (Judith Wright)

The main subject of the poem is the poet's great-great-grandmother whose character is highly extolled in the following stanzas by recalling and summoning her past events. Here, the woman self-assuredly posits her wish to the year that she believes is yet to take the final decision. Great-great-grandmother's portraiture is positively highlighted in the above lines.

Australian body of writing has marked the difference in the global literary canon by revisiting their past and rereading their historical backdrop to bring to the surface what was hidden and suppressed by grand narratives of European discourse. Writers all over the continent emerged with their creative thoughts retelling the stories of once colonised nation from a marginal point of view. Female writers are no exception. Compared to their male counterparts, their identity was twice removed from the reality. But they have been successful enough to bring into notice their plight and have efficaciously confirmed their position in Australian literary culture.

Similarly, great-great-grandmother is specified as being *a legendary devotee of the arts*, strengthening her position and stance in the male dominated society where her charm as an artist obscures the male ascribed role to her within the society.

One can easily figure out from the above lines that the author is being a little envious of her great-great-grandmother's attributes and her desire to owe them. This enviousness could be taken in the positive sense because what the author is craving for is something that can help assert her status and opinion, therefore, marking her way into the loudest preconceived and opinionated world.

The following lines suggest the setting of the Victorian Era:

Who having eight children
And little opportunity for painting pictures
Sat one day on a high rock
Beside a river in Switzerland (Judith Wright)

Representing the protagonist as a typical mother of eight children, she offers her readers the satiated mother surfeit with a plentiful of kids, her achievement as the chief of a large family. She is the one who devotes no or little time to her personal pleasures like art. The submissiveness of the protagonist towards her family breaks abruptly and the poet in a straight forward language depicts the action and the real tussle of the protagonist with her inner contradicting desires. The great-great-grandmother is seen perching on a high cliff witnessing her family in a state of crisis.

And from a difficult distance viewed
Her second son, balanced on a small ice flow, drift down the current toward
A Waterfall
That struck rock bottom eighty feet below, (Judith Wright)

In the above stanza, the images like 'difficult', 'distance', 'balance', 'struck', 'rock bottom' suggest the horrendous and dreadful situation that the family is in. It also suggests the chilling and frigid response of the mother towards her children.

The term 'distance' in particular conveys the idea of how objective the mother has become by shunning all her emotions and sentiments that she once harboured while she nurtured her children. Because she has resolved to something, she therefore has the power to paint in the grievous circumstances. This determination and lack of affection becomes the foundational principle for her creative masterstroke.

While her second daughter, impeded,
No doubt, by the petticoats of the day,
Stretched out a last-hope alpenstock
(Which luckily later caught him on his way).

These lines provide the delineation of the protagonist's daughter portrayed as the alter ego of the main figure. She is the one who runs to save her brother, crossing all the impediments unlike her mother who is watching over them calmly and silently with a complete sense of objectiveness. The last two lines of the stanza fore spell a brief hint of a hope. But then, this hope diminishes as we move further in the poem.

Nothing, it was evident, could be done;
And with the artist's isolating eye

My great-great-grandmother hastily sketched the scene.

The sketch survives to prove the story by.

The very first line of the stanza in question derives the inference that the protagonist is as calm and quiet as showing no sign of emotions or agitation. She appears very objective, outstripped, Machiavellian, and rational. She has sanely apprehended the situation of the uncontrolled dramatic scene before her eyes but the only thing she can do is to aim at the piece of art, the painting she has desired to draw. With her “isolating eyes”, she draws the picture which survives as a piece of evidence that no assault of nature or time or dogmatic society can challenge to destroy. The very term “isolating eyes” is scathing enough to portray the protagonists’ emotionally distanced and unfeeling attitude towards her family. At the same time, what it communicates is the subjects certain level of despair on the part of an unsatisfied and empty artist.

The last two lines give readers the sense of nostalgia:

Year, if you have no Mother’s day present planned,

Reach back and bring me the firmness of her hand.

