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# Transcending The Dichotomy Of Nature And Culture: An Ecocritical Study Of The Select Works Of Judith Wright

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## Abstract

In the post-global ambiance of the twenty-first century, where the rapid disconnect from nature constantly assaults humanity, it is crucial to rethink ecological issues to emphasise the inseparable bond between nature and culture. As a result, thinkers of various disciplines have tried to offer possible solutions for correcting the contemporary environmental condition. Literary scholars have played a crucial role by foregrounding the relationship between literature and the environment, which paved the way to establish the theoretical movement known as “Ecocriticism.” Simon Estok argues that “ecocriticism has distinguished itself, debates notwithstanding, firstly by the ethical stand it takes, its commitment to the natural world as an important thing rather than simply as an object of thematic study, and, secondly, by its commitment to making connections” (Estok 2001, p. 220). This paper investigates how Judith Wright’s poetry reflects her dynamic and radical ecological thought. Through her verse, the poet demonstrates the inextricable bond between humans and the natural world while also recognising the serious threat posed to the biosphere by the current anthropocentric worldview. Wright, who shows ecological issues through her powerful articulation long before the phrase was popularised, alters the canon of Australian poetry by expressing her innermost concern for the welfare of both Australian society and the earth at large in new and meaningful ways.

**Keywords:** Post-dualism, Ecocriticism, Nature, Culture, Biocentrism.

Human superiority over the non-human natural world is a major contributor to the current ecological crisis that the world is facing due to anthropogenic climate change and ecological degradation. The Renaissance ideal of the human is hierarchical because it advocates subjugation in different forms. In light of the impending ecological collapse, the traditional notion of environmentalism needs to be revisited to address the current

ecological crisis. Since the rise of Cartesian thought, philosophers have tried to criticise the notion of human rationality by blurring the division of nature and culture with a view to foregrounding the ecological crisis of the contemporary world.

The term "eco-criticism" was coined by William Rueckert in his 1978 article "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," making it a relatively recent development in the field of literary studies. In 1996, with the publication of two influential books—*The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, and *The Environmental Imagination*, by Lawrence Buell—the phrase began to generate much discussion and debate. The term "ecocriticism" refers to the study of literature and the environment from a multidisciplinary perspective, in which experts from many fields meet to discuss the state of the environment and how it may be improved. *The Ecocriticism Reader* (edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm) and *The Environmental Imagination* (written by Lawrence Buell) were two major publications that appeared around the same time in the mid-1990s and officially announced the emergence of ecocriticism. Eco-criticism was developed by a group of writers who, inspired by the prospect of averting ecological disaster, wrote to share their worries about a planet weighed down by a global ecological catastrophe. They began expressing themselves and raising awareness of the ecological catastrophe through literary works.

The field of ecocriticism delves into literature to discover how humans interact with the natural environment. Specifically, it examines and critiques representations of environmental problems, cultural problems related to the environment, and perspectives on nature. Ecocriticism seeks, among other things, to investigate people's responses to and interactions with ecological and natural settings. The growing public concern for environmental degradation and the rapid development of new technologies have brought renewed focus to this type of criticism in recent years. Therefore, it is a fresh approach to studying and interpreting literary works, adding depth to the study of literature and theory. Green (cultural) studies, Eco-poetics, and environmental literary criticism are only some of the numerous names for purposefully broad approach of Ecocriticism.

Judith Wright (1915–2000), a poet renowned for her activism and protection of wildlife, can be hailed as a poet concerned about the current ecological crisis. Wright is well-known not only as a poet but also as a critic, environmentalist, and social activist, in addition to her status as a short story writer. By depicting nature as a living entity that can speak with a man as a source of solace and inspiration, the poet emphasises the inextricable bond between the human and non-human worlds. The poet discovers the ways in which human activity poses a threat to the natural environment through the process of creating poetry about grass, trees, birds, wild animals, rivers, and creeks. As a poet, she hopes to encourage people to take better care of the planet and its wildlife. She writes poetry in which she equates herself with the land, believing that it, like herself, is subject to exploitation and injustice. Her literary protests against the exploitation of

