CHAPTER II

IN SEARCH OF FULFILMENT:
LIVESAY AND WRIGHT AS LOVE POETS

I seek more
than skin, flesh, blood
I seek the coursing
heaving heart
for my soul's food

Livesay, "The Hard Core of Love" (SCT 137).

I am alone, I will not
touch you or move
I am only thirsty for love

Wright, "Brown Bird" (WCP 172).

Love has remained a major theme with both Livesay and Wright throughout their poetic careers. For both, the central motive in their poems has been to find a true meaning in life. Though in her early poems Livesay chose to deal with political struggle, in her later poems she thinks of the struggle of the
individual. "All my later poetry is mostly dealing with relationships", she admits (Meyer and O’ Riordan 78). Love to her means fulfilment and a renewal of self. But when it leads to frustration it even means the very negation of these two. Commenting on Livesay’s achievement as a poet, Miriam Waddington observes:

Miss Livesay is preoccupied with the problem of expressing and perhaps reconciling, the many sided feminine self. This self continually appears in all its varied guises of child, wife, mother and finally as the socially concerned human being. (Hutchinson 141)

Ever looking forward to the emergence of a genuine feminine identity where woman can be her true self, Livesay urges womanfolk to assume their rightful place as members of the human race even if it demands a rejection of the conditioning imposed upon them by male dominated society. Naturally, in many of her love poems, Livesay boldly denounces the patriarchal world of the sun, the dominating and aggressive male principle and acknowledges the value of the feminine principle represented by the moon, earth and water. But gradually a new poetic landscape emerges marked by a fusion
of the private and public voices and an integration of the male and female principles within the self. This alone can guarantee a wholeness of the self and a larger healthy community. A complex web of inter-relationships lies at the root of any individual identity.

Quite early in her life, Livesay had become aware of the temperamental and attitudinal differences that separate the two sexes, apart from the biological factors that distinguish them. "I always had the feeling that I was struggling alone to make a woman's voice heard. I admired the men—particularly those who encouraged me... but I felt curiously detached from them in a literary and lifestyle sense," she admits (RHLH 19). For long, feminists emphasized the similarities between man and woman projecting man as the norm. Naturally any deviant stance from this norm was looked down upon as inferior. But a major change came in the attitudes of the feminists in the seventies and eighties when they started speaking of the distinctive nature of the female experience by projecting woman's own distinct viewpoint. Unlike men who favour aggressiveness, individuality and control, women value human relationships, wholeness and togetherness. Livesay seems to believe that a woman who holds on to these qualities alone can bring about a change in human consciousness.
According to Livesay a truly successful relationship is one based on mutual respect and understanding. Her poem "One Way Conversation" amply brings out this view. For most men, the sex act alone matters. They seldom realise that a woman wants to be "touched, caressed, massaged and kissed" because for her, it is the sense of being needed that is most important (SCT 247). Quite often, man fails to realise that the role he has to play is "as valid as sunshine" to be a "partner" to woman (SCT 247).

Livesay's brief honeymoon with communist ideology and her later disenchantment with it are discussed in a subsequent chapter. In her eagerness to foster oneness between the two sexes, Livesay had turned to Marxism whose basic belief in "comradeship" she thought, would help bridge the inequality between them. But her hopes were soon shattered as is evident from her following words:

Such were the dichotomies I found in male-female relationships in the thirties. In theory we were free and equal as comrades on the left. In practice, our right hand was tied to the kitchen sink. (RHLH 115)

"The Taming" shows how even love-making is a battle for supremacy. In the act of making love, man and woman have
different but complementary roles to play. So the woman is not offended when she is told, "Be woman". But gradually she realises that she cannot be herself. She is not free like the man—but must yield to his demands, doing "just that and nothing more". "Do as I say. I heard you faintly / Over me fainting / be woman," says he (SCT 120).

In "The Touching" the sexual act is projected as a force of renewal, a rebirth of self. A successful physical relationship can transform even the "coldest hour" into ecstasy (SCT 123). The barrier laid down by the narrow walls of the woman's own identity are broken down and at least for a short while she submerges her own identity into that of her beloved. The partners become aware of the underlying unity of all existence and the physical act itself assumes a kind of mystical aura:

    each time
    I whirl
    part of some mystery
    I did not make or earn
    that seizes me
    each time
    I drown
    in your identity (LCP 298).
That man and woman are complementary to each other is the theme of another poem, “The Widow”. With the death of her husband, the woman becomes, in every sense, an abandoned one. No man needs her any longer. She longs passionately for physical intimacy with a man, “the body is relentless, knows / its need / must satisfy itself without the seed” (SCT 97).

“The Unquiet Bed” is undoubtedly her greatest poem with feminist overtones. It reveals her quest to find recognition of the woman’s real self. She reminds her lover that she too has a multifaceted personality to match his and therefore every right to grow and develop:

The woman I am
is not what you see
I’m not just bones
and crockery

the woman, I am
is not what you see
move over love
make room for me. (SCT 117)

In poems like “Four Songs” and “The Dream” also Livesay shows how the sexual act reveals the mystic element of love. The lovers make love for “delight” or for “compassion”. But they seldom
realise that their union was ordained "Long before / our bodies met" (SCT 118).

Using the image of a maid encountering a unicorn in a "dark wood", Livesay speaks in "The Dream" of the transforming power of the sexual union. A successful physical union leads to a "song in the mouth" and "a meditative dance" (LCP 294). But the poet knows that love's pleasures are "temporary" and that one should learn how to enjoy it while it lasts and let the memory of its beauty sustain one later.

