

**The Movement of Ecofeminism as manifested in *A Thousand Acres*  
by Jane Smiley**

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by Jane Smiley**

This paper addresses itself to the movement of ecofeminism; it investigates how an ecofeminist approach stands as a connection between the issues of women and the issues of nature, particularly the abuse falling on both entities. With a focus on the philosophies of dualism and

rationalism as discussed by Val Plumwood, this study aims, among other objectives, to draw attention to the acclaimed similarities between women and nature. Plumwood defines dualism as “an alienated form of differentiation, in which power construes and constructs difference in terms of an inferior and alien realm”.<sup>1</sup> While rationalism is “a doctrine about reason, its place at the apex of human life.”<sup>2</sup> By drawing on dualism and rationalism, Plumwood attempts a critique that helps raise the awareness about the consequences of associating the philosophic conceptions of dualism and rationalism to the male figure. An ecofeminist approach is hence applied in this paper to a novel entitled *A Thousand Acres* (1991) by Jane Smiley with the purpose of highlighting the fact that man’s recognition of the worth of women and land synonymously would help achieve justice and avoid environmental crisis. This paper highlights the ecofeminist approach that men should seriously reconsider the roles of women and nature in their lives; all entities (men, women, and nature) should be viewed as inseparable from one another. Throughout the paper, the researcher provides an analysis of the novel and its major characters in order to demonstrate the link between women and nature and to underscore the amount of aggression that both nature and women have experienced in the novel as a result of men’s arrogance. Moreover, the paper stresses the ecofeminist theme of equality among all beings which is needed for a more harmonious ecological balance. For this to be achieved, according to Plumwood, certain male-restricted conceptions like dualism and false rationalism should be totally rejected. The term “human”, for Plumwood, should not be used to refer to men only; women are also part of humanity. In addition, full humanity cannot be achieved without this harmony with

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<sup>1</sup> *Ecofeminism and The Mastery of Nature* 42

<sup>2</sup> *Environmental Culture* 18

nature. Nature constitutes a vital part in human life as it encompasses rich resources that should be taken good care of.

### **Ecocriticism: The Core of Environmental and Ecofeminist Studies**

Ecocriticism is the study of nature as displayed in a given literary text. It is the umbrella term that unites environmental and feminist studies as an approach for the assessment of literary texts. As defined by Gerdorf and Mayer, ecocriticism “focuses on real and imagined boundaries between nature and culture without denying nature’s physical existence.”<sup>٣</sup> Thus, ecocriticism takes nature and the ‘physical’ environment as the core of its study of literature. Not only is ecocriticism connected to ecology and the environment, but also it is associated with philosophy and politics in a way that develops other critical movements such as Environmentalism and Ecofeminism.

As for Environmentalism, it constitutes a good part of ecocriticism. It is also known as the green movement that calls for the protection and reservation of the natural environment. It discusses the causes of the environmental problems prevailing in the world today, like population growth, Ozone depletion, deforestation, and pollution...etc. (1994), Luke Martell defines the environmental movement as a new social movement that has developed since the 1960s. He states that this new movement is characterized by autonomy and the defence of the rights of the civil society that are represented in reforming social consciousness and life style.<sup>٤</sup>

Environmentalists are against the claim that humans inherit the feeling of separation from nature that is why humans tend to manipulate nature by every possible means. In fact, people's minds are affected by materialism and industrialization, and that in turn, allows them to regard

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<sup>٣</sup> “Nature in literary and cultural studies” 9

<sup>٤</sup> P.112

themselves as having tremendous technological powers that cause many environmental problems. That is to say the natural resources, consumed by humans, are used for materialistic, industrial, and economical objectives without any consideration for the environment around. Consequently, this leads to feelings of disconnection from nature. As Pepper states, "our spiritual, emotional, artistic, loving and cooperative sides are neglected for this cold materialism, which overplays the role of rationality, 'hard facts' and calculating economic utilitarianism in deciding what is good or bad."<sup>°</sup> Therefore, people trust the role of technology and rationality in possessing power and authority over nature.

