



ENSCONCING OF SELF –RELIANCE OF SISTERS IN JANE SMILEY’S NOVEL ‘A THOUSAND ACRES’: A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

A Thousand Acres plot places the play of *Lear* in the farmlands of Iowa and portrays from the point of Goneril. Ginny's suppression and her living situation is a vicious circle created by Larry and it prevents her from expressing her feelings. Father decides to divide his large and flourished farm which built through his hard work and inexorable acquisitiveness among his three daughters. Caroline, who has moved to the city and become a lawyer, and she resists and refused the arrangement like Shakespeare's Cordelia, solicitous natured daughter, refuses to over praise her father to get his estate. The father is no longer hold sway of the decision making about the farm and he begins acting desultorily. There is a scene in which Larry goes out to wander and lost in a terrible squall. The relationship disputes between the inheriting sisters, each of them bears a deep scar. Rose has undergone treatment for breast cancer and Ginny has been infertile in terms to carry a baby. Caroline becomes outright antagonistic to her sisters and takes her father's side. Then things go from ill at ease to terrorizing. Despite *A Thousand Acres* clearly dramatizes Jane Smiley's grave concern about American culture and American agriculture practices it explains scarring, agonizing and loss.

Key words: American Midwestern, Feminism, Sisterhood, Farmland, Infertility, Patriarchy, Sexual abuse

Introduction

The twentieth Century American women novelists have played a highly expressive role and made a distinguishable contribution to literature. They play up human experience and human concerns in the contemporary American world. Writers like Edith Wharton, Zora Neale Hurston, Flannery O'Conor, Toni Morrison, Virginia Woolf, Joyce Carol Oates, Alice Walker, Jane Smiley and Sandra Cisneros have shown different facets of American life which was in the making in their

works. These writers are transparent in their intentions and objectives and they directly showed interest in the social values of life. Some novelists have applied psychological approaches of human issues in a realistic perspective and drawn from theology and philosophy. These successful American women writers focus on the themes of apple pie families and family monomania, contestable combining motherhood and careers in writing, wherefores for divorce and personal attributes, suffering in the patriarchal world, sexual

exploitation, clockwork depression and pernicious acts, isolation and societal expectations of femininity imprecise with their essential personalities.

This paper presents the theme of Patriarchy which is the primary obstacle to women's progress in all aspects even in developed country U.S.A. And the novelist presents American Midwestern culture and its problems. Though differences in levels of domination man wishes that woman always should be submissive to him. The nature of this control may vary. Patriarchy frequently creates obstacles for women to go forward in society not only in developing countries but also in developed countries. Patriarchal institutions and social relations are responsible for the inferior status of women. The absolute priority is given only to men in male dominated society and to some extent limits women's human rights and refers to the male domination not only in public but also in private spheres. Modern novelist Jane Smiley narrates and exposes the incest under the disguise of father discipline in *A Thousand Acres* through the characters of Ginny and Rose.

Jane Smiley was born in Los Angeles, California and brought up in Webster Groves, Missouri. She had completed an MA in 1975 and PhD in 1978 from the University of Iowa. When she was working toward her doctorate, she spent a year studying in Iceland as a Fulbright Scholar. She worked as a Professor of English at Iowa State University from 1981 to 1996. Smiley is the author of fourteen novels. Her debut novel, *Barn Blind* was published in 1980, and won O. Henry award for her short story "Lily" in 1985. For *A Thousand Acres*, Smiley received Pulitzer Prize in 1992, which is a story based on William Shakespeare's *King Lear*

Smiley is inspired by feminist writers like Woolf, Jane Austin, Flannery O' Connor, George Eliot and Tony Morrison. She delineated her ideas and structuralism in society and the consequences in the course of time in her works. Smiley says in an interview, "I think I am essentially a realist writer. And with an interest in social constructions not necessarily social issues. More the 'how does it work of the world' that we see around us. I am

interested in those things". (Identity Theory, A Literary website: June 18, 2003)

When writing a novel Jane Smiley is impelled by surroundings which give more interest than creating an imaginary world with self expression. To *The New York Times magazine*, she says, "Every novel I've written has been about finding stuff out. I'm motivated much more by curiosity than by self-expression, and if that's your goal, then maybe the process is more of a pleasure." (Charles McGrath: Oct. 6, 2014). Smiley's novels present the world through quite alienate perspectives and understanding people experiences and reflections. The primary purpose of reading a novel is enhancing knowledge about the contemporary society and its culture. Richard Chase states about the novels of Smiley, " The events that occur will usually plausible, given the circumstances....Smiley introduces it only into such scenes as have been already prepared to vouch for it". (Richard Chase: p. 21).

