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## DOROTHY LIVESAY'S KINSHIP WITH NATURE IN HER EARLY POETRY

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### ABSTRACT

Nature has always been a central theme for poetry in all ages universally. Some poets appreciated it, some are grateful to her for her gifts to human beings, others feared its wrath, some others approached her as lovers and some as children. Plants, birds, mountains and other aspects of nature have always provided poets with an almost endless source of inspiration. Using aspects of nature as symbol or metaphor to convey ideas is a common technique used by poets. The relationship between nature and human beings is as old as the life itself and both are interdependent. But Livesay treated nature quite uniquely in her poems and she, from her very young age, understood this special bond and tried to voice the need for protecting and respecting nature. She has firm faith that nature is ever continuing, perpetual, and self reflecting. If human beings are conscious of this special trait of nature it makes their vision wide with an inherent awareness of their participation and kinship with nature and its process. This paper tries to explore the poet's vision and response to nature and in doing so elucidates Livesay's early poems in *Green Pitcher* and *Signpost*.

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Dorothy Livesay was a leading Canadian poet with keen observation and ability to feel and express the precious moments of life. She was a prolific writer and won two Governor General's Awards for Poetry. Livesay, right from her early years, was very much worried about the greed of mankind and wanted to stop violence against Nature and believed that we can survive only if we adapt to nature. Her early poems in *Green Pitcher* (1928) and *Signpost* (1932) deal with nature, personal and emotionally intense observations of a young girl on role of a woman in society.

Livesay had always sought for a special place for women in patriarchal world and this led her to deal with conflict between culture and nature. In this process she also highlighted position of male and female and the role of women in shaping the culture. Livesay, a radical activist, always

challenged traditional role of women as subordinates. She didn't accept woman's position as a helpmate or domestic assistant. She recognized woman's special abilities to create, to procreate and regenerate as a wife, mother and as an artist, striking a balance between culture and nature, working as a synthesizing agent.

The comparison of man to culture and woman to nature presents woman as nurturer and mother while man is worker. It happened because women have been subjected to subordination to men for centuries. This concept also leads people to believe that women's life is to reproduce, to take care and make men comfortable. Such man made rules manipulated nature for convenience and denied equal status to women. Whereas both men and women bear a relationship with nature and both contribute equally to culture also. They are the

two sides of the same coin; neither can survive nor function without the other. Women are capable of handling their domestic responsibilities and satisfying their artistic creativity as well for this Livesay chooses the world of nature as symbol of women's capacities. Man inherits nature but has no qualms in exploiting or ravaging it, woman also inherits nature but is alienated from it by man; for she resembles nature.

Livesay was conscious of binary opposites and tried to achieve a synthesis between them – be it male – female, culture – politics, culture – nature, culture – poetry or poetry and woman. She admits, "Any biological difference affects one's point of view" (Interview with Lever 1975) still men and women are complementary, they really do need each other. For her even human beings and natural world are interdependent. In "Haunted House" she says culture may come and go, people may go away but "raspberries and grass/Are here to stay". It suggests that nature is ever continuing, perpetual, self reflecting. So, if human beings are conscious of this special trait of nature it makes their vision wide with an inherent awareness of their participation and kinship with nature and its process. The flora, fauna, the birds and woodland always inspired Livesay. She felt a connection with nature and deals with it realistically

One recurrent image that occurs in these poems is that of 'restriction' that expresses domination and restriction put by the patriarchal world on woman and at personal level by a man, and at universal level by men on nature. There are two solution offered in these poems; one being passive acceptance and retreating in nature for solace, another being defiant and challenging men and culture to struggle for identity. In "Invincible" the earth is the symbol of womanhood and the sun is patriarchal principle who tries to conspire with the elm trees to "delve their arms/ Into the helpless earth". In "Assertion", once again, she asserts her resistance saying "I shall be the dust/ That never falls to earth". She is not going to be blown away by the winds even if she exists in particles, she would shine in sunlight. She challenges patriarchal society and it's imposed culture on her life, she retorts; "Escape defiantly/All your infallible/Laws of gravity"

(CP 46). She would sparkle and express her existence in the male dominated world.

Livesay's love for Nature was not superficial. She was conscious of nature's exploitation by men at one hand and men's praise for her on the other hand. Such hypocrisy leads to ravage nature and poses danger to the human existence. This exploitation of Nature leads to alienation because only when men identifies with nature (women) they could come to resolution of conflict. The conflict arises because of destruction of landscape by him, the same way women's alienation by culture into narrow confines of domestic walls. Culture is viewed as man's secret weapon and this debate has been metaphorically expressed in Livesay's poetry. The word alienation means "aloofness, estrangement, turning or keeping away, indifference of somebody either society, religion, even the self" (Johri 491). This estrangement brings stress sometimes leading to repressed overcharged feelings. It also "signifies a sense of helplessness, powerlessness, hatred of the self and others" suggest Freud and Max Weber (Ollman 131). Hegel calls the alienation as "unhappy consciousness" when he offers a philosophy of "spirit which reconciles itself and nature, mind and matter.... Mind realizes that it as well as world are two seeds of the same all pervasive, all unifying "Absolute Spirit" (Johri 499)". Livesay felt this connection between men - nature – spirit therefore appeals to protect nature. In the poem "Pioneer" the male figure praises nature's beauty but doesn't hesitate in ravaging it with the result he is alienated, lonely and cries at its loss in wilderness at the end. He has displaced not only old trees but stones also:

He laboured, starved and fought:  
In these last days  
Cities roar where his voice  
In lonely wilderness first sang out praise.  
He sits with folded hands  
And cries to see  
How he has ravaged earth  
Of her last stone  
Here last, most stubborn tree (CP 53).