"The Notations of Love" which appears in her last volume of poems The Self Completing Tree deserves mention here. Here she seeks to discover the meaning of the man-woman relationships. The lover seemed selfish as he took away all he wanted; but love has also transformed her; made her aware of her inner strength:

 softly I melted down
 into the earthy green
 grass grew between my thighs
 and when a flower shot
 out of my unclenched teeth
 you left me nothing but
 a tongue to say it with. (SCT 126)
The lover has in fact left her with every thing. Her earlier misgivings when he "bared me to the light" yield place to hope when she realises that the lover has left her with everything—"The earthy green grass" and "a flower". Whether it is "day or night" she is "undressed / dance / differently" (SCT 128).

She no longer has to seek refuge in pretence or mere show - she can bare her true self!

Later, as the poet advances in age, she realises that the merging of bodies does not necessarily mean the merging of identities. Like any other human experience, love also is to be enjoyed for itself, as something capable of lending meaning to life. It need not necessarily be at the expense of one's individuality. So Livesay confesses in "Mistakenly":

When waters join
to form a river
neither claims
identity. (SCT 132)

Complete identification with the beloved is only fleeting. Love cannot remain at the same pitch of intensity. So even the loss of love does not become a shattering blow for her. She is no longer depressed by the vicissitudes of love. She no longer needs
to submerge her identity in that of her beloved--hers now is a transformed self in the man-woman relationship.

In a short but terse poem entitled "Wedlock", Livesay looks upon marriage as more than a mere union of two bodies. It is much more than a legal document pronouncing the two as man and wife:

    Flesh binds us, makes us one
    And yet in each alone
    I hear the battle of the bone
    A thousand ancestors have won
    And we, so joined in flesh
    Are prisoned yet
    As soul alone must thresh
    In body's net. (SCT 79)

Until the "two souls" attain perfect understanding they feel "bereft" and "Achieve no unity, / We are each one bereft / And weeping inwardly" (SCT 79).

What is imperative for attainment of wholeness is nothing short of unconditioned acceptance by both. Shorn of all conditions, customs and etiquettes a true relationship should base itself on mutual love and acceptance. So in "Interrogation" she bluntly asks her beloved:
If I come unasked
Will you forget
What you ever learned
of etiquette? (LCP 28)

In poem after poem Livesay points to the fact that the physical act of love is nothing if it does not involve the heart also. In “The Hard Core of Love” she admits:

I seek more
than skin, flesh, blood
I seek the coursing
heaving heart
for my soul’s food. (SCT 137)

In the same vein she tells her lover in “The Woman”: “When you make me come / it is the breaking of a shell / a shattering birth” (SCT 122).

Love has the power of changing an old withered woman into a young girl again. With old age, breasts become “withered gourds”. Yet true love can make her young again. So in “Sorcery” she expresses her wish openly:
O engineer of spring!
magic magic me
out of insanity
from scarecrow into girl again
then dance me toss me
catch! (LCP 318).

By her own admission, Livesay's *Collected Poems: The Two Seasons* enact the "drama of woman's search for a soul and body of her own" (Hutchinson 7). Through this master volume which includes most of her important poems on the theme of love, she is trying to find a synthesis between "community and private identity" (Hutchinson 7).

Interestingly enough, even mythologies have made a distinction between the male and female experiences. While male quest-myths generally involve an upward or forward movement, female quest-myths generally take the form of a descent. In keeping with this mythical notion, the female protagonist in "The Descent" is made to descend a place where there is no light, air or recognizable path just to know where she is. There she is completely "at home" though it is a place of "mucus", "swift blood" and "semen". Though she has been conditioned
through centuries to regard her as "unclean" during menstrual periods and childbirth, she successfully rids herself of these prejudices and pulls from her body "the after-birth":

(Most men
Cannot look on this
and women shun,
bury the truth)

Yet I cry
unless you have eaten
of this foul excreta
identified
and swallowed it
you are not whole
you are not man. (WIA 77)

Anyone who refuses to recognize this aspect of human experience is really denying its existence, little realizing that to be wholly human both man and woman should accept this reality.

Society has imposed many restrictions on woman, caged in that "box called home" whose roof she cannot easily "wrench off". She has no other option but to comply with the dictates of the society. Her predicament therefore is much akin to that of a swallow "beating its wings/against a wire mesh" (SCT 12).
"On Reading Some Writings by Women" is dedicated to such hapless women. Such a woman is in no way different from a small child "hitting its fists against granite rock / when there are no doors". The child calls for "Mama", a symbol of love and sacrifice. But for woman, no easy way-out seems to exist. For her even the home is only a "box" where

Always alone
These lost ones are
while their mates
are standing around
laughing. (SCT 62)

While referring to the repeated imagery of houses to explore Livesay's ambivalent attitude to love and family life, Susan Zimmerman suggests that houses "stand for security and warmth, but at times, restriction and denial of freedom" (32-45). The constant restrictions placed on women by motherhood are the theme of another poem, "The Mother":

She cannot walk alone. Must set her pace
To the slow count of grasses, butterflies
To puppy's leap, the new bulldozer's wheeze
To Chinese fishman, balancing his pole. (SCT 39)
She cannot even “think alone” and words have to be chosen carefully “poised to the smaller scope”. It is “Her lot to busily bestir herself / With knots and nooses, all the slough and slips / Of day” (SCT 39).