The notion that regards humans as superior to nature is known as "Anthropocentrism." Mark J. Smith, in his book *Ecologism* (1998), discusses anthropocentrism stating that, "[n]ature is only valuable in so far as human beings have a use for it. Moreover, it is common to think of natural things as having a value only if human beings have transformed them into useful products."<sup>¶</sup> This kind of approach may further be known as "an instrumental view."<sup>∇</sup> of nature, for it considers the value of nature in accordance with human needs. Furthermore, the anthropocentric concept is associated with the conception of 'technocentrism' or as Smith calls it "technofix"(4);<sup>^</sup> i.e. the belief that technology can fix any environmental problem in the society through the human mind and scientific knowledge. The core of both approaches is to "ensure human mastery over the natural world and that the natural [and the technological] things exist for the use and welfare of human beings."<sup>¶</sup>

### **The Movement of Ecofeminism**

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<sup>°</sup> P. 13-14

<sup>¶</sup> P. 4

<sup>∇</sup> P.4

<sup>^</sup> P.4

<sup>¶</sup> P. 1

Ecofeminism is the third movement in the feminist studies which emerged in the 1970s and early 1980s. Françoise d'Eaubonne was the first to introduce the term 'Ecofeminism' in 1984 in order to propose a direct connection between the oppression of women and the oppression of land. Ecofeminism stresses the fact that there is a link between human domination and the ecological crisis in western societies. It contributes to environmental studies on one hand, and to feminist studies on the other. The problem, according to ecofeminists, is not about human-centeredness as previously explained in the environmental context, but rather about male-centeredness, or in other words, 'androcentrism', (i.e. the belief that man should dominate all his surroundings including woman). Ecofeminist philosophers, such as Vandana Shiva, Ynesra king, and Sharon Doubiago believe that androcentrism, and not anthropocentrism, is the central problem for ecofeminism. For they assume that "androcentrism historically preceded other forms of domination, including that of nature by human being."<sup>11</sup> The androcentric approach is the oldest, since the oppression of women has been the longest over history. Thus, androcentrism comes first, then the concept of nature domination appears as a result. Slicer supposes that androcentrism has led to anthropocentrism, yet she asserts that both oppressions are inextricably connected and inseparable. In order to understand one, the other should be understood too.<sup>11</sup>

Val Plumwood hence stresses the importance of two concepts that lie at the heart of ecofeminism; namely 'dualism' and 'rationalism' in the twin domination of nature and women. Dualism is a kind of difference which transcends categorization to an oppression based on a certain hierarchy. Therefore, "By means of dualism, the colonized are

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<sup>11</sup> Slicer 30

<sup>11</sup> P. 32

appropriated, into the selfhood and culture of the master, which forms their identity.”<sup>١٢</sup> It does not include nature and women only, but all the subordinated orders like people of color, the poor, the slave, and the animal. They are all treated as inferior and “subject to denied dependency.”<sup>١٣</sup> Dualism gives rise to the creation of the self and the other. Similarly, ecofeminist philosophers reject the dualistic view of entities. Men/women, culture/nature, mind/body dualisms are the reason behind forming a hierarchy in which the first entities like men, culture, mind are given priority over the second entities: women, nature, body, ...etc. Therefore, this dualistic trait is behind the logic of domination, which makes men’s exploitation of women and nature seem natural.