nature are an attempt to solidify her position as an environmental activist. According to her, man is the one who disrupts the natural order of things. Many of the key themes of her poems revolve around endangered species, polluted environments, and the destruction of natural resources, including rivers, forests, streams, and landscapes. Her poetry is a vivid depiction of the natural world, from her intimate knowledge of the land to the sweeping panoramas of birds, trees, and wildlife. The author's portrayal of nature encompasses both admiration for the seamless integration of natural elements and condemnation of human exploitation of the environment. This aligns with her eco-consciousness, as Ecocriticism is a field of study that examines the connection between literature and the natural world, emphasising an earth-centered perspective (Garrard, 2012, p. 3). This study aims to examine the poet's portrayal of the Australian flora and animals, highlighting both her appreciation for their beauty and her profound distress over their destruction, while also emphasising her commitment to their preservation.

Wright's poetic works are abundant in their portrayal of trees as objects of joy. She composes poems about a variety of plants, including camphor laurel, cedars, wattle, flame, orange, eucalyptus, pepperina, scribbly gum, and many others. She illustrates the harmony of nature in her poetry. Nevertheless, she asserts that mankind constantly jeopardises this state of equilibrium. She stresses the importance of safeguarding trees that are being felled without any consideration for their value. Every day, trees are destroyed by photocopyers, but we make no effort to preserve this valuable gift from nature, which plays a significant role in preserving ecological balance. The poet directs our focus towards this particular aspect of reality and illuminates it through her poetic compositions. She actively works to foster the awareness needed to maintain ecological harmony. The harmony of the ecosystem is essential to maintaining ecological equilibrium. The significance of trees to her lies in their ability to withstand and persist through many environmental challenges, such as weather conditions, erosion, and drought. They are undeniably committed to fulfilling human needs. Therefore, it is imperative for individuals to safeguard this unique natural resource for the benefit of all species in the biosphere. The poet's preoccupation with trees is depicted in a multitude of her poetic works. In the poem "The Wattle-tree," Wright (1994) claims that the wattle-tree consists of four elements and combines four truths in one, "The tree knows four truths - / earth, water, air, and the fire of the sun. / The tree holds four truths in one" (LC.142). The wattle tree, through its incorporation of the elements of earth, water, air, and fire, serves as a representation of perpetual rejuvenation and profound wisdom. This concept of ceaseless regeneration and the pursuit of profound knowledge is posited as the ultimate aspiration for humanity. The poet engages in a comparison between her poetic truth and the wattle tree in a poem consisting of twenty-four lines. She posits that, akin to the tree's unwavering adherence to its inherent nature during its process of rejuvenation, she aspires to remain authentic to herself and convey veracity in her role as a poet (Smith, 2006, LC.4). The poet establishes a connection between the natural world and her own identity, portraying her literary voice as a representation of truth identical to that of the trees.

Wright's poem titled "Camphor Laurel" holds significant relevance. Within the confines of this poetic composition, the poet establishes a profound correlation between the natural world and the human experience. Nevertheless, the intriguing juxtaposition arises from the disparity between the imprudence exhibited by human beings and the unassuming yet unwavering existence of the camphor laurel tree. According to Smith (2006), the tree is regarded as a representation of enduring qualities such as permanence, sweetness, and innate honesty, in contrast to the transient, thoughtless, and morally questionable behaviours often exhibited by humans (p. LC. 5). The contrast between the realm of humanity and the camphor laurel becomes readily apparent in Wright's (1994) exposition titled "Camphor Laurel." She writes:

Under the house the roots go deep,  
Down, down, while the sleepers sleep;  
Splitting the rock where the house is set,  
cracking the paved and broken street.  
Old Tim turns and old Sam groans,  
"God be good to my breaking bones";  
and in the slack of tideless night  
the tree breathes honey and moonlight. (LC.35)

