



Indigenous Identity and Land: The Poems of Judith Wright and Ram Dayal Munda

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Abstract

Land for the Adivasis or Indigenous people of India and outside is not only a source of livelihood, but they are emotionally attached to it. Land alienation has been a major social and political issue, and its impact on the Indigenous people is enormous. Their symbiotic relationship with the land has given them a rich culture and a dignified life. With land alienation comes displacement and loss of culture and identity, furthermore leading to a situation of disruption of their livelihood. Several writers and activists have agitated against land alienation, displacement, inadequate compensation and conservation of the environment. Two prominent writers, Dr Ram Dayal Munda from India and Judith Wright from Australia, have actively fought for Indigenous land rights and the loss of their identity. Through their writings, they have attempted to make the readers aware of the oppression and deprivation of fundamental rights of these Indigenous groups. My paper attempts to study how these two writers, Judith Wright and Ram Dayal Munda, try to create awareness among readers through their poems of their campaign against land alienation, exploitation, and oppression by outsiders.

Keywords:

Adivasis, Aboriginals, land, Identity, social justice, culture, oppression, discrimination



The contemporary writings of Adivasis contextualize social and historical issues faced by tribal communities in different regions. The tribal writers question the destruction in their region caused by the capitalist development mode. The encroachment in their ancestral territory in the name of development brings outside religion and culture that becomes a threat to the tribals.

The changing relation of “jal, jungle, jameen” (water, forest, and land) with the settlers' encroachment makes the tribals vulnerable to suppression and discrimination. Contemporary tribal writers assert their voices through empowering narratives of their lived reality. The tribal writers portray their experiences and observations of their surroundings in their creative works.

One of the prominent tribal writers of Jharkhand, Dr. Ram Dayal Munda (1939-2011), belonged to the Munda tribe. He was a scholar, educationist and cultural activist whose literary works delve into the Adivasi's deep connection with nature while exploring social realities and identity politics. He included in his writings the cons of development that eroded the cultural and communitarian roots in the Chotanagpur region.

Australian writer Judith Wright's writings deal with similar issues of Australian Indigenous experience and their landscape. She took up the fight to save the Aboriginal people and their rights. Australian Aboriginals are the indigenous people of Australia, and they have two hundred different Aboriginal languages. ‘The traditional owners of the land, which archaeological evidence confirms is the oldest continuous civilization on earth extending back over 65000 years. They are the first humans to migrate out of Africa along the coastlines of India and Asia until reaching the shores of Australia’ (<https://www.worldvision.com.au/global-issues/work-we-do/supporting-indigenous-australia/8-interesting-facts-about-indigenous-australia>)

Judith Wright (1915-2000) is a foremost Australian poet and social activist. She was passionate about environmental issues and social justice. Her connection with the Aboriginals and their landscape is characterized in her writings in which she explores the themes of belongingness, identity and the human connection with nature. She advocated for Aboriginal land rights and the conservation of Australia's environment. One of the prominent voices among



Australian poets, she has moved from the world of nature to the world of politics while writing poetry.

Judith Wright from Australia and Ram Dayal Munda from India have similar concerns for indigenous land rights and identity in their writings. This paper will examine two poems, one by Wright and one by Munda, to establish how contingent particulars work in their poems. In the words of the critic Leonie Kramer in his article Judith Wright, Hope and McAuley he says:

Judith Wright began to write as early in the 1940s, when she returned to the countryside where she had been born. There she rediscovered the rural landscape, and her own childhood, and the early poems are a record of that awakening. They disclose an imagination responsive to the moods of nature, curious about the legacy of the past, and moved by the suffering of humans and animals. The lyrical impulse is strong, and the poetic logic shaped by feeling rather than reason, by intuitive awareness rather than thought.