Along with the concept of ‘dualism’, ‘rationalism’ is another notion utilized against nature and women by Western patriarchal system, namely the concept of rationality. According to Plumwood, it seems to be a prize for the group possessing such quality; a rational individual is considered a complete model of a human being. On the other hand, the group lacking the concept of rationality is denigrated and excluded. For that reason, women are classified as irrational beings, while men are not. Thus, men are considered ideal human beings, Women, on the other hand, are “inferior, impoverished or imperfect human beings” because they lack the qualities of full human being like courage, freedom, rationality, and control. As a result, masculinity and humanity are convergent whereas femininity and humanity are divergent.<sup>14</sup>

According to the rationalist approach, reason is the supreme aspect that delineates the dominant class. It constructs power in which

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<sup>١٢</sup> P. 41

<sup>١٣</sup> P. 42

<sup>١٤</sup> Plumwood, “Women, Humanity and Nature” 212

Plumwood terms “hegemonic rationalist constructions of reason.”<sup>15</sup> In such constructions, reason subjugates the powerless beings, turning nature and other bodies into lesser and subdued objects. According to Plumwood, the myths, of women’s connection with emotion and her unstable nature, and man’s “invincible and heroic” spirit, are created. These myths link male with technological and economic reason that is thought to save the world from inevitable crisis. However, Plumwood believes that this “rationalist rationality is irrational”, for it is the consequence of the current ecological crisis and not the reason for survival.<sup>16</sup>

### **Ecofeminism and the Dichotomy of Men/Women and Nature in *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley**

Ecofeminism in *A Thousand Acres* shows itself in the notion of the abuse of women and land as a major theme . The novel displays a patriarchal society where women and land are controlled by the male figure. The female figures undergo profound destructive experiences that add to their desperate search for love, compassion, care, and freedom. Similarly, the land, that represents the heart of Zebulon County, is subjected to mal-practices by the male figures, which not only destroys its pure and organic nature, but also affects the female characters as well.

The novel's setting is in Iowa, Zebulon County. It is a thousand acres belonging to Larry Cook who has three daughters: Ginny, Rose, and Caroline. It starts with Cook’s decision to retire and incorporate his farm, which he has hardly been working on and cultivating for years, to his three daughters. Ginny and Rose who are always dutiful to their father agree to his decision, while Caroline refuses, believing that his decision is

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<sup>15</sup> P. 19

<sup>16</sup> P. 18-19

not a good idea. This definitely infuriates her father and makes him cut her out of his will and refuses to talk to or about her either. In ecofeminism, Ginny, Rose, Caroline and the land are the property of Cook, Ginny and Rose do not dare to reject their father's decision because they are powerless beings dependent on Larry Cook, while Caroline represents a model of a liberated woman who has a will to change and to state her opinion without fearing anyone, and this is what ecofeminists call for. After this agreement, Larry Cook insists on exercising his authority on his daughters. His abrupt decision brings his downfall.

According to the assumptions of ecofeminism, Women are the closest to nature as they are related to the domestic life on the farm. They do the washing up, cook the food, clean the house, and take care of the male figure. On the other hand, men (represented by Larry Cook, Ty, Pete, and Jess) are related to productivity and farming. Moreover, the dichotomy of men versus women in *A Thousand Acres* places women not just as a background for the male figure, but as tools used by males to achieve their needs and desires. At the same time, the female figure is degraded due to her dependent economic status. Being dependent on the male figure, who is the source of financial support, causes more oppression for the female. Every male figure in the novel denies his dependence on the female figures and neglects their existence. This dualistic logic of oppression of women in the novel applies to two main female characters, Ginny and Rose.

The relationships that Ginny and Rose have with their father and their husbands are significant as they best demonstrate the female subjugation by the male figure, and the hierarchal construction in a patriarchal society caused by dualism. They also elucidate how false

rationalism associated with the male figures could cause the torment of both women and land.

Ginny's identity and decisions fade away as compared to the identity and the decisions of her father and her husband. Ginny, the narrator and the protagonist, is the oldest, obedient daughter and a dutiful housewife. Throughout the novel, she is the person who tries to please everyone else, especially her father, yet her efforts to maintain a strong connected family fail her at the end. Being a female in a society that believes in male power, authority and values enlarge Ginny's feelings of her lower status among her family. She accepts, and submits to male orders, unquestionably agreeing with her father and her husband in everything without paying attention to her own excluded self. She is unable to choose what suits her. For instance, her marriage to Ty was based on her father's will. Ginny "is forced to silence her individual voice so that her own subjectivity becomes deformed and detached."<sup>17</sup> She does not try to change her situation. For instance, in spite of her disagreement to the incorporation agreement initiated by her father, and just to please her husband Ty, who is enthusiastic about this agreement as he wants to increase the hog operation in the farm, she tried to "sound agreeable" and said that "it [was] a good idea."<sup>18</sup>