Smith and other critics argue that the speaker of the poem employs the metaphor of the camphor laurel to critique the societal wrongs done by men. Similar to the American transcendentalists, she shares the belief that institutions and society have responsibility for the degradation of natural environments. The underlying cause of all malevolent occurrences can be attributed to the establishment of institutions, societal structures, and individuals. Conversely, the natural realm embodies tranquillity and order. According to her, the immobile tree possesses a rationality that opposes senseless animosity and deliberate unfairness towards humanity. In the above poem, the poet expresses a strong desire to eliminate deeply ingrained societal vices and emphasises the importance of firmly establishing the fundamental virtues (Amutha, 2013, LC. 30). The poem "The Cycads" similarly emphasises the same issue. In this literary work, the poet emphasises the need to foster the virtue of unity among individuals. The author proposes that individuals should acquire knowledge from trees. A parallel is observed by the individual between the elderly gentleman and the cycad plant. Similar to the ancient cycad tree, which inevitably experiences the effects of aging, a human being must likewise confront the process of growing old. Nevertheless, the elderly gentleman is experiencing a sense of discontent and despondency due to his isolation amidst a multitude of individuals. Nevertheless, one can acquire knowledge from observing the cycad plant on how to attain happiness and derive pleasure from personal development. In her poetry,

the presence of trees serves as a metaphorical device to convey the notions of tranquillity, contentment, and rejuvenation. This is exemplified by Wright's (1994) poem "Eroded Hills," where she articulates the idea that, akin to how trees revitalise eroded hills, they also possess the ability to mend fractured lives. Through the lines, "When the last leaf and bird go / Let my thoughts stand like trees here," the poet emphasises the enduring and steadfast nature of trees as a symbol of resilience and restoration. (LC.81)

In the poem titled "The Scribbly-gum," the poet observes the convergence of the mountain, palm, and fern, encapsulated within a singular unfamiliar term (Wright, 1994, LC.131). This encounter occurs during the poet's journey through a forest, wherein she perceives a profound message, namely, "the inscribed path of an existence that eludes my comprehension" (ibid). In this poetic composition, the author effectively depicts the marvels of the natural world alongside the disjointed and fragmented written expressions that encapsulate the course of human history. Once more, a juxtaposition emerges between the idyllic realm of nature and the morally compromised realm of humanity.

The poem "The Orange-tree" emphasises the ability of orange tree to convert the blackness of the earth into a robust form of life and the chill of winter into fruit during its appropriate season (Smith, 2006, p. 2). This is attributed to the inherent simplicity of tree, which enables it to achieve reconciliation. Similar to the orange-tree, the flame tree and the eucalyptus likewise embody the melodious and esteemed attributes of trees that modern Australians and others worldwide ought to embrace. In "The Eucalypt and the National Character," Wright (1994) shows:

Ready for any catastrophe, every extreme,  
She leaves herself plenty of margin. Nothing is stiff,  
symmetrical, indispensable. Everything bends  
whip-supple, pivoting, loose, with a minimal mass.  
She can wait grimly for months to break into flower  
or willingly bloom in a day when the weather is right. (P.362)

In the lines that have been mentioned above, the poet conveys a fresh awareness of the natural surroundings. The eucalyptus tree exemplifies the desirable attributes associated with Australia's national identity due to its remarkable adaptability. This implies that humans can extract useful insights from Australia's indigenous flora, including the eucalyptus. In this context, the eucalyptus tree serves as a means to analyse and evaluate a human society that exhibits a propensity towards a hierarchical class structure. Consequently, the poem advocates for a sense of modesty and openness that can be derived from observing and studying the tree (Gifford, 2010, LC. 78). Therefore, the poet portrays trees through her powerful articulations with a sense of profound

admiration rather than sentimentalism. According to her, everyone needs to pay attention and act together to avoid cutting the bush and denuding the terrain if they want access to clean air, which is crucial to their survival.