Diana M.A. Relke has all the praise for Livesay's attempt to save ecological balance, when she remarks, "...neither the Wordsworths nor the

Coleridges, the Lampmans nor the Carmans, have done anything to halt the attack on nature; the roar of cities has replaced their voices just as effectively as it has the Pioneer's"(18). Those romantics sought refuge in nature's lap away from hustle and bustle of cities, without any feeling to save or protect the gift of God to men. Long before the modern Century concept of 'Sustainable Development' was initiated by Livesay. Sustainability for humans means the capacity to endure and responsibility to manage the natural resources so as to maintain the diverse and productive biological system. If the resources are consumed thoughtlessly then nature will pose a challenge to living conditions. The ecological principle for the well being of all life on earth with all its richness and diversity is upheld by Livesay in her poetry. She envisioned men's insatiable and unending thirst for materialism for which they sacrifice natural resources.

In "The Gulls" human emotions are reflected in the objects of nature e.g. "...it seemed that the voices of the gulls/ Were human, piercing and anguished/As of someone lost, calling vainly to another" (CP 15). She even feels that her body is no longer hers but "bound forever to the rock/ Possessed forever by the wind". This bond with nature and identification with it is very unique because nature is permanent where as human beings are not, yet if we want to be near it we should go and merge with it. Livesay was brought up in rural innocent atmosphere and was taken to sophisticated urban life where she found it hard to adjust. Thus the longing to go back to nature or rural atmosphere is very much witnessed in her poetry of early phase. The poet is at pain at nature being stripped off its beauty because of modernization. She laments at the loss of nature and can understand what it utters thus she can "hear/ How silence sings" (CP 3).

In "Hermit" the poet seems to be inspired by the image of hermit in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" who lives alone in the woods. Livesay depicts the same spirit pervading him and the objects of nature therefore the hermit in her poem never feels lonely. In the monologue "Hermit" the protagonist is shown rejecting the truth, subterfuge and hard ways of men while living in the constant

company of nature. He seems like seeking refuge from the "hard ways of men" and delighted in the company of nature. This is the benevolent influence of nature when it becomes a source of and guide to human morality. He has learnt to show emotional response to nature and is not afraid of the storm, drought, the sun and the rain, even the snow are all dear to him. People are afraid of nature because they have lost association with it whereas nature is benevolent if we approach it with respect. The idea is one of association of external with the internal world, the union of matter and spirit. He reflects:

You do not feel yourself at one with it.  
You have grown out of it, forgetting that  
Man has a kinship with each stone, each  
tree  
Which only civilization drove him from:  
If he returns, h'll find no loneliness.  
Instead a silence lifted from the heart  
(CP 19).

Livesay believed that one should go to nature without any preoccupation or fear and enjoy its offerings to man. The hermit does not fear the rock, symbolizing strength and vitality against storms, but respects it. He has done "Nothing with hands" to molest nature or possess it. Likewise man should respect the existence and autonomy of nature and understand its silence

There is no age,  
No growing old, once silence is understood,  
One's death's a doorway back to life again!  
....But while the earth remains, and the tree  
grows  
There is no death: life is a constant sun  
(CP 19).

The rocks, symbolizing indestructible aspect of nature, will remain forever, long after human existence and unchanged by the protagonist who lives there. Therefore instead of capturing or possessing nature we should respect it, be near to it and in return it will provide you what you need for survival i.e. raspberries, potatoes to eat and a roof for head. Without nature survival of human beings is not possible. The poem ends gracefully where the hermit is content with his life spent in the company of nature, the angel.

Livesay was very much sensitive to the loss of nature and she addressed this looming danger to human existence through some of her finest poems. As an intellectual and an artist Livesay was aware of this Sustainable Development which includes not only nature but has an important hidden implication of liberty and justice as sustainable values in society to foster the needs of future generations to meet their own needs. She advocated Sustainable Development as our responsibility towards earth and culture. In the invader – settler colonies, such as Canada, where the colonial experiences produced identities associated with land, the sense of place is symbolic and images from nature are often repeated as formulation of identity and Livesay uses Nature as female identity. Livesay feels that nature is a gift to human beings and we must love it for its physical existence the most. She likewise feels that man and woman are biologically different but they need each other therefore ignoring space and respect for each other would be calamitous for both. There is need for personal autonomy and mutual relationship which would be the solution to this problem of human existence and conflict. She seems to be upholding Indian concept of development called “Mangalya” i.e. overall welfare, not only of individuals but all other lives around him. This is a way to lead a blissful life.

She takes it as her responsibility to express her views on the balance between the human world and nature, and poetry becomes a medium to present her views. One wonders that how at that young age also she could pen down this complex conflict and suggest a synthesis so lucidly and sincerely poems after poems. Not only *Green Pitcher* and *Signpost* but *Findings*, *Garden of Love* and *The Garden of Childhood* composed during this phase reflect the same craving and struggle. Being a woman she views the natural world with sympathy and recognizes the special position of woman in preserving the existence and suggests human beings to desist from destroying it. Livesay’s images are realistic, striking and original. The images and their emotional appeal, descriptions of landscape and their evocative quality render her the place of one of the foremost poets who articulates about the reality of the world around. She is an optimist and a

revolutionary who takes the responsibility to make this world a better place without any hypocrisies or narrow outlook.

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