In “Towards a Love Poem”, Livesay presents the New Woman as very much a part of herself. She is no alien to her - she is her “sister” or even “surrogate daughter”. So she tells her

I can rejoice in your differences
distortions
imperturbable otherness
seeing you as risen from ocean
Lady from the sea. (FTW 34)

To Livesay, the New Woman is an

Unknown plant
discovered in my garden
not to be weeded out
but guarded protected. (FTW 34)

Livesay finds kinship with the New Woman in that like the latter, Livesay too has a lot to learn and unlearn. The unchartered
path ahead does not deter her: "I too / am learning to fly
/ under water" (FTW 34).

In many poems, Livesay stresses the need for the man
to acknowledge the woman’s personhood and give her space.
Is a woman incomplete without such a relationship? "The Three
Emilys", seminal in terms of the theme of women, ponders this
question, reaching first one conclusion, then the opposite, "...the Emilys are unfree yet free. Self-sufficiency is not only
possible but is essential for the creative artist" say Shirin
Kudchedkar and Jameela Begum (290). The three Emilys are
Emily Bronte, Emily Dickinson and the Canadian painter, Emily
Carr. No woman artist can easily shun home and family life.
But such a drastic step is necessary if she were to remain free,
unfettered and in complete possession of the world. The three
poets are bound together through their common anguish. As
Sandra Hutchinson has observed, the poem” focuses on woman’s
subjugation to man and her search for a creative, independent
role” by “linking the difficulties of these three solitary artists
to universal feminist concerns” (Hutchinson 176).

Though the three artists voluntarily decided to remain free
from the shackles of marriage and prefer “wandering lonely”,
their decision is not an easy one. They
cry to me
As in reproach
I, born to hear their inner storm
of separate man in woman's form. (SCT 83)

Like the three Emily's Livesay also is a creative artist. But unlike them: "I yet possess another kingdom, barred / To them". Herself a wife and mother, her creative energies "Flow the immemorial way / Towards the child, the man" (SCT 83).

She knows that despite the apparent comforts and luxuries in which she is steeped, the truth remains that

the whole that I possess
Is still much less
They move triumphant through my head
I am the one
Uncomforted. (SCT 83-84)

The poet does not mince her words here: she is expressing in clear terms the conflict in her mind. The conflict obviously is between her yearning to be a creative artist sans any familial commitments and her desire to play the traditional role of wife and mother.
"Other" can be considered as a study in the contrasting attitudes of man and woman towards life. The almost abrupt and startling opening of the poem: "Men prefer an island / with its beginning ended" presents man's viewpoint clearly (SCT 90). Man always opts for the island, the petty, limited and egocentric world where he is the unchallenged master. Much is to be found in common between man and island - both are remote, isolated and outside the realm of meaningful communication. When he prefers a road "circling shell like / convex and fossilized / forever winding inward", the woman is a "mainland" ranging "from upper country to the inner core / from sageland brushland marshland / to the sea's floor" (SCT 90).

Man expects woman to be like a "shell", with her sensitivity and vitality blunted like his own. But the woman does not want to yield herself to his demands that easily. She is aware of her oneness with the elements of nature and is ready to go to the very roots of life experience, eager to receive life with open arms. Hers is therefore
Livesay's most important poem betraying her feminist concerns, I believe, is "The Disasters of the Sun" where the myth of God, the Sun is completely demolished. It reveals her unceasing concern with being a woman in a male dominated world. The poem falls under five sections. In the opening section, the poet addresses the "old gold garnered incredible sun" and appeals to him to "sink through my skin / into the barren bone" (SCT 99). She does not fear "the splayed scalpel" of the sun. It can at best make her aware of her own inner strength. So her appeal to him is "assure me I am human" (SCT 99). The second section points to the predicament of woman. Her vision of the world is one of harmony "The world is round / it is an arm / a round us" (SCT 99). But it is still only a vision because "bright between our bones / shines the invisible sun" (SCT 100). There is always the inescapable divide between man and woman. In the third section she leaves the plane of reflection and lands on the mundane realm. At an airport she encounters her ex-lover, a man with: "dark hair, piercing eyes /
lean profile, pipe in mouth” (SCT 100). His power to destroy her idea of self annoys her. She finds her identity at stake and

In the airport circle where
the baggage tumbled
all my jumbled life
fumbled (SCT 100).

His look for her is like

*a soft bomb
*behind my eyes. (SCT 100)

But she does not lose hope—she is ready to wait for “the one sweet piece” that will render life meaningful. In the next two sections, the poet deals with the impact of the unfeeling, masculine sun on the feminine self:

*I tell you
*we live in constant
danger
*under the sun bleeding
*I tell you (SCT 102).

She views the sun's dual roles of “grower” and “destroyer” with suspicion. For her, the sun is no godfather, but a tyrannical
king. It nurtures only to destroy. Hence her advice is to “keep out of the way of/ this most killing / northern sun” (SCT 102).

The poet would rather “grop[e] for those blunt / moon scissors” than let herself be cowed down by the sun’s “fiery blades” (SCT 102). The moon is obviously the feminine principle and it can flourish only after it severs its connection with the “black sun”. So she pleads: “connect me underground / root tentacles / subterranean water” (SCT 102).