According to ecofeminism and dualism, the master model suppresses the other so as to deny her existence, and conceal the master's reliance on her. Hence, in *A Thousand Acres*, the satisfaction of the father and the husband is in itself a goal to be fulfilled by Ginny, in spite of her relationship with them which lacks affection and nurturing. She sees Larry Cook only as a cruel father and farmer. She said "when I went to first grade and the other children said that their fathers were farmers, I

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<sup>17</sup> Lin 98

<sup>18</sup> *A Thousand Acres* 19

simply didn't believe them. I agreed in order to be polite, but in my heart I knew that those men were impostors, as farmers and as fathers, too.”<sup>19</sup> Ying Chiao Lin in his article “Father's Farmland, Daughter's Inner Land” (2003) explains that Ginny places her father in a God-like state. He is the one who gives orders and she, as well as everybody else in the family, should follow his rules.<sup>20</sup>

Ginny has been subject to her father's oppression since she was a child. Her father once beat her because she lost one of her shoes at school, Ginny says “he grabbed my arm and pulled me over to the doorway, leaned me up against it, and strapped me with his belt until I fell down”.<sup>21</sup> She said that her mother “betrayed” her by asking about that shoe, and her father started to beat her then. Larry cook condemns Ginny's mother when she tried to defend her daughter saying “you on her side?”, and “there's only one side here, and you'd better be on it.”<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Ginny suffers from not having friends- her friend is her sister Rose – that's because her father always tells her that her role is to be at home. She knows that she is inferior and that causes her to be objectified. The two situations reveal the amount of violence Ginny has been subject to and much proves the androcentric conceptions discussed by the ecofeminists. In other words, the female figure, like Ginny and her mother are powerless creatures; their side is excluded and subordinated by the master's side.

Ginny's voice and opinions are always silenced; she says “Of course it was silly to talk about ‘my point of view.’ When my father asserted his point of view, mine vanished. Not even I could remember

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<sup>19</sup> P. 19

<sup>20</sup> P. 98

<sup>21</sup> *A Thousand Acres* 182

<sup>22</sup> P. 182-183

it.”<sup>23</sup> Ginny considers expressing her own point of view as silliness and even if her father’s opinion is not right, she dares not to state hers. Her way of talking to her father clarifies her subjugation and awe as she uses mollifying statements such as “I try to show respect, Daddy”, “we do our best”, and “we’ll try harder, Daddy.”<sup>24</sup> At the same time, her comment on Caroline’s hesitation on the incorporation agreement displays her profound need to be treated as a recognized self, rather than a neglected other. Caroline expresses her opinion freely saying “I don’t know;”<sup>25</sup> her father takes her comment as a sign of rejection to his decision which raises his anger. Ginny believes that saying “I don’t know” is not turning her father down and that Caroline’s comment is not a mistake because she speaks as “a woman rather than a daughter. That was something I realized in a flash, that Rose and I were pretty careful never to do.”<sup>26</sup> Consequently, she knows that her role as a daughter is blind obedience, and she knows that her voice as a woman will not be listened to and will be backgrounded.