The poet frequently asserts that the fragrance of organic existence is progressively deteriorating as a result of human intervention. In the context of her avian-themed poetry, the author emphasises the significance of simplicity. In her perspective, avian species exhibit a sense of fairness and equity towards their fellow birds, a characteristic that is notably lacking in the realm of human society. According to her, people ought to derive lessons from avian behaviour in order to cultivate benevolence towards one another. Every element within the natural world possesses its own distinct characteristics and consistently adheres to its inherent nature. Similar to the poems centred around trees, the poet establishes a clear distinction between the avian realm and the human realm in her collection of poems.

However, due to the greedy and ignorant actions of humanity, nature is not free from destruction. They are destroying every part of the ecosystem by considering it as commodity. Judith Wright's perspective unequivocally opposes such endeavours. She believes that the harmonisation of the natural world should not be disrupted by any external factors. In her poem "Birds," Wright (1994) asserts that the essence of perfection lies within the bird itself, as she states, "Whatever the bird is, is perfect in the bird" (p. 86). Furthermore, she posits that birds embody their true nature and do not strive to surpass their inherent avian qualities, as she states, "all are what bird is and do not reach beyond bird" (ibid). Through these lines, Wright suggests that birds exemplify a harmonious existence within their limitations, in contrast to the destructive tendencies of humans, who, driven by their insatiable desires, indiscriminately exploit nature for momentary gratification and personal gain. The poet expresses her personal grief and distress at her affiliation with the human realm, as she laments, "I am torn and beleaguered by my own people" (citation). The poet possesses a hereditary affiliation with the white settlers, hence experiencing a sense of guilt due to the detrimental impact inflicted upon the Australian natural environment, landscape, and indigenous population. The aboriginal people, who formerly embraced a harmonious existence intertwined with nature, have predominantly endured suffering, exploitation, and devastation at the hands of the white settlers. Since the poet's ancestors were white settlers, she can't help but blame herself for the damage they did to Australia's nature and scenery.

The individual possessed a comprehensive understanding of the growing divide between humanity and the natural world, which can be attributed to the shifting perspectives and behaviours of humans. In his analysis of Judith Wright's poem "The Two Fires" (1995), M.C. Kinney highlights:

the conception, on one hand, of Nature as a self-sufficient physical system which is essentially the counterpart of a sensory experience, and on the other of man, the triumphant investigator of the ultimate secrets of this external physical

system, as the master of his own intellectual and material destiny. It is this dual idea that has constituted the inspiration of our whole modern way of life, and the significant fact is that, at the point where the latter conception that of man as the master of his own destiny has come to dominate our minds (Mckinney, p. 105).

Despite the disruptive effects of societal strife on her life, she consistently aspired to achieve internal harmony across personal, social, and ecological domains. She asserts, "The landscape I knew was full of a deep and urgent meaning...these hills and plains...these rivers and plants and animals were what I had to work with as a writer, and they themselves contained the hidden depths of a past beyond anything that cities and the British invasion had to offer." (Judith Wright, p. 51)

There are many poems in her volumes that explore and shed light on the state of society and the nation as a whole. The poetry produced by the individual in question demonstrates a profound dedication primarily to the preservation of the natural environment and the advocacy for the rights of indigenous communities in Australia. The author's concern for environmental degradation resulting from the rapid expansion of industry, science, technology, and population during the current millennium is identical to that of an eco-critic. Through her creative work, she vividly portrays the harsh reality to her readers, prompting them to contemplate the gradual destructive forces acting upon nature. The individual in question consistently exhibited a disdain towards anthropocentric perspectives that emphasize the disconnection between humanity and the natural world. This sentiment is effectively conveyed through the creation of numerous poems and critical articles.

As a true eco-critic, Judith Wright highlights the unity of nature's design, in which man is only a component. According to Judith Wright, the cause of environmental degradation can be attributed to mankind's inattentive and uncaring attitude. The inherent futility of human cynicism, characterised by its inclination towards analysis and criticism, renders it ineffectual. Instead, it is imperative to adopt proactive methods aimed at establishing meaningful connections with virtuous and rational aspects of life. The phrase "yet one is all and all are one" alludes to Judith Wright's desire for a uniting perspective among humanity. Additionally, it suggests that the destruction of one element would result in the automatic destruction of everything else. The presence of markings on the sleek, pale bark of Australian eucalyptus trees is an important phenomenon. Judith Wright's works possess the ability to interpret the existential significance embedded within them. The individual perceives a deficiency in the human approach towards comprehending the profound significance of life through various forms of written expression and natural artifacts.