Once rooted in the earth, she is no longer under the shadow of the male. But a man-loving, woman-affirming poet is quick to realise that no proper balance can be maintained without recourse to a masculine power: “no more lovely man can be / than he with moon-wand / who witches water” (SCT 102).

“Bartok and the Geranium” is another important poem where Livesay celebrates the feminine principle. But here also, she gives almost equal time to the male. The whole poem has been conceived in the form of an imaginary story about a contest between a Bartok concerto and a geranium. Bartok stands for the dominant, masculine principle while the geranium represents the reflective, intuitive, feminine principle equated with Nature. The geranium is always eager to accept; lifting her green umbrellas towards the pane, she always seeks her fill of sunlight
or of rain: "Whatever falls / she has no commentary / Accepts, extends, ..." (SCT 216).

At the opposite pole is the Bartok, never content with anything, let alone the small room: "... all the while he whirls / explodes in space" (SCT 216). He cannot even be confined to the limitless sky because it seems too small for his ambitions: "She's heaven-held breath / He storms and crackles / spits with hell's own spark" (SCT 216).

Thus, in terms of temperament, man and woman are poles apart. "He is dark" selfish, secretive and self-centered and "she is daylight", self-content and full of love and understanding for whoever needs it (SCT 216). Echoing the Chinese philosophy of Yin and Yang, the poem becomes an eloquent celebration of the complementariness of the two genders. The feminine attribute derives strength from nature and lends it to whoever comes in contact with her. Besides, it activates the faculty of intuition. It is well known that the source for poetry is intuition and feeling and not merely rationality.

Much like the noted Malayalam poet Sugathakumari whose poetry in a different context elsewhere has been referred to, Livesay is also ready to identify herself completely with the collective body of other women who share her own aspirations
and sufferings. The anguish and misery woman undergo defy
time and space and are universal in nature.

In “Apocalypse”, a poem written on hearing how the
archeologists found “Lucy”, she responds to the cry of the
prehistoric “Lucy” and records her “scream for humanity”. Her
bones hid in the earth for three million years till “Our phoenix
rises / bursts into / a dazzle of satellites / blazing” (PL N. pag).

The phoenix image, suggestive of rebirth and renewal
implies a future full of promise. Woman’s unrelenting desire
to “evolve” from hate, love, desperation and despair into “some
marvellous connection” will ultimately bear fruit. The success
of the mission is such that it will dazzle by its brilliance.

The vulnerability of woman in a patriarchal society is the
theme of “Nothing is Private”. The poem begins with the bold
assertion that unlike women, men have never been subjected
to physical scrutiny. But

For a woman

*nothing is private!*

She is invaded

night after night
has only the soul’s essence
through which to believe herself
human, and right. (PL N.pag)

In “Mon Semblable, Mon Frere” she expresses her desire
to be recognised as a friend or foe by man. She has no “dragonish
to surround his rock and devour. She assures him “Take
power” power” to surround his rock and devour. She assures him “Take
me as hostage / if you must / I’ll not betray / your trust”
(PL N.pag).

“Serenade for Strings”, one of the earliest feminist gestures
in Canadian writing, celebrates childbirth, a unique feminine
experience in all its entirety. Despite the pain involved, once
“it is done”, woman can “Relax, Release” (WIA 21). She can
now proclaim proudly “And here, behold your handiwork /
Behold - a man!” (WIA 21).

In “The Prophetess” a poem inspired by the poet’s African
experiences, she equates mother with a prophetess who can
redeem and offer true liberation. Rejecting the male patriarchal
God, she says

Not by a whiteman’s God
need we be saved
but by the resurrection of a woman
an African mother. (LCP 313)
"Why we are Here" is a poem important in many respects. Besides celebrating the uniqueness of the female experience, "Some of us especially / are women / open / ever receiving / into" it also seeks to attempt a new definition of the function of the poet:

Some of us are here
as messages
because in the small womb
lies all the lightning. (WIA 65)

For Livesay, woman is at once a creator of life and art. She can transform the human mind and like a sibyl, can guide humanity about the values of life. With her tender, understanding qualities she can bring about a change in human consciousness.

Right from the beginning of her poetic career, love has remained a major theme with Judith Wright also. The Australian poets of yesteryear who suffered from an acute sort of alienation psychosis, with the centres of cultural and spiritual inspiration far away from them, had only two options before them- turn to the native mythology of the Aborigines or draw material from the more familiar mythology of the Europeans. Either course, they feared, would dampen the search for an independent
identity. Thus for a long time, no serious love poetry worth its name was produced by the Australians. Pioneering work in the realm of love poetry emerged in Australia only in the 1940s when poets like Judith Wright, A.D. Hope, James McAuley and Kenneth Mackenzie introduced love, sex and sexuality into Australian poetry.

Judith Wright has exploited a variety of mythologies ever since she began to write. She was not attached, beyond a certain extent, to either the Jindyworobak movement which insisted on relating all arts to everything native or to its counter movement by the Angry Penguins who wanted every artist to be cosmopolitan in their outlook. Her treatment of love is free, uninhibited, complex and undeniably rich. But what is most striking about her love poetry is the feminine vision it so realistically seeks to communicate, a quality it shares with the poetry of Livesay also.