Not only does Ginny suffer from the biased relationship with her father, but also endures the unpleasant relationship with her husband Ty. From the very beginning it is not her decision to marry Ty. She gets married to him only because “he attracted Daddy.”<sup>27</sup> Ty has always been “patient, understanding, careful, willing to act as the bulwark to [her] father.”<sup>28</sup> Yet Ginny ‘pretends’ to be happy in this relationship. Ginny has five miscarriages of which Ty knows only three. After having three miscarriages, Ty tells her not to attempt to get pregnant again, however

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<sup>23</sup> P. 176

<sup>24</sup> P. 175-176

<sup>25</sup> P. 19

<sup>26</sup> P. 21

<sup>27</sup> P. 262

<sup>28</sup> P. 155

Ginny wants to have children so much that she becomes obsessed with the idea and she calls it a “private project.”<sup>29</sup> Ginny endeavors to get pregnant secretly and has another two miscarriages that her husband knows nothing about. Preserving the secret trials of pregnancy has benefited Ginny in having “a whole secret world, a way to have two lives, to be two selves. [she] felt larger and more various than [she] had in years, full of unknowns.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, Ginny feels that she is assorted and has something to maintain in her plain life.

As a result of Ginny’s traumatic oppression, she reacts negatively by having a secret liaison with Jess Clark, the son of Harold Clark and their neighbor. Ginny, in this relationship, attempts to act in a free will as it is the only thing that she is not compelled to do. Another reaction to her trauma is losing the memory of her father’s abuse. Ginny’s father has molested her and her sister Rose after their mother’s death, but Ginny remembers nothing about it. In “Memory, Nostalgia, and Gender in *A Thousand Acres*”, Sinead Mc Dermott interpreted Ginny’s reaction by saying “remembering can be a form of resistance to the erasure of women's lives and of domestic histories of abuse within patriarchal discourse.”<sup>31</sup> Therefore, Ginny prefers not to remember her father’s abuse so as not to resist the patriarchal entrapment that affects her. Ginny says “it was such a lovely word... ‘freedom’ a word that always startled and refreshed me when I heard it. I didn’t think of it as having much to do with my life,”<sup>32</sup> thus when Ginny hears such a word, she is moved as she feels that she will never be free in her life.

Rose is another main character who is a victim of androcentrism or male violence and oppression. She is married to Pete, and a mother of

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<sup>29</sup> P. 26

<sup>30</sup> P. 26

<sup>31</sup> P. 394

<sup>32</sup> *A Thousand Acres* 109

two daughters Pammy and Linda. Similar to Ginny, Rose suffers from male abuse first by her father and then by her husband. Nevertheless, the character of Rose can be viewed as a rebellious one. Rose, though not able to take an action against her father, teases her father from time to time. Unlike Ginny, she treats him in an appalling and provocative way, she always has a reply to his talks, and she is never afraid of him. Rose never forgets her father's molestation of her and Ginny after their mother's death. Moreover, she is the one who reminds Ginny of his abuse. Rose comprehends pretty well that she and Ginny are nothing more than instruments existing to please their father; she says "we were just his, to do with as he pleased, like the pond or the house or the hogs or the crops."<sup>33</sup>

Rose's suppressed paternal experience turns to deep hatred towards her father. She was seduced by her father at the age of thirteen; she consented as she was following 'his' rules. She says "I thought it was okay...since he was the rule maker. He didn't rape me, Ginny. He seduced me. He said it was okay, that it was good to please him, that he needed it, that I was special. He said he loved me."<sup>34</sup> On commenting on Rose's behavior, Lin says that Rose not only welcomes the patriarchal and sexual domination, but also believes her father's lies.<sup>35</sup> Rose, therefore, exerts efforts to keep her daughters away from their grandfather. She sends her two daughters to a boarding school and she tells them not to open the door to their grandfather if they are alone at home. Even her marriage to Pete lasts for the sake of her daughters as she knows that "if [Larry] Daddy did anything to them, Pete would kill him.

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<sup>33</sup> P. 191

<sup>34</sup> P. 190

<sup>35</sup> P. 102

That's partly why [she] stay[s] married to him."<sup>36</sup> Her marriage is merely a means for resisting the male abuse of her daughters by her father. Despite being unhappy with Pete, Rose seems to utilize his male power as a protective measure against more harmful forms of male power.