These concluding verses propose the central idea of the poem by going back to the muse of the first line, i.e., *year*. The main character in the poem can be described as possessing the firmness of a kind in the times of crisis and it is the same firmness that the poet has a strong longing for. The poet wants to master the same passion and ardor which her great-great-grand mother possessed amid the grim and severe exigencies. It is a poem which exploits an important theme: pursuit verses human nature. Life offers us myriad number of opportunities but there are certain aspects of life that we need to value more like family, relationships, and friends. Others like success and pursuit become secondary. Art is from Life but sometimes Art can go beyond Life.

Diving further into the deep recesses of the poem, other possible message that the poem perhaps is conveying is the belief that an artist must be detached from his/her family obligations and personal constraints while striving to move a step further in the artistic avocation. The artist should remain detached from the main subject of the art in order to create something original and sui generis.

Critical Analysis of The Poem ‘Woman to Child’

Woman to Child delineates mother’s emotions. The poem brings to focus the unimaginable and life-altering experience of motherhood, most often viewed as uncomfortable and unpleasant. It portrays the collection of events and activities cognizant to both the characters through the structure of her writing and the use of the figurative language.

Judith Wright’s second collection of poems *Woman to Man*, published in 1949, includes the classic lyrical poems expressing her intimate moments as a mother, a loyal and a passionate lover and a

mother with tenderness and compassionate feelings. All this is never detached from the fear and anxiety that she firmly sets in a matrix of love. The irreversible changes taking place in her body, in her own life and the life of the people she loves constitutes what she believes the source of her comfort as well as the tension which adds to the credibility of the lyrics.

Woman to Child, similarly, is a poem that clearly is an instance of the biographical mask of Judith Wright herself metaphorised, where the poet has turned into a symbol, achieving a required personal, intimate and passionate tone of the poem. While analysing the poem, one reaches to the point where one realises that the poem has successfully expressed mothers emotions regarding pregnancy and the after effects of the pleasant phase of woman's conjugal life.

The first stanza reads:

You who were darkness warmed my flesh
Where out of darkness rose the seed.
Then all a world I made in me;
All the world you hear and see
Hung upon my dreaming blood.

The very opening of the stanza expresses the act of fertilization which becomes obvious in the phrase "rose a seed". The speaker takes a credit of having made a life. She proudly flaunts her natural competence by seeing her sexuality as a gift and believes her suitableness as an extraordinary act. These feelings, the speaker figuratively expresses in the following lines of the stanza, where, in creating a life, she is giving her unborn child the world to live in. This reveals one of the most important aspects of Judith Wright's life and a woman's life in general.

The following stanza describes the beginning of the life-altering phase of pregnancy. It reads:

There moved the multitudinous stars
And coloured birds and fishes moved.
There swam the sliding continents.
All time lay rolled in me, and sense,
And love that knew not its beloved.

These lines convey the first stages of the eternal relationship between the mother and the child. There is a great sense of power that reverberates as the child develops in his initial stages because this reverberation echoes God's creation of the universe. Just as God created the universe with His power and will, the mother compares her creation with His creation, attempting to make connections between the random particular and the universal, hence relating man to the cosmos. Words, particularly, "moved", "multitudinous stars", "swam", "sliding continents" also comment on the massive and the plethora of changes taking place in the woman's life. So intense is the transformation

that it has changed her outlook on her life. This intense relationship is yet to reach to its peak because it is not fully ripened. This is corroborated by the last line which reads: “*And love that knew not its beloved*”

Although the speaker expresses her compassion for the unborn baby in the previous lines but she somewhat feels disconnectedness and detached from the little unborn inside her womb. She cannot recognize her child, perhaps it is yet to reach out to the personal level which she is eagerly craving for.

The third stanza takes the process further and represents a more developed relationship:

O node and focus of the world;
I hold you deep within that well
You shall escape and not escape---
That mirrors still your sleeping shape;
That nurtures still your crescent cell.