Shirley Walker in her book *The Poetry of Judith Wright: A Search for Unity* rightly maintains that the poetry of Judith Wright as a thematic whole is an expression of the poet’s continuing search for the unity of being. Her preoccupations throughout her poetic career with continuity, love, nature, imagination and language are all inter-related aspects of the unity which she seeks. She hails love as a mighty force fit
to foster unity. For her love is "a powerful physical and
metaphysical force, the life force itself. It ensures the unity
of man and nature and is the agency through which continuity
is achieved", observes Walker (ix). What she vehemently pleads
for is the love between human beings and the integration of
man with the world around him.

Written at a time when war and death were tormenting
all who believed in peace and human values, "The Moving
Image" has its focus on vulnerability and disintegration. But
she projects sexual love and creation as capable of removing
the sense of disintegration, thereby effecting a joyful unity and
integration with the bounteous nature. As her poetry progresses,
she confronts sinister aspects of experience like the imperfection
of love and the duality of nature and her poetry naturally
imparts a quivering sense of the destructiveness of time and
its hostility to permanence. Love is now at a precarious state,
a refugee at the mercy of the bleak, unknown future.

In "The Company of Lovers" she tries to relate her love-
relationship to that of all lovers in the world. Though written
in the background of the Second World War, love is the central
theme here. She projects the lovers as the seekers of love's
eternity in a world where "Death marshals up his armies round
us now" and where the loneliness of the "narrow grave" is
an ever threatening menace (WCP 7). In a world darkened by death and desolation, the only ray of light is love. Love is significant in that it is an affirmation of human purposiveness and creativity.

A public figure with a deep concern for the major issues of the modern world, Judith Wright believes that the dissociation rampant in the modern psyche can only be dispelled by a reaffirmation of the values of love and life which have consistently been denied by rationalism. Like Auden she too feels that this dissociation stems from the failure of love and imagination. She cannot toe the line of "man concerned with power values, not with the values of love and life" (BIWI 42). She feels that mankind has now been reduced to "a set of human individuals with no common purposes, incapable of conferring value and therefore valueless in themselves" (BIWI 190-91).

Fully aware of the great damage inherent in an overemphasis on rationalism, she stressess the feeling aspect of the psyche rather than the rational modes of thought throughout her poetic career. Her poetry seeks to express the neglected powers of the psyche, namely, intuition and imagination. Love can work wonders in the world. It can bring about changes in man's attitudes towards his fellowmen and towards nature.
It is above all, a unifying power reconciling individuals with one another, integrating the individual into the schemata of the natural world thus guaranteeing the unity and continuity of all aspects of being. This accounts for the emphasis in her poetry upon the power of love for "love releases the feeling and intuitive powers which are held in bondage by rationality" (Walker 11).

In "Woman to Man", love is presented as a vitalistic force which moves through and lends order to the entire phenomenal world, and as a spiritual force fit to counter fear, evil and hatred. Even the very sexual act is a great force which can integrate the pattern of human life with the cyclical pattern of renewal in the natural world. Her manifesto, "I am the maker" points both to her vocation as a poet as also to the recognition of the power of sexual love to transmit life through time. Thus "Woman to Man" is a paean of praise to the principle of love. Significantly, this volume begins with a motto, an excerpt from Francis Bacon's *The Wisdom of the Ancients* proclaiming "Love was the most ancient of all the gods, and existed before everything else, except Chaos" (WCP 26).

Poems like "Woman to Man", "Woman's Song" and "Woman to Child" occurring at the beginning of *Woman to Man* are metaphysical in essence, despite their apparent celebrations of
individual physical situations. The three dramatic lyrics present a particular physical situation and define their metaphysical importance. At the purely physical level “Woman to Man” is direct and explicit. “The blind head butting at the dark” is both the phallus and the child’s head at the moment of birth. Thus a unique double-time perspective is provided in which the future is made implicit in the present. A clever maneuvering of the rhythm which gains impetus in the last line with a fine blend of the sexual act and its effect on the woman richly suggests the physical act:

This is the maker and the made;
this is the question and reply
the blind head butting at the dark
the blaze of light along the blade
Oh hold me, for I am afraid. (WCP 27)

The image of the resurrection in the first stanza is reinforced by the child’s birth from the darkness of the womb. Every birth is a triumph of creativity over chaos, darkness and death. Again, there is the complex symbol of the tree of life to suggest the continuity of life through sexual love: “This is the blood’s wild tree that grows / the intricate and folded rose” (WCP 27).
While the "blood’s wild tree" represents passion, "the intricate and folded rose" is its sequel. The tree stands at once for the unity of all being and the inexhaustible creativity which the feminine principle represents. With her deep concern about the problems of environmental protection and the conservation of Australian wild life, she can never think of man separate from nature or vice-versa. She is always eager to stress the organic unity of man and nature.

Judith Wright no longer views time as a monstrous entity; for her it is the beneficent agent of eternal recurrence. In “Woman to Child” the child becomes the symbol of the conquest of time: “All time lay rolled in me, and sense, / and love that knew not its beloved” (WCP 28).

Even the reproductive role is viewed in terms of the recurrent cycles of the natural world:

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. (WCP 29)
In "Woman's Song" she categorically tells the child what is in store for it:

... move in me, my darling,
whose debt I cannot pay
pain and the dark must claim you,
and passion and the day. (WCP 28)

It is clear that the "dark" here and the "night" in "Woman to Child" point at once to the death to which the child must follow his mother as also the fertile darkness of the earth through which the vegetation cycle must pass before a new life is brought forth.