Throughout the novel, Rose attempts to stand up against male's violence but she cannot. Rose has a recurring nightmare that stands as a symbol of her weakness. She dreams of "grabbing things that hurt [her], like that straight razor Daddy used to have, or a jar of poison that spills on [her] hands. I know I shouldn't, and I watch myself, but I can't resist."<sup>37</sup> Rose's self-harm in her dream reflects her inner suffering, and the straight razor can be a symbol of her father's irrepressible molestation to her that cuts her body into pieces. She recognizes her lower side in life and that she is powerless and unable to get out of male domination. However, Rose's way to resist and her disgust from her father is uncovered in her way of talking to or about him. She all the time calls her father crazy, and she is annoyed of Ginny's defense of her dad, "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? He's dangerous!" When her father was caught by the cops drunk while driving, Rose wished he had been put in jail, calling his release "a pure luck."<sup>38</sup> Rose knows that her father is vicious and brutal.

Pete is another source of oppression for Rose. Not only is Pete abusing her physically, but also psychologically. He used to beat her and he broke her arm during one of their fights. His insensitivity to her cancer and mastectomy increases the gap between them. For example, he asks Rose to put on her nightgown on after she receives her chemotherapy and

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<sup>36</sup> P. 191

<sup>37</sup> P. 62

<sup>38</sup> P. 150

comes from the hospital, not caring for her body weakness, a behavior that puts more physical and emotional stress to Rose's body and soul. Rose gets accustomed to his behaviors towards her as she knows that Pete and her father do not really get along. Having this relationship with Pete is another way through which Rose resists her father and even manages to annoy him.

As the novel's female characters are male-controlled, the ecological part is exploited and oppressed by a male figure as well, something which stresses the ecofeminist view of androcentrism. Nature is represented in the thousand acres in which Larry Cook owns. The idea of nature is set from the beginning of the novel with a description of the farm of Zebulon County as seen by Ginny. The history of the land went back to the time after the death of Ginny's grandmother, Edith. Larry's family was a poor one which purchased a marshland that after its drainage, revealed a very fertile soil. Afterwards, Ginny's grandfather, Cook, made two more purchases of land to expand the field. He used to save money for purchasing land and buying machinery. Then, Larry Cook bought the land of their neighbors the Ericsons, to reach a thousand acres.

Ginny draws the picture of the farm that is in seclusion from the country. She says that "no globe or map fully convinced me that Zebulon County was not the centre of the universe."<sup>39</sup> Jennifer Bolmefalk comments on the picture of the farm as drawn by Ginny saying that it is stereotypical to both women and the farm (for Ginny as well as other residents), the farm and the county is their whole earth. It is a small farming community in which anything which does not belong to farming is of less importance. Ginny lives all her life in such a secluded community, that is why it means the universe to her.<sup>40</sup> Cook's farm is the

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<sup>39</sup> P. 1

<sup>40</sup> P. 6

biggest land in the country as he has worked hard to expand it year after year until it became a thousand acres. Just like women, the farm land is another property that is dominated and abused by the father.

The *body* of nature is abused just like the abuse of the *body* of women in the novel. Nature in the novel forms a part of the patriarchal society. Although the farm appears fertile, yet, it is poisonous and this is because of the deadly practices like spraying the land with toxic chemicals and the excessive use of fertilizer by Larry Cook. This harm extends to his daughters and affects their bodies. Ginny is unable to give birth to a child as a result of the nitrates existing in the well water, and “the fertilizer run off drains into the aquifer.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, the water of the land well is not suitable and causes Ginny’s infertility. Similarly, Rose is battling breast cancer as a result of such toxins. Ginny realizes at the end that she is physically harmed by her father and that he is the reason behind her infertility. She says “my inheritance is with me, sitting in my chair. Lodged in every cell, along with my DNA, are molecules of topsoil and atrazine and paraquat and anhydrous ammonia and diesel fuel and plant dust, and also molecules of memory.”<sup>42</sup> She becomes aware of the toxic materials used in farming and that she and Rose suffer mal-agrarian methods implemented by the male figures on the land (as Ty and Pete used to help Larry on the farm). Although Ty does not abuse her directly, by abusing nature, he abused her as well. Hence, it is “the loop of poison”, as Ginny calls it, that runs into the soil and the plant, and then to “the drainage wells” and the “mysterious underground chemical sea” that runs into their faucet. Both women drink from it and are debilitated.