The avarice exhibited by individuals in their pursuit of personal advancement has played a significant role in the deterioration of environmental circumstances. Throughout history, the portrayal of man has often depicted him as an oppressor, while

nature is personified as a suffering being burdened by the harsh consequences imposed upon it. The poet, much like an eco-critic, denounces this kind of human conduct. Moore's statements regarding Judith Wright's perspectives on the treatment of nature are quite pertinent:

Nature can no longer be viewed as a machine. It has a living aspect, with which we find ourselves identifying. We can perceive, in the change from day to night, from winter to spring, an inescapable correspondence with the process of our own bodies, and we can see those same changes going on in creatures other than ourselves...so it was this revived sense of correspondence between man and his world that revitalized poetry in early nineteenth century. (Moore, p. 67)

Wright's focus on avian subjects is predominantly evident in the poems featured inside her poetic anthology titled *Birds*. The poet derives pleasure from establishing connections between herself and many species of birds in the natural world. The individual engages in the composition of poems centred around several avian species, including the peacock, migrating swift, magpies, orioles, blue wrens, and winter kestrel. The avian species observed in the given context include the Currawong, Swamp Pheasant, Thornbills, Egrets, Doves, Parrots, Wagtails, Pelicans, and Silver Terns. Species such as Black Cockatoos, Lory, and Dotterel, among others, are examples. In her poems, the author delineates the precarious status of the majority of avian species, elucidating their vulnerability to the imminent risk of extinction. Not only do individuals engage in the whimsical and frequent act of hunting these creatures, but they also consistently inflict harm on their habitats. The anthology *Birds* comprises a collection of thirty poems that, in various ways, convey the poet's sentiments. There is a growing apprehension regarding the potential extinction of many avian species. According to scholarly discourse, her poetry is regarded as a manifestation of her profound connection to the land intertwined with her own identity.

The connection of individual to the land is perpetual. In Wright's (1994) poem titled "Woman to Child," the author articulates the following statement: "I embody the earth, I represent the root, / I serve as the stem that nourished the fruit" (LC.28). The poet's utilisation of analogy to establish a connection between her own self and the earth has the potential to engender a more profound and extensive discussion. The protagonist comes to the realisation that both women and the land are subjected to dominance and are regarded as the marginalised "Other." The parallels between the affliction experienced by the environment and that endured by women are evident. According to her biographers, her affinity for certain locations originated during her formative years. The poem titled "South of My Days" explores the development of a heightened sensitivity and an aesthetic appreciation for the region described as "the high lean country / full of old stories that still go walking in my sleep" (Wright, 1994, LC. 20).

In the final analysis, it can be asserted that Wright's ecological consciousness constitutes a fundamental aspect of her poetic works. The poet's work, which centres on



themes like trees, birds, and land, serves as a testament to her profound connection with and profound affection for the natural world. The individual in question serves as a representation of the casual manner in which human beings are causing destruction to their natural surroundings. The author establishes a juxtaposition between the tranquillity and uncomplicated nature of the environment and the malevolence inherent in human society. The author posits that it is imperative for human society to adopt simplicity in order to coexist harmoniously with the natural world and exhibit empathy towards wildlife. The themes of soil degradation, stream desiccation, deforestation, and wildlife mortality are integral components of her poetic works. The author emphasises that men primarily perceive the natural world through the perspective of personal gain. The conservation movement advocated through her creative endeavours posits that the preservation of nature should not solely be motivated by the convenience it brings to humans but rather by the intrinsic value and inherent worth of nature itself. Throughout the paper, an effort has been made to argue that the poet inherently links nature and humans in her poetry, claiming that her poetry is the pinnacle of her eco-consciousness because "Ecocriticism analyzes the ways in which literature represents the human relations to nature" (Alam, 2011, LC. 13).

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