Commenting on the influence of these poems on later poets Ken Goodwin has said:

These three poems, celebrating love fecundity and the quickening of the child, seemed to most readers thoroughly original poems about subjects rarely touched on. They have been very influential in encouraging other women writers particularly in the 1970s and later to write about procreation and childbirth. (127-28)
In poem after poem love is celebrated as a unique entity that can have its full sway over everything. Their creative power is such that lovers can transmute even death into life. Love is thus the key to regeneration. The following lines from “The City Asleep” are a celebration of love that “aches, and swells” to produce “its flower” namely the child, symbolising the conquest of time:

We are the white grave-worms of the grave
we were the eyeless beginning of the world.
Oh, blind, kind flesh, we are the drinking seed
that aches and swells towards its flower of love.

(WCP 50)

Though she is a strong votary of the power of love, hers is not a blind adoration. She is equally responsive to the way sex is misused, depriving it of its creative splendour. In “The Unborn”, the focus is on the sense of deprivation and loss felt by a mother who has stalled the conception of her child. What irks the poet most is the fact that the sense of deprivation and loss applies to the child as well. The child is denied its heritage, the drowsy comfort of the “warm womb” and even pain:
Not even tears were mine,
not even death;
not even the dazzling pain
of one first breath. (WCP 48)

In poems like “The Promised One”, “To a Child Outside Time” and “Still Born”, her primary concern is with the denial of life. Even a poem like “The Old Prison”, which apparently describes the old convict gaol at Trial Bay where German aliens were incarcerated during the First World War, becomes, at a deeper level, a symbolic projection of sterility:

They did not breed nor love
Each in his cell alone
cried as the wind now cries
through this flute of stone. (WCP 53)

Judith Wright’s most vehement condemnation of anti-sexual and life-denying values is probably found in the poem “Typists in the Phoenix Building”. The insurance firms are housed in the phoenix building where “half-cock clerks” and “immaculate and dumb” typists work. The modern urban society tries to turn its back not only against the powerful forces of the natural world like fire and flood but also against human sexuality:
Shirley and her clerk
in tiled and fire proof corridors
touch and fall apart. No fires
Consume the banked comptometers;
no flood has lipped the inlaid floors. (WCP 238)

For Judith Wright, sex is at once a creative and destructive force. It tantamounts to near heresy to deny sexual love that makes one aware of the time-defying powers of the natural world. Her treatment of the sexual act is always from the woman’s point of view. The feminine sensuality expressed through her poetry is always modified by a strong awareness of its metaphysical import. “The poet’s voice, at its most powerful, is the voice of the primordial feminine, speaking of the inexhaustible and eternally recurrent fertility of the earth’s cycles of which birth is the human expression”, says Shirley Walker (41). Wright’s attempt through her poems is to establish a unity between the sexuality of man and the fertility of the natural world. It is in sexual love and ultimately in childbirth that the poet feels herself at one with the regenerative cycles of nature. Many poems in Woman to Man, as mentioned earlier, celebrate man’s unity with nature through the persona of the child. In “Child and Wattle-tree” she assumes the guise of the child to express her longing for a total integration with nature:
Lock your branches around me, tree;
let the harsh wooden scales of bark enclose me
Take me into your life and smother me with bloom
till my feet are cool in the earth. (WCP 31)

Poems like "Midnight" and "Flame-Tree in a Quarry" also celebrate the fundamental unity underlying all psychic and natural processes. Through the many suggestive images used in "Midnight" she tries to establish that man is at one with nature and that the same creative force moves through the organic world of nature and the psychic world of imagination:

As a plant in winter dies
down into the germ, and lies
leafless, tongueless, lost in earth
imaging its fierce rebirth;

And with the whirling rays of the sun
and shuttle-stroke of living rain
weaves that image from its heart
and like a god is born again. (WCP 59)

"Flame-Tree in a Quarry" tries to reinforce what has already been stated. Its focus is also on the regenerative power of the
natural world which finds its parallel in the creative power of the imagination:

Out of the torn earth's mouth
comes the old cry of praise

Out of the very wound
springs up this scarlet breath
this fountain of hot joy,
this living ghost of death. (WCP 60)

Leonie Kramer's comment on the poems in Woman to Man merit mention here:

At the end of this volume are poems about a woman's experience of love and child birth. They are poems of passion which express fine shades of feeling in striking images, rendering the intangible in sensuous terms, and giving a concrete existence to volatile, emotional states. (89)

Judith Wright is a confessional poet like Kamala Das or Sylvia Plath. Her candour in describing erotic feelings and ideas, at times direct and at other times implicitly conveyed through metaphors and symbols has shocked many a critic. Shirley Walker has quoted Philip Lindsay's
reaction to Judith Wright's treatment of sex in Woman to Man:

Of Judith Wright's poetry, it might well be said that she is the only woman who has kissed and told. Other women have sung of love, but apart from Sappho - and she, after all, was a man in female skin - none have written honestly and without the shame of their desires (73).

Though Shirley Walker calls it a valid observation, she hastens to add that Lindsay has failed to acknowledge the poet's exploration of the metaphysical dimensions of female sexuality. Love and all its allied feelings, ideas and even acts are absolute and eternal realities from which none can easily escape. That is why in matters of sex, she allows her poetic imagination freeplay. Why should she feel qualms about exposing the truth about which she feels quite certain? Besides, talking tongue in cheek has never been her wont!