Smiley deals the multiple themes in her works like contemporary political, social issues along with her personal life. As a woman, Smiley has not written merely on the domestic life of women like Jane Austin writings on love, marriage and give and take life or George Eliot who writes only regional novels. She is not a revolutionary writer like Virginia Woolf whose works are completely resisting and loathsome the male domination in the society. As Native American she has dealt American dreams, seductions as well as the inner life of herself. She focuses on the progression of women leading life with unpromising society.

Smiley's '*A Thousand Acres*' is a moral weight and technical accomplishment which won the Pulitzer prize in 1992. There are no modern tricks and no fiery gratifications and her narration is austere. This novel is based on Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Lawrence Cook is compared with Lear character and Cook may be called as the twentieth century Lear, Caroline as the contemporary Cordelia, Ginny and Rose are superseded as Goneril and Regan, and Harold Clark somewhat affiliated to Gloucester. The theme of the novel undergoes through the characters and situations. Smiley

formulates the characters and theme very carefully without knowing to the readers that the novel is going on the materialize structure of *King Lear* and it is a modern American treatment of *Lear*. The incidents dramatize the grave concern about American culture and American agricultural operation. *A Thousand Acres* is a southern Gothic novel plays through the eyes of an impeccable woman who slowly comes to see the deleterious people in the world. The novel is well written and performs like an opera. The child abuse is one of the America's most abused themes of the time. The first half of the novel is somewhat a set of interlocking short stories than a novel. The second half of the plot feels like the epic novel that it aims to be.

Critics have described *A Thousand Acres* as a modern interpretation of William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Despite the connections between *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres* should not be dismissed. Smiley has created a novel that it is more than just a story about a modern kingdom, sister's face off and disinheritance. By reproducing an old English play Smiley has created a twentieth century novel that not only deals with family bonds but also modern rural life, Mid-western culture, American life, caducity, madness, incest, diseases, appearances and so on. Smiley has created an opaque and forceful story about three sisters and their living conditions at a time that synchronize with the end of second wave feminism and their complicated relationship to each other. The plot of the novel was placed in the late 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. It was the period of change when feminist agitators fought for equal rights and meditated the importance of powerful sisterhood. This revolutionary period spurred many women writers across the U.S.A. Unfortunately most of these improvements were implemented and truncated only in the urban parts of the U.S.A.

Smiley sets about the novel by spell the farm out through the eyes of Ginny who is a protagonist. This perspective draws attention to the castaway of the farm from the rest of the country. This kind of mechanistic people looking at the farm as the center of the earth and they have formed the farming community society within the American society,

"No globe or map fully convinced me that Zebulon County was not the center of universe...because the intersection was on this tiny rise, you could see our buildings, a mile distant, at the southern edge of the farm".(p.3)

The setting of the novel is an isolated Midwestern landscape as well as the cultural isolation from the rest of the society and revolves around the farming. The Cook family has possessed the biggest farmland in the Zebulan County and the farmland is only the world of narrator throughout her life. She has no savvy of anything outside the farming community and keeps up to think the farm as the "centre of the universe" (P.3). The narrator is completely shackled and imprisoned by the wall of 'patriarchy'. Of course, man has created the term 'women's subordination' is the only safest feature for women protection. Women's subordination means the position of women is always inferior to men. The feeling of demarcation, impuissant and experience of limited self esteem contribute to the subordination of women. The author Gerda Lerner said, "The use of the phrase subordination of women instead of the word "oppression" has distinct advantages. Subordination does not have the connotation of evil intent on the part of the dominant. (Lerner, p.234) The subordination of women is a central feature of *A Thousand Acres*. The feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir's argues that women are reduced to the status of the second sex or inferior class. Kate Millet's theory of subordination argues that the class of women is a dependent sex under patriarchal domination.