In these lines, the speaker makes it distinct that the child has become the centre of her world. These lines can potentially be interpreted in two different ways. The first possibility is that the speaker encloses the baby inside her body, reinforcing the idea that she is the centre of the child's world and is providing a refuge and protection to the child. Second interpretation takes altogether a different metaphoric meaning where there is the division of one body into two but it represents more emotional aspect of human existence and their relationship. Though the child has stepped into this world by physically detaching itself from the mother's body, but emotionally, the child still enjoys the mother's bliss in the form of her love, care and protection from the harsh realities of the modern world. Both the interpretations seem different but offer something which transcends the eternal relationship between the mother and her child. The child technically escapes from the mother's body but emotionally remains under her never ending influence as the child forever remains the part of her life. The last stanza steals the show as it delineates the powerful struggle at the time of labour and childbirth. It reads as follows:

I wither and you break from me;
Yet though you dance in living light
I am the earth, I am the root,
I am the stem that fed the fruit,
The link that joins you to the night

Again the speaker compares herself to the Creator of the universe. She sends a powerful message that even though the child can lead an independent life from now onwards, but then, she continues to be the creator of that life. The speaker imagines herself to be the creator of new life. She imagines herself

to be the earth which sustains life. She is that root which becomes a pathway for the young buds to get the nourishment from. She is the stem that partakes in the development of the fruit. She is the one who can wither herself away so that she creates something new, something marvellous that the world cherishes and treats with affection. The last line gives a sense of completion to the poem. The mother has let the child start his life's journey and she becomes the link which takes the child towards his collapse. Although, it seems morbid but it also justifies the child's journey from the mother's conception through to the child's short stay in the universe to his discontinuance in the dynamics of the universe.

The four stanza structure of the poem divides it into four different stages of pregnancy and the figurative language used helps to portray these stages in an artistic and poetic manner. The structure brings a positive light to what can be found as a negative experience. As a result, this experience which the nature has bestowed onto the female folk is adorned as enviable rather than pitiable. The poem as a whole paints the captivating colours of maternal love, pictures a complete woman and the womanhood at its purest form. Judith Wright discusses the complexity and the depth between a woman and her child. A woman becomes a co-creator in the functioning of the world and the child becomes the microcosm of her universe.

Critical Comment

Poetry has been established as something which engages the readers into the insight of the poet's inner journey as well as the social concerns poem seems to describe. This blend of classicism and romanticism is what Judith Wright's poetry is replete with. It becomes important for her to write about her personal background in order to have a complete understanding of the meaning and value of literature. Judith Wright's poems are intensely metaphysical illustrating a sense of growth. Her poems condense into the most intimate experiences of life which she relates to the sexuality of the universe and her verses which describe her encounter with nature also are permeated with the metaphysical ideas. Creation for Judith Wright is nothing but a miracle, it's something of a magic. Be it the creation of a new-borne baby or a poem, the poet treats the theme with the utmost care. By retrieving these acts of creation from the mundane world, she imparts new life and elevates the mundane realities by reawakening the reader's capacity for feeling and emotions. In her poems, one is concerned about 'Everyman' and 'Everywoman' rather than with the biographical Judith Wright. She deals with the intimate themes in such a manner that she tends to develop a fundamental relationship between the speaker and the audience. This helps the poet to build up the subject matter of a poem in a unique way, novel to the audiences when it comes to its frankness and its treatment of the sexual and emotional intimacy. Her characters can be seen in their archetypal forms of collective unconscious working in the Jungian sense with the representative central substrate of the human psyche. Through

these poems, the poet has resurrected the central concerns of womanhood and woman's psychological traumas she goes through while retelling the authentic tale from a positive perspective leaving behind the negativity usually associated with women around the world. In her poems, she depends on the triple status as a character, an image and a narrator. This helps her to transform herself into something which goes beyond her references to her biographical self and this she achieves via her poetry. She becomes a symbolic matrix of meaning by integrating herself into a muse and an image thus travelling beyond the physical representation.

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