She speaks brazenly of the act of sexual union in poems like "Eden" and "The Flood". She considers Eden as the only place where perfect pleasure of sex existed and where the "flesh" had not split into the "two halves". So her main contention in "Eden" is that the real Eden can be regained only in the
total merger of the two sexes—"love in love dissolved". Apart from being the source of all life and of the continuity of the human race, the sex act is the culmination of the noblest aspiration of the flesh: "the two halves of my being / met to make one truth" \( (WCP\ 90) \).

In "The Flood", the narration as well as the rhythm, dramatizes in clear terms a woman's sexual experience:

slowly, how slowly,
I shall stir now within my crusted earth
I feel the green, the sap that moves within me, turn to your touch
I will be ready for the violence of your kiss, be ready for the pain and the delight
Only a little while, a little longer
Sun of me, life, for love, I climb towards you. \( (WCP\ 43) \)

Her three-part poem, "Fire at Murdering Hut" also deserves special mention for the complex sex-imagery employed. Fire, frost and knife used with different connotations have been lent rich erotic implications here. Even a too casual reader can catch the amatory references of a physical nature when she sings: "Cruel was the steel in the hand that split my sleep / and branded me with pain" \( (WCP\ 73) \).
The fire symbolism imparts a clear unity to the poems in *Two Fires*. In the title poem she speaks candidly of the "bridegroom and the bride" who like Donne's lovers burn in each other's flame of passion and enact the atavistic ritual that ensures the continuance of the human race on this planet. Judith Wright's interest lies more feelingly in "love" the verb than in its noun variant. The poems in *The Other Half* amply prove this. A typical example is "Wishes" where she asks:

What do I wish to do?
I wish to love
that verb at whose source all verbs
take fire and learn to move. *(WCP 225)*

The same preoccupation is found in "Pro and Con" where she says: "By night we meet in old conspiracy / and conjugate 'to love' - past, present, future tense" *(WCP 224)*.

The poet's candour in treating sex is such that she at times presents images that may shock a moralist. In "Remembering Michael", for example, she refers to factory chimneys as "smoking phalluses" *(WCP 356)*.
A clear streak of conjugality is found in almost every poem in *Woman to Man, The Two Fires, The Five Senses* and *The Other Half*. In “Twenty Five Years”, she reminisces about the happy past of her conjugal love: “The Other Half”, in all probability, is a celebration of the sacred love between husband and wife. The lover in most of her poems also seems to be her own husband. In “Turning Fifty”, the last poem of the volume, *The Other Half*, we find her fully satisfied and happy on her 50th birthday:

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Still, as the sun comes up
bearing my birthday,
having met time and love
I raise my cup -
dark, bitter, neutral, clean,
sober as morning -
to all I’ve seen and known
to this new sun. (WCP 252)
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Unlike her earlier poems, the love poems in *Shadow* are couched in an overt elegiac mournfulness. Her husband is no more and his death seems to have taken away the buoyancy and vivacity of the passion of love. Poems like “This Time Alone”, “Lovesong
in Absence”, “The Vision (For J.F. McKinney)”, “Eurydice in Hades” and “Rosina Alcona to Julius Brenzaida” are fit to touch the heartstrings of even the most callous of human beings. “Rosina Alcona to Julius Brenzaida” deserves special mention here. During one of her drives homewards, her eyes suddenly fall on a wooden pub, “that anachronism” where once she “drank laughing” with her departed lover:

Holding the steering wheel
my hands freeze. Out of my eyes
jump these undryable tears
from artesian pressures,
from the strata that cover you,
the silt-sift of time. (WCP 283)

No wonder, A.D. Hope calls this poem “the most moving of all Judith Wright’s poems” (22).

The same reminiscent and elegiac strain is found in the poems of Alive also. But now the poet has successfully adjusted with the reality of a loverless life. Armed with a surer, firmer and clearer perspective, she can now accept reality without losing heart. So in poems like “Dialogue”, “Space Between” and “Tableau” she has combined love with pathos in a remarkable way.
The so-called Vitalists of her country like Lindsay, Kenneth Slessor, Douglas Stewart, FitzGerald and Hugh McCrae celebrate the overwhelming vitality of the masculine life-force. Judith Wright, who has in no small way been influenced by them, has added one more dimension to the life-force concept; the woman's awareness of her vitality and her decisive role in furthering human life on earth. According to her, love has a supreme role to play to liberate man from the fear of time and death. This explains the reason why in many poems of *Woman to Man*, the child is made a symbol of the triumph of love over time and death. Besides, her firm conviction is that an artist finds himself at perfect peace with his medium only when he is love prompted. Her poems on war, Aborigines and conservation also proclaim that love is a potent force that can rehumanise man and bring him back into a meaningful and productive kinship with nature and his fellow human beings.

Judith Wright is a philanthropist in the fullest sense of the term. Her heart goes out passionately to all those who have been denied their legitimate right to live in honour and peace. Her interest is not confined to the physical and sensual love that sustains life on earth. She is equally concerned about the havoc wrought by the ruthless and callous destruction of the
vegetation and wild life in Australia. Poems like "Trains" and "The Fire Sermon" discussed elsewhere in a different context, bear testimony to her deep humanism and love for mankind. "Bullocky", a poem written in her formative years is a tribute paid to the heroic spirit and fortitude of the pioneers. But in her zeal to appreciate these qualities, she does not hesitate to voice her disapproval of what they did to the aboriginal natives of the land.