Patriarchy is a system of woman is kept subordinate in multiple of ways. In *A Thousand Acres* Ginny and Rose are living under the canopy of the patriarchy. In this novel the progress is personified in the youngest sister Caroline only lives away from the farmland and makes a life of her own as a successful lawyer the city. It is the variation between the modern working women in urban America and the housewives who belong to farming communities in rural. By this disparity the novel substantiate that feminism has not been as successful. Among the three sisters, Ginny lives up to the role of a housewife and loving daughter to

Larry. Ginny focuses completely on the maintenance of a strong family listen to the men's wishes and acts and also tries to persuade her sisters to listen with the men's rules. When the farm crisis was arisen in the eighties, Larry Cook, the leading farmer in Zebulon County, Iowa, unexpectedly announces plan to retire from farming. He wishes to divide his assets among his three daughters but Caroline is only refuses her father plan. When Caroline refuses Ginny tries to keep the peace in the family: "come along, be around...you can do that...this is important...we have to receive it in the right spirit. Just do this once. Last time, I promise" (p.35). Despite unwillingness Ginny has shown obedience at her father words as it is continuing from childhood. She remembrance and said her earlier days with Larry, " If I had to speak to him, I addressed his overalls, his shirt, his boots....If he kissed me, I endured it , offered a little hug in return. (p.19).

In a cognate plot, Larry's friendly neighborhood Harold Clark has two sons Loren, impassive and faithful, who is always helped to his father on the farm and Jess who has deserted from the war of Vietnam. The main paramount action starts at a party celebrating Harold purchase a new harvester tractor. Harold and Larry not only best friends but also competitors. As Carlson states the rivalry among farmers in rural, "And there is the rivalry of farmer against farmer, the competition for success for the crops, with machinery and with the bank—(Carlson, p.12) Larry has announced at a local pig roast of his retirement and his plan to form a corporation. This event pulverizes the rock- solid of the Cook family like the *Lear* saga. Ginny discloses that there are problems within her marriage knot and within that of her sister Rose. Pete, husband of Rose, is a go- getting, tempestuous and sometimes violent and he once broke her arm. Cancer affected body of Rose is a symbol of her troubled personal life. Ginny has undergone five miscarriages but her husband Ty knows only three. Though Ty insists that they stop trying to conceive Ginny has refused and keeping her further attempts secretly. Ginny's secrecy is shown by the author that she misses the autonomy. As Ginny says, "One of the many benefits of this private project, thought at that time, was that it showed me a whole secret world". (p.26)

Ironically, Ginny finds deception vitalizing and her excitement indicates credulous. Despite she is the oldest of the three sisters she is the most credence and the most immature. She maintains her innocence only for sleek family relationships. When she opens herself to the exciting possibilities of duplicity there will be opened to ugly memories which are long suppressed. If she rolls up which is seemingly sedate, harmonious surface and unforgettable the shocking depths will stare from her heart. When Cook mental health exacerbates rapidly he decides to reclaim his gift. Ginny confronts that her father is on-again, off-again behavior, his drinking and his persistent fury. Ginny realizes laggardly that Rose and she have been shaped by Larry's will and by his sexual abuse. To suppress her father's abuse in a series of affairs, Rose turns to Jess, who has already an affair with Ginny. Knowing fully the affair between Ginny and Jess, Rose regards her behavior as her right: "He loves me, Ginny. You don't think I would let him have anything private with my own sister..."(P.303) Ginny comes to believe that Rose and herself were 'shaped' in another dreadful passion in the name of Jess Clark. Jess's long absence from his land, maintains Ginny's miscarriages and Rose's cancer are inferences of local farming practices. Even the land itself is a main character. Jess and Ginny strongly believe that fertilizer run off has drained into the aquifer. And the well water, what they drink is responsible for their physical illness. Father's abuse and Ginny mother's reserve are responsible for their psychological problems.

