

# Echoes of Self: Unravelling Identity Through Judith Wright's Natural Metaphors

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## Abstract:

This paper investigates identity metaphors in Judith Wright's poems, illustrating how environmental imagery articulates the tension between the settler identity and indigenous dispossession. She employs metaphors to explore nature's interconnectedness and human fragility transforming the abstract concepts into sensory experiences rooted in Australian Landscape. It explains the complex interaction of the inner self of an individual with the external environment like social roles, culture, and the power dynamics. Her poetry utilizes Psychoanalytic theory which examines, repeated symbolic ideas, early experiences, and the unconscious mind that influence's identity of the person and it can be experienced in case of Judith Wright as well. Her poems like 'The Moving Image,' 'Woman to Child,' 'Two Dreamtimes,' and 'Remittance Man,' 'Nameless Flower' suggests how Wright's eco-poetic metaphors create an overlapping selfhood that challenges homogenous National narratives. Her poems are the reflection of establishing individual's identity along with the cultural and National identity and the way it is framed, presented, and understood. She combines all the senses for complete impact, and her diverse approach strengthens her position in establishing an eco-poetic Australian voice and the reason being, that she draws upon Romanticism, capturing Wordsworth's nature-soul unison, but integrating Australian details with ancient wisdom. Finally, her art contributes to modern debates on identity, advocating for reconciliation with Australia's divided territory.

**Keywords:** Australia, Judith Wright, Dispossession, Metaphors, Identity, Culture, Aboriginal, Environment, Psychoanalytic theory

## Introduction:

Judith Arundall Wright was born in the year 1915 near Armidale, New South Wales in the family of the pastoralists. She was a renowned poet, environmental activist, and a prominent social figure in Australia. She is often considered as the 'conscience of the nation' as she has worked towards the upliftment of Aboriginals and dedicated her life towards the conservation of the Australian Environment. Her hard work has resulted in her being a pioneer in the literary world as her poetry elevates the miserable indigenous class and helps in bridging the gap between the native Australians and the Australian landscape. She spent her childhood on the Walla Mumbi station, under the guidance of her father and grandmother, where she developed a deep connection with the landscape despite born to White parentages. This connection helped her to understand her inner thoughts and feelings for her homeland. She attended the Sydney University where she immersed herself into reading and writing poetry. Around the World War period, she worked as a market researcher and secretary and her remaining time was devoted towards writing poetry. She also

met Jack Philip McKinney, a philosopher and a novelist who influenced her thoughts and writings as he became her life partner despite an age gap of 24 years. While helping Jack in writing his manuscripts, she got philosophical ideas for her own poetry collection *The Moving Image* (1946). She has written several poetry collections and prose works during her lifetime chiefly *The Moving Image* (1946), *Woman to Man* (1949), *The Gateway* (1953), *Two Fires* (1955), *Birds* (1962) and *The Cry for the Dead* (1981), *Preoccupations in the Australian Poetry* (1965). She fiercely fought for the Aboriginal Land rights and the Environmental Conservation of the Great Barrier Reef and the Frazer Island. She was nominated for the Nobel Prize several times and had won the Queen's Medal for Poetry in 1992 but these accomplishments are minimal Infront of the love she holds for the land and its people.

### **What is Metaphor of Identity:**

In poetry, Metaphor of Identity is a potent literary device that uses ideas and objects from the daily life to symbolize the self and its many aspects. It is the reflection of the inner self where the idea or object works in synchronisation with the self, resulting in a more profound and meaningful knowledge which otherwise becomes challenging in the literal language. It is used by poets to establish a strong connection between the two by avoiding the words 'like' and 'as' which seems as if there is amalgamation of oneself with the object in question. Poets use metaphors for transforming intangible emotions or difficult situations into concrete images that is easier to understand. The conflict between a person's public and private selves can also be resolved with its use.

Identity and Individuality have a basic relationship with each other. Self-discovery is one of the most profound results of this metaphorical illumination. It creates a conflict between the Individual's sense of unity within a social body and their uniqueness; this experience identifies our humanity. It is impossible to overstate the importance of having a feeling of identity on both a societal and personal level as it is essential to all forms of art.

Thomas K. Fitzgerald in his famous work, *Metaphors of Identity*, explains the reason of using Metaphors. He says that 'A primary goal of Metaphors of Identity is to use the Bridging concept of identity to gain insight into the contemporary debates about culture and communication-what I call "the culture - communication dialogue."' (2)

The Eco-identity formed when man interacts with its environment and the inseparable bond between them makes it even more responsible on the part of the humans to protect and preserve the environment because a part of the human soul dies when nature is destroyed. The subject of most of her poems are often trees that symbolizes the painful history of the land which is deeply embedded as roots under the soil and only the branches are seen which are the words used by the writer in her poetry.