Her poem 'At Cooloolah' describes a region of lakes and rivers near the coastal areas North of Brisbane where the poet had a house. 'At Cooloolah', the visual landscape and history are juxtaposed. The poet details the Aboriginal land, birds and animals, representing the primal ancestor spirit. For the white settlers, the land and resources existed to be exploited and make money. The Aborigines, for them, were a lazy, inferior race whose land they had the right to take and whose religion and culture made no sense. The poet here is singing affectionately about the beauty of Cooloolah, her sense of the past seen with guilt for the harsh treatment and hostility meted to the Aborigines and their environment. The poem visualises the physical beauty and landscape of Cooloolah in the first stanza. The blue crane mentioned here is the common Australian white-faced heron with a blue-grey colour on its body. The blue crane's beautiful form parallels the beautiful landscape, brightening it up and giving the impression that the crane and the landscape she visualizes are no longer two entities but inseparable. Hence, it represents the bond between the Aborigines and their land. The whites have physically invaded them and colonized them but cannot break them away from the land. The poet projects that only death can part them from their land.



The next stanza reflects the personal and political themes. In the lines-

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,

the past is evoked, and the poet's tone is that of a participant. There is a fusion of time, the past, with the present. The Aborigines were brutally murdered, dispossessed and oppressed by their ancestors, the white invaders, which makes it hard for the Aborigines and the Bush to reciprocate her affection. Her love for the beautiful form of the Aboriginal landscape and the submissive and peace-loving Aborigines on one hand and awareness of the past on the other has overtones of the present, which brings in the sense of embarrassment, ashamedness and guilt. She brings in the contrast between the conquering people and the serene calmness of the environment.

'Cooloolah' in the past has been named by the aboriginals where the 'earth is a spirit' for them representing primal ancestor spirits. They believe ancestors' spirits will protect their land from the invaders and 'the invader's feet will tangle in nets there and his blood be thinned by fears' and no enemy can grab their land from them. There is also a recollection of the personal, mingling with history when the poet reminisces in the lines:

Riding at noon and ninety years ago,

my grandfather was beckoned by a ghost-

a black accoutred warrior armed for fighting,

who sank into bare plain, as now into time past.

Her grandfather, when followed by a black-skinned aboriginal dressed like a warrior, was shot by him, collapsing into the plain. The white settlers do not deserve to view the beautiful landscape, the serene 'white shores of sand, plumed reed and paperbark, clear heavenly levels frequented by crane and swan.' The vision of the beautiful surroundings with white beaches



decorated with reeds and paper bark will not bring peace to the whites. The heavenly shores filled with grandeur coming to life with the frequent visits of the cranes and swans cannot provide warmth to them because of their pretended love. The white man's burden to reach out to them is mere pretension on their part; instead, they came as rulers to oppress them. This harsh treatment in the past haunts the poet's mind, filling her with guilt.

In the last stanza, a sense of brotherhood extends in this poem beyond the human world to include the whole creation. The poet is 'walking on clean sand among the prints of birds and animal' and is 'challenged by a driftwood spear thrust from the water;' like her grandfather,' must quiet a heart accused by its own fear.' Her desire is for social change combined with the plea for protecting the natural environment preserved by the aborigines brought to destruction by the colonizers.

In the last three lines, she imagines a 'driftwood spear' aimed at her would kill her, a baseless fear. This is the same kind of fear felt in Conrad's Heart of Darkness, where, on the riverside, Marlow sees arrows flying about all around him. The men hiding in the bush attack them with arrows. Later, he is told that the natives are simple and mean no harm.

In the poem 'At Cooloolah,' the poet's desire for self-improvement is combined with a plea for social change. Her quest for love and compassion are seen as alternatives to war and hatred. Her concern for protecting the Australian landscape is evident throughout the poem.

The poem 'The Return' (Vapsi) describes nature at its best, with peacefulness and serenity in the Adivasi village. Underlying the beauty and calmness is the implied theme of outsiders or dikus threatening to destroy the place's uniqueness.