The aboriginals have remained a persistent subject of concern for Judith Wright. She readily associates herself with such promising writers from the aboriginal group like Kath Walker who to her is "my shadow sister" (WCP 317). In poems like "Bora Ring", "Old House" and "Two Dream Times: For Kath Walker", she laments the plight of the aboriginals most touchingly. She knows that they are a wronged tribe and she directs her anger against her own people who have been so cruel and selfish in dealing with the original masters of the land. To Kath Walker she says:

I am born of the conquerors
you of the persecuted
Raped by rum and an alien law,
progress and economics. (WCP 317)
Extending beyond the human world, Judith Wright’s sense of love encompasses birds, beasts, trees and even hills. Poems like “Trapped Dingo”, “The Bull” and “To a Mare” reveal her unabiding concern for animal life. While the dingo is Achilles, Hector and Andromache, the bull in her hands becomes a curled god; a “red Jupiter” (WCP 38). “To a Mare” is a short elegy on a mare killed by drought and famine:

Mare of the clean straight pace,
hide grey as mist or ghost,
what shall I tell your rider,
she who will miss you most?
Only, “All born must die;
all loved be lost”? (WCP 232)

Judith Wright has to her credit an entire volume comprising thirty poems devoted exclusively to birds - *Birds* written for her daughter, Meredith. These poems, mostly about the birds of Tambarine Mountain, reveal her remarkable knowledge of the behaviour of many birds. At times, she sees them in anthropomorphic terms - the magpies walk along the road “with hands in pockets”. Sometimes the birds become reflections of her own mood. So she tells the brown bird: “I am alone, I
will not / touch you or move / I am only thirsty for love” (WCP 172).

In the same poem she entreats the bird, as Shelley does, to “fly down and teach me to sing” (WCP). In “Wounded Night Bird” she appears Buddha-like with her concern for “a bird with a broken breast” who fronted her with a stare that “abashed my own” (WCP 170). In poems like “The Peacock” and “Extinct Birds”, she chastises man for keeping birds in “dirty” cages and for destroying their habitat namely the trees (WCP 161).

Even such unexciting creatures like snails, toads, reptiles and spiders engender a spirit of kinship in Judith Wright. Her sound faith in the theory of evolution and the marine origin of mankind makes her watch her “unfinned feet” not with joy but with sorrow: “Beached by the old betraying sea / I drag my body further, / crawl to my unfinned feet and dress and go” (WCP 344).

The marine creatures may be obnoxious and sickening to many, but to her they are objects of love calling for deep concern. “Habitat”, a long poem in Alive reveals her deep emotional attachment to reptiles, spiders and bats. “The eight-foot carpet snake” described by her is probably the first instance of the
plain portrayal of a snake in English poetry, free from any biblical, psychological or symbolic connotations (WCP 299).

The poet's concern for the wronged races, be it the Maoris or the Aborigines of her own homeland, is appealingly consistent. In Four Poems from New Zealand included in Phantom Dwelling she describes how the "kind uncertain ladies in their best" gather to entertain the visitors and how the local talent sing "I love you truly" (WCP 395). Even the white peak is a "tourist mountain" as it exists just for tourists. A brief stay at the beach in Kokitaka with the swoop of mountains at its back is enough to convince her that it is "Not my country / I go back to my loves, my proper winter" (WCP 396). From among the grind of shingles at the seashore she picks up a slate grey oval stone: "Out of the sea's teeth / I chose it for you, for another country, / loving you, loving another country" (WCP 396).

In the five sections of "For a Pastoral Family", the poet takes a dig at the callous indifference with which the settlers treated the original landowners. When the land was taken, it was said to be for the "good of the old country". They thought that even God approved of their deeds: "That God approved us was obvious / Most of our ventures were prosperous" (WCP 409).
Other poems in *Phantom Dwelling* which reveal the poet's concern for every form of life, plant life not excluded, are "Sun Orchid", "Fox", "Hunting Snake", "Rain Forest", "Caddis Fly", "Violet Stick Insects", "Lichens", "Moss" and "Fungus".

A caddis fly falls into her wine glass. Though she saves it, it flies again only to dive into the fire's centre. The concluding lines are richly poetic:

Why should I mourn, little buddha,  
small drunkard of the flame?  
I finish my wine and dream  
on your fire-sermon. (*WCP* 418)

Wright's love, therefore, is all encompassing. She does not always draw any line between plant and human lives. She proudly identifies herself with everything around her, both living and non-living. To identify oneself with something or somebody is the ultimate mystical end of love. Her concept of love embodies a robust sense of oneness with the universe and eternity. So she readily identifies herself with the land too. In "Jet Flight Over Derby" she emphatically asserts: "I am what land has made/ and land's myself" (*WCP* 280).
In “Eve Scolds”, a poem of the mid 70s, she appears in the guise of the Eternal Woman. Throwing “that old ribstory” to the winds she avers: “I was the clay...” (WCP 359).

Her anger obviously is at the male excesses she witnesses everywhere. To her, even God is a person with a “huge masculine beard” whose “dictator hand” gives “strength” to Adam. Though she is not ready to concede any superiority or seniority to man, she does not underrate his role: “And yet- / still at your touch I melt ...” (WCP 360). She knows fully well that she cannot “share my apples” without him (WCP 359). This poem thus best typifies the poet’s attitude to the relationship that exists, and should exist, between man and woman.
Works Cited