Ginny demystifies her strange relationship with her father as: "my job remained what it always had been—to give him what he asked of me..... to try to find out what would please him" (p.123) McDermott points out that the Ginny character in her article "Memory, Nostalgia and Gender in A Thousand Acres." "Inability to explain her 'annoyance' has left her stuck in a cycle of repetition, where her father continues to exert dominance over her life". Ginny needs to be gladden everybody and maintaining some peace in the home, in contrary, her father created farm world which is a tumultuous world. This kind of sophisticated behavior is something described by

Millett in her book 'Second Sex'. Millett explains such kind of unjust conditions of patriarchy has "an effect upon the psychology of both sexes" (Kate Millet, p.54) Millet's explanation of the character Ginny's supple behavior and her primal efforts to keep the family together. Even though Ginny sometimes is aware of her inferior position in the family she still obliges of her subordinate position. So, Ginny denies the years of sexual abuse and has been exposed to by her father. Ginny constantly forgives anything the men what they do, "I told myself that all this was okay with me, that a life could be made of this proximity" (p.184). She continues to make excuses for the men's fallacious and obnoxious behavior and her intention is "nobody got hurt..." (p.161)

Besides by subduing her own memories and opinions Ginny has destroyed her own life. McDermott points out how that Ginny smoldered painful memories, "Ginny's situation in the novel is an interesting one, because unlike her sister Rose she has forgotten, or repressed, the memories of her father's abuse". In other words, Ginny has suppressed her own memories of the sexual abuse and fails to stand up against patriarchal society. Ginny does anything to flinch from the truth because it is pleonastic, abominable to acknowledge. Ginny needs support from her sisters because she has no choice but to brazen the reality out her situation. In that way she maintains somewhat control in the family or else there would be uncontrollable environment.

Rose character is portrayed complete opposite to Ginny and a rebel among the sisters. She demands some sort of avenging for the way the men have treated. Rose expects the same respect as the men and she cogently believes that Ginny and she should insurgent against the men's domination. She is well cognizant of the men's oppressive behavior. In Millett terms about Rose, "recognize and admit their circumstances" (Millet, p.56). Throughout the novel Rose tries to communicate Ginny and make her realize the truth about their situation: "jeez, Ginny, don't you get tired of seeing his side? Don't you just long to stand back and tell the truth about him for once? (P.161). Ginny understands her strong

opinions but they have societal responsibilities where there is nobody to help.

Still and all, Rose denies surrendering into a life of submission and she tries to construe to Ginny that they cannot give in to the men's violence. Distinct from Ginny, Rose does everything to complicate the men's lives. Rose's refusal can be noticed when she talks about how she has taken every possible opportunity to evoke her father. Rose realizes that their father in order to destroy the power balance in the family and to be free to live their own lives. Rose needs her sisters and in particular Ginny in order to break free from their oppressive living situation. Particularly, Rose seeks help from Ginny because that they are able to fight against father only with unite. Of course she has tried several times before but not succeeded and knows that she herself cannot stand up to the men of the family.

Caroline is the youngest of the sisters and she has only had the opportunity to leave the farm and from father. The unfortunate death of her mother was a crucial incident in relation to Caroline's life in order to construct her better future and career. The two older sisters have raised Caroline from the age of six so that she has been given opportunities that Ginny and Rose never had. At the time of their mother's death, Caroline's sisters only twelve and fourteen and they decide to give freedom to Caroline and seek better life. In the words of Ginny, "We agreed that she was going to have a normal high school life, with dates and dances and activities after school..."(p.64). Divergently, Caroline has been brought up when compared to her sisters and she has the green light to do more things than her sisters. Ginny and Rose scrupulously made these sacrifices in order to protect Caroline. As a result of these sacrifices, Caroline is the one who has escaped sexual abuse from father. Comprehensively, Caroline's life is antithetical of her sisters' lives back at the farm. Caroline lives in the big city as a lawyer far away from the farm and lives the life of a modern self governing woman but has no interest to change her sisters' moribund living conditions.

Caroline has neither concern in the farm nor intends to return to the farm and to fulfill all the responsibilities that come with it. She visits home every third weekend. After each visiting she has the possibility to return to the city where she can retaining to live her own life as an independent woman. She suddenly disappears and then returns as if she has never left home. Caroline's attitude towards her father is a strange alternation between fidelity and beguiling. Caroline's behavior is changed between a typical working woman and an empathetic daughter. 'Caroline runs away from her family' is an evident when Ginny thinks about Caroline's bizarre manner towards her family. Caroline is satisfied with her life in the city where she can take her own decisions and not be controlled by her father. Ginny and Rose sometimes find it difficult to understand each other yet they have continued to work together as a team. Rose's liaison with Ginny's lover is the decisive action regarding their future as sisters. If Rose doesn't commit they will have continued to view each other as true sisters. The failure of maintaining sisterhood can be noticed at the end of the novel with Ginny's depletion of loyalty towards her sister. When Ginny has heard the news about Rose's affair with Jess she wants to flee from the idea of a sisterhood and the responsibilities that come with it but accepts of her ineluctable bond to Rose.