### **Analysis of the Poems:**

Judith Wright poems are the reflection of establishing individual's identity along with the cultural and national identity and the way it is framed, presented, and understood. The complex interaction of the inner self of an individual with the external environment like social roles, culture, and the power dynamics. Her poetry utilizes Psychoanalytic theory which examines, how repeated symbolic ideas, early experiences, and the unconscious mind influence identity of the person and it can be experienced in her life as well. Her childhood trauma of losing her mother, the stories of ill-fated displacement of the Aboriginals, the loss of Australian identity and constant struggle of discovering her own identity shaped her personality which eventually shaped her poems.

Here is the same clock that walked quietly  
Through those enormous years I half recall,  
When between one blue summer and another  
Time seemed as many miles as round the world,  
And world a day, a moment, or a mile,  
Or a sweet slope of grass edged with the sea,  
Or a new song to sing, or a tree dressed in gold (HP, 14)

The poem under analysis is 'The Moving Image' from the poetry collection with the same name. In this poem, Wright has used the metaphor of clock and time to describe the journey of her childhood life. Just as the clock moves quietly and steadily, similarly her childhood days were quite happy and it seemed to her as a song, a memory spent in the lap of nature. The clock also stands as a metaphor for her desire for the days spent with her family when her mother was alive as it was a peaceful phase of her life where she was not trapped in the vicious circle of time.

In another poem 'Woman to Child' Judith connects her child to the larger natural and cosmic order while highlighting the women's acceptance, pride, and confidence in her role as a mother and the creator of life. In a place where the child is both separated from and linked to the mother, the mother's love is unconditional. The entire poem is a metaphor where the mother's womb is compared to the mother earth where seed is sowed and the new plant germinates. A woman is the creator of life just like nature;

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. (HP, 22)

The poem's refusal to give the unborn child, a name as the name also gives a constant identity as Judith also expresses in few of her other poems with a similar theme the idea, that identity is not fixed but rather is ever changing. By using these comparisons, the poem centres the mother as both the source and the preserver of her child's identity which is usually defined by the Patriarchal society. The organic, caring and the changing identity formed by motherhood is symbolized by the natural growth. Nature is enjoying the process of creation and is happy, 'there moved the multitudinous stars, and coloured birds and fishes moved.'

As the centre of power, origin and existence, the womb of a mother shapes the speaker's identity as motherhood forms an essential component of her identity.

Kathy my sister with the torn heart,  
I don't know how to thank you  
For your dreamtime stories of joy and grief  
Written on paperbark. (HP, 166)

Above lines are from 'Two Dreamtimes' by Judith Wright, a poem written for Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal), contemporary of Wright. She starts by highlighting a common feeling of loss, suggesting that she and her Black friend share a sisterly bond in their grief. As she progresses, Wright comes to understand that one person's loss cannot really be compared to another's. She seems to desire to connect deeply with the landscape around her, to write not just as uprooted Europeans or aimless individuals who disregard their past, but as people who fully embrace their present and draw strength from their history. She explores the mutual loss experienced by indigenous Australians and white settlers through metaphors of dual

cultural identities. The poem compares two Dreamtimes signifying shattered heritages amongst reconciliation and imperial guilt. 'Dreamtimes' is a metaphor that positions the Aboriginal experience as a timeless, all-inclusive lost to history by symbolizing the indigenous spiritual identity linked to ancestral land and legends, now undermined by invasion. This is reflected in the white "dream time" "which haunts settlers with inherited separation and is a false, materialistic identity based on stealing. Metaphor for 'sister' represents an identity that transcends racial boundaries and unites people through sorrow over the lost country. The identity of both countries disappears without recognition. Metaphor of "knife" represents split personality, one that is inherited, other that is enforced through violence and bloodshed.

With a knifeblade flash in your black eyes  
that always long to be blacker,  
your Spanish-Koori face  
of a fighter and singer, (HP,167)

The metaphor of 'desert' represents the aridness and loneliness in the hearts of the Natives who are detached from their culture and heritage. The isolation is both emotional and physical reflecting a period of hostility in the life of these people. Another metaphor of "Eden" signifies a Utopian country where sisterhood and harmony soar in the air but it has been taken over by the conquerors.