In his poem 'The Return', Ram Dayal Munda conveys through the narrator the fear and threat of development that will disrupt the way of life of the simple and naive Adivasis of Chotanagpur. Using simple language the poet reminisces his village filled with warmth that is encountering a massive change towards modernity. In the lines:

The red soil on the path to his village

Would have become metalled now;



Below the tamarind tree and next to the dance-arena

Would have come up a school

Amidst the beats of drums,

The shouts of children

Would be presenting a new spectacle;

The poet reminisces about his quiet village with fertile red soil, the huge tamarind tree in the centre providing its fruits and leaves as food, and its greenery as shade to the Adivasis. The dance arena close to the tamarind tree was a significant landmark for the community to come together to celebrate festivals and happiness. It had been transformed into a concretized place with metalled roads and a school. His helplessness of being unable to protect his village from the invasion of the outsiders in the garb of development had saddened him. By describing the drastic changes, he conveys the outsider's or diku's selfish motives in contrast to the selflessness of the Adivasis. He regrets that with modernization, his village would become unrecognizable and would be transformed into a concrete jungle with numerous buildings coming up. The specific landscapes of the village where they gathered to celebrate life as a community had been encroached upon to erect buildings. The traditional medicines and the rituals of the exorcist Rando Guru would lose their effect and popularity with modern forms of medication.

Ram Dayal Munda wants to preserve his land and its beauty against mindless ravages in the garb of development. He dislikes seeing the scalding truth of displacement and exploitation. The poet's concern for his land and region is reflected in the lines, 'The air is filled with urgency.' The Adivasis are vulnerable to the exploitation and repression of the outsiders. It is miserable that their beautiful land will be destroyed within no time. The poet uses this to show that the Adivasi's freedom is curtailed by making them dependent on modern amenities. Besides, people would have 'assumed unfamiliar ways,' forcing them to adopt different ways of life by assimilating with outsiders. The poet is remorseful to see the impact of the land alienation on their lives and is anxious about their future. The Adivasis struggle to preserve their land, culture and



history. He highlights the importance of land and the culture that formulates their identity. Munda allude to the weakening of their community after all that has been lost with modernization and land alienation.

In the poem 'The Return,' the poet Ram Dayal Munda depicts time as motionless, 'separating the moments of then and now', making them two different entities. This contrasts the fusion of time depicted by Judith Wright, where the past brings awareness to the present. As the poem concludes, he feels like a stranger in his village. In the lines:

“Bandhan kept trying to recognize every face

But in return each face looked at him

As if he was the question mark”

Everyone appears like a stranger to him after the village is modernized and encroached on by the outsiders. The influence of outsiders has alleviated community bonding and tribal unity. The anxiousness of the poet is underlined as the poem ends with the haunting lines:

Then, he had run away leaving the village behind;

Now the village has run away

Leaving him behind!

The poet feels out of place in his region, which was transformed entirely while working in the tea garden. By embracing the unfamiliar ways of life forced upon these Adivasis due to land alienation, culture and identity are lost. While Land is an integral part of their lives, their resource giver, an outsider cannot see the connection. The poet expresses how destructive modernism and land alienation is when it comes to preserving the tribal identity. The poet celebrates the unique Adivasi culture and practices while juxtaposing it with that of the outsiders.

The readers are reminded of the Adivasi's strength, uniqueness and resilience. If things are allowed to change, their culture will be continuously eroded and eventually be lost. The poet wants to convey that their traditional practices and culture have been lost and will still be lost.



Both Judith Wright and Ram Dayal Munda are social activists who, through their empowering poems, attempt to bring awareness to the Aboriginals and the Adivasis about their rights, respectively. In their poems, there is a similitude where both aboriginal and the Adivasi culture are at stake, with the outsiders invading their land. Ram Dayal Munda deeply loves the Chotanagpur region, and Wright loves the Australian landscape. Their feeling of guilt and distress at the destruction of the land is reflected in their poems. Both the writers voice their anguish over the exploitation of their land and nature by outsiders or settlers. Their activism has led them to write about the relationship between the land and mankind with guilt and regret.

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