Therefore, the connection between the body of women and that of the land are well defined. Nature changes from lay or surface nature that

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<sup>41</sup> *A Thousand Acres* 165

<sup>42</sup> P. 369

is pure and untouched by human interference to a realist one full of deadly chemicals and pesticides. Similarly, Ginny and Rose change from chaste characters to experienced and impoverished ones. Both entities are affected by each other and suffer as a result of male egotism and superiority. It is Larry Cook who misuses and demoralizes both bodies; first by poisoning the land and applying chemicals, and second by abusing the bodies of his daughters. His impact on Ginny's body is severe, she psychologically becomes disassociated from her body and she said that she hates her body. In "Trauma and Corporeality in *A Thousand Acres*," Rodi Risberg comments on the Ginny's disassociation of her body saying that Ginny "has no conscious memory of being incest-abused as a teenager. Instead, her traumatic memory is lodged in her body, which is positioned as a witness testifying to what occurred twenty years earlier."<sup>43</sup> After denying her father's molestation, she admits it by saying "my father had lain with me on that bed."<sup>44</sup> Rose's disease, as well, signifies the anger in her body. She says "we're not going to be sad. We're going to be angry until we die. It's the only hope."<sup>45</sup> Therefore, although cancer eats her body and wanes her muscles, it can be read as a sign of her rebellion.

After confessing her father's rape, Ginny starts to have a new life and becomes independent. She starts working as a waiter and deserts Ty and her father. Although she attempts to have a life of her own, she never forgets the pain she has endured all her life. Lin states that Ginny's regained memory of rape shows "her desire for justice...that would be a consolation and a remedy for her pain and, by bringing closure, promote

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<sup>43</sup> "Trauma and Corporeality"

<sup>44</sup> *A Thousand Acres* 228

<sup>45</sup> P. 354

herself-reconstruction,<sup>46</sup> hence, Ginny's new life represents a recovery from male dominance and oppression.

The connection between women and nature exploitation is demonstrated in the use of language and symbolism in the novel. Smiley, through Ginny's narrative, employs language to serve her point of view and reveals a deep apprehension of the untamed anguish both of nature and women. For instance, the language used to picture the farm is so lively. The description of the fields as "flat and fertile, black, friable" pictures the land as fertile and fruitful, yet at the same time, it is weak and black.<sup>47</sup> This expresses a metaphor of the hidden damage and the secrets that will be uncovered. Moreover, she establishes a link between the feelings of women and the changes of nature. For instance, when Rose receives good news about her cancer treatment, Ginny and Rose "came out of the hospital into the pleasant May air, which was sweetened and colored by the flowering crab apples and beds of tulip...a display we hadn't even noticed upon going in."<sup>48</sup> Women can feel the beauty of nature and sense its changes more than men. Furthermore, *A Thousand Acres* has various symbolic connections that identify women with nature. Rose's name, for instance, is a symbol of nature that is fragile and abused. Ginny identifies herself with nature all through the novel, comparing herself to a sow and a horse. Larry Cook uses nature emblems in cursing Ginny's infertility like "barren" and "dried up whore bitch."<sup>49</sup>

### **Feigned Male Rationality in Abusing Women and Land**

Rationality is seen at the beginning of the novel when Larry decides to divide his farm among his three daughters. Yet after signing the incorporation agreement, he does not want to give away his role as the

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<sup>46</sup> P.114

<sup>47</sup> P. 4

<sup>48</sup> P. 58

<sup>49</sup> P.181

land owner and the rule-giver. Larry Cook is one of the main characters who exercise his authority on the female figures in the novel. Larry not only owns the biggest land, but he also owns his daughters. He believes that his daughters' role is to please him to the extent that after his wife's death, he seduced his two daughters instead of providing affection and care to them. In fact, throughout the novel, he never regrets what he did to his daughters or even speaks about it. On the contrary, he seems powerful and controlling, his feigned rationality brings about his downfall.