Thus, with the help of several metaphors related to identity, Judith Wright has tried to expose the darkness that gripped the entire nation and its people and so she is grieving through this song, "I sing to you; from my place with my righteous kin; to where you stand with the Koori dead, "Trust none-not even poets." (169)

Her next poem, 'Remittance Man' speaks about the similar theme,  
The Spendthrift, disinherited and graceless,  
accepted his pittance with an easy air,  
only surprised he could escape so simply  
from the pheasant-shooting and the aunts in the close; (HP,4)

Metaphor is an essential component used in this poem to examine identity, especially the issues of alienation from the homeland, displacement with respect to both the British and the Australian context. The words, 'disinherited,' 'graceless' reflects the broken identity of the emigrant who has been forced to be away from his homeland and loved ones. The poet uses constant comparisons between the past and present identity of the individual, 'Everything but life slips through his fingers' indicates that there is no sense in his present existence and that all worldly charms are left behind.

The phrases, 'red blowing dust of roads,' 'sparse swinging shadow of trees', establishes the identity of the Australian landscape which is barren and greenless unlike the green and civilized cities of Britain. It also constructs the recognition of the country which was undeveloped and uncivilized. The brutal Australian environment serves as a metaphor for the exiled identity of the Remittance man whose existence was cut off from civility and pushed into a harsh yet free environment.

The post-colonial approach of Hybridity, of which Judith Wright herself was a part, argues that there are emerging identities based on nationality, gender, race, and class when a conflict between the two different cultures occurs. The above poem justifies this approach and combining these with metaphors serves as a powerful tool to revive the lost Aboriginal voices and to curb the colonial complexities and addressing the layered identities with maturity.

The major chunk of her poetry was written, 'from the early days of World War II when fear, loss, displacement and destruction filled lives in Australia as elsewhere, to today when we are in greater peril

of losing the very world we live in, through the results of ignorance, greed and immensely increased power.' Her views on the age were written in the foreword of her book, *A Human Pattern*.

Three white petals float

Above the green.

You cannot think they spring from it

Till the fine stem's seen. (HP,74)

The above poignant lines are taken from her poem 'Nameless Flower' which is a keen observation of the speaker about a flower while she was exploring her country side. The three white petals under observation are a metaphor for the multifaced layers of human identity where the unique traits, experiences and the societal and cultural constructs are composed together to form a whole being.

According to the writer, poetry inspires individuality and wholeness, suggesting that identity flourishes in natural and unidentified environment rather than forced survival. The transformation of a flower from 'the dark and jungle floor' to bloom stresses upon consistent self-realization in the face of separation.

'I'll set a word upon a word to be your home' implies that the speaker attempts to use words to describe the flower, but it fails because, 'before the trap is set, the prey is gone,' underlining the difficulty that is faced in identification with a language.

The words are white as a stone is white,

Carved for a grave;

But the flower blooms in immortal light,

Being now; being love. (HP,74)

The identity is fluid and flowing in the presence of the immortal light but when words in the language intervene this identity, it fixes and limits the growth of it. The fragmented aspect of an individual's identity joins as one self. It can also be related to Wright's aspiration of combining the different individualities bestowed upon her from different cultures which she wants to make into one unified personality. Thus, her poems are reflection of the many layers of her character which she developed after introspecting and understanding the meaning of her birth and it is through her poetry that she wants her readers to know the purpose of existence and what an individual is capable of, through every minute attempt that can be made in the service to humanity.

### Conclusion:

The above poems have been investigated to extract the metaphors that reflects the identity of the Nation and its people. Also, the layers of identity in the personality of Judith Wright have also been examined. The study of poetry world of Wright proclaims that identity is ever changing and its does not reach its destination and it always changes with the changing dynamics. The metaphors employed by her not only explains who she is but the existence of a person as a being is possibly explored in a land which is loved and stolen both. She reconciles the two selves of her inheritance through metaphors; one is the inherited self which has been passed on by her European ancestors and the second is the Indigenous self which is present in her since childhood and reclaims her spiritual connection with the land. She opinionated that the settler identity is 'ghosted' as the settlers should acknowledge the presence of the blood in the soil as she uses shadows and hauntings as metaphors for the incomplete identity formed of them which she expresses in her poems. The identity is inescapable as the 'blood' of the settlers represent the lineage that binds their history with their historical crime. Several other metaphors are also used like a 'line' that serves as the path that joins the true self of the settler with the stories of their brutal crime. The landscape is the

external representation of the inner self of the individual and not just a setting for poems. She frames the identity through metaphors of root connecting her own existence with the ancient, geographical time. She also uses metaphors of silence to represent the part of the Australian identity that is suppressed regarding indigenous history.

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