When Jess lives away from Ginny, she receives a word that Larry with the help from Caroline is suing them to reclaim his property. Rose and Ginny, along with their husbands hire a lawyer, Jean Cartier. Meanwhile, Ty, husband of Ginny, discovers that Ginny had a miscarriage that she hid from him and a distance grows between them. Ginny is jealous the affair of Rose with Jess and secretly she prepares a jar of poisoned hemlock sausages, which she gives to Rose in the hope of that she will die but the plan is failed. Larry was failed for claiming land and fails to convince the judge that his case has any such grounds. The judgment is at the side of Rose and Ginny and the land is owned to these two sisters. After hearing the news, Ginny is afraid that her family bonds would be breached forever. Then, Ginny informed to Ty that she's leaving and moves to Saint Paul, where she

takes up a job as a waitress with determination that she never come back to home.

Many years later, Ty visits Ginny and explains that the farm has fallen into debt. Ty has asked Ginny for a divorce but she never agrees to it univocally. Ginny learns that Rose health is deteriorating and will die of cancer soon. Rose's has become the unique owner of Larry's farmland. After the death of Rose, the property goes to Caroline and Ginny. Now, two sisters reunite in their father's old house and Ginny explains to Caroline how Larry used to rape her and Rose. Ginny takes care of Linda and Pamela, who are daughters of Rose, after their mother's death but continues to feel a visceral sense of lonesome.

In this novel, all the characters maintain pretence for public image but underneath their personalities are very different. Appearance is just a mask for truth. When consider the character Harold Clark, he is not only Larry's neighbor but also rival. Clark pretends as an old eccentric but he is radically sharp and purposeful. Clark manipulates Larry's public image in order to get benefit for himself. Harold's son, Jess Clark represents an example between appearance and reality. The characters have achieved a kind of manipulation for freedom. Especially, women characters are forced to accord a certain public image instead of crafting. Their public image doesn't offer freedom but has become burden to them. Ginny and Rose also have an atrocious secret that Larry raped them repeatedly when they were teenagers. Ginny and Rose remain silent about their father's horrible crimes. Of course, the sisters are afraid of challenging Larry's image as a pillar of the community. Smiley scrambles among her characters appearances and their true natures. Some of the characters are succeeded in manipulating their own appearances. All the women characters are victimized in the name of image because they are internalize by the image, in a result, men characters have assessed upon them.

Smiley describes the land as a conceit of the female body. The land is existed only for men to regulate, possess and for exploit. In every situation Larry forcefully spreads himself over a body and claiming his power, aggrandizing and ownership of

land. In Larry's view, daughters are like a farmland and feminine bodies for him to assert his power over. The land-body metaphor works in an equivalent way. Both body and land have a hidden proportion for Larry. Water imagery in the novel offers a vital index of loss in nature and comparing with characters consciousness. The crowded concrete pool actuates memories for Ginny when Rose and she spent languid hours in a farm pond in summer as young girls. Ginny returns to search for that old refuge but failed. Smiley uses animal metaphors which generate a sense of ambience shared with non human animals that demand broader compassion. For instance, Ginny helps her husband castrate new born pigs. That night she has dreamt that the experience of exciting intercourse with her husband. This amorous transient pleasure has given to Ginny's fruitless sex life.

Smiley has given a response to Shakespeare is a Mid Westerner's response in an interview: "I know that in plays the characters really have to talk. But I still do have this resistance to the characters talking all the time." (The Guardian, Robert Mc Crum). This novel states that the domestic violence, social alienation and the liberation from painful memories. The locations of significant traumatic events are existed within the home. Smiley poses that the structure and values of the traditional male- centered families. Women identity is threatened by constrained family relationships in the name of reverence and the phrase of women subordination. *A Thousand Acres* has the kaleidoscopic quality of the greatest art. The reader may think that the novel is explaining about people who have been shaped by the land only. This would be a natural theme for a novel about rural America and the author is silver-tongued in her descriptions of the earth and the way it has divided and been divided.

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