Larry is a master who represses and controls the identity of his daughters, giving rules to be undeniably followed. He never listens to them or responds to their demands. For instance, when Ginny and Rose used to swim in a pond in the farm, Larry "drained the pond and took out the trees and stumps around it so he could work that field more efficiently."<sup>50</sup> Moreover, he often uses verbal words degrading his daughters and cursing them, calling Ginny 'slut', 'you're not really a woman.'<sup>51</sup> He devalues his daughters and hurts their feelings. Larry is obstinate and arrogant. When his daughter Caroline claims that she does not know whether the act of incorporating the farm is a good idea or not, he simply says "you don't want it, my girl, you're out. It's as simple as that."<sup>52</sup> His ego and pride prevent him from discussing the idea with his daughter Caroline despite being his favorite daughter.

Having lost his power of control, Larry becomes eccentric. He drinks too much and he becomes out of control and loses his alleged rationality. He fails to gain the sympathy of his daughters, and dies of a heart attack. When Ginny hears about his death, she says "he had a heart

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<sup>٥٠</sup> P. 85

<sup>٥١</sup> P. 181

<sup>٥٢</sup> P. 21

attack in the cereal aisle. I imagined him falling into the boxes of cornflakes.”<sup>53</sup> Her comment is ironic and sarcastic revealing no compassion for his death. His funeral is small and Rose does not even attend it. “In *A Thousand Acres* Smiley wants to show, then, finally that incest is not a question of forgiveness and punishment, but one of permanent psychological damage for which there is no absolute cure.”<sup>54</sup> Hence, both daughters have not sympathized with Larry’s death due to the psychological and emotional pain they have developed because of their father. Their pain is carved in their hearts with no space for forgiveness.

Rationality in Larry’s character belies his deeds and actions. His decisions are not thought about carefully. He not only caused his daughters’ severe self-damage, but also poisoned them with his technological and chemical methods of farming. He is “poisoning the water and destroying the topsoil and buying bigger and bigger machinery, and then feeling certain that all of it was ‘right’.”<sup>55</sup> He does not think of the consequences of his own decisions which lead to his breakdown as a father and as a farmer. The use of the name “Cook” by Smiley highlights the agribusiness aspect of his relationship with the land. His name is deliberately used to associate production and consumption rather than raw and natural ingredients, reproduction and freshness.

Ty and Pete are other characters in the novel whose false rationality and oppression of land and women make them lose everything. To start with Ty, he is a hard worker, ambitious, and materialistic. Larry likes him because he owns one hundred and sixty acres, therefore, Larry thinks that Ty’s marriage to his daughter will increase his land. Ty is

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<sup>53</sup> P. 334-335

<sup>54</sup> Lin107

<sup>55</sup> *A Thousand Acres* 343

fascinated by the idea of increasing hog operation and raising capital, causing him to plow four hundred acres from the land. More than that, Ty takes a loan from the bank to have more machines and facilitates his own interests in expanding the economic state. He ignores Ginny's emotions and needs, does not discuss her miscarriages, and rather asks her not to seek pregnancy again as a sign of love and understanding. Ty may not be physically harmful to Ginny like her father; however, he is not making efforts to overwhelm her with attention, warmth, and consideration. Ty's name connotes "tie" which shows how Ty ties his wife when he deprives her of trying to get pregnant, and this is an absolute right for her as a woman; he ties the land when he changes the pure nature to increase production. Finally, Ginny leaves him and he fails to pay the debts to the bank, consequently, he loses both the land and his wife due to his 'feigned' rationality.

Brutal as Larry Cook, Pete's character indicates a patriarch who is alienated from nature and who subdues women. Pete's name is significant as it is similar to "beat" that denotes how oppressive he is to both woman and land. He does not get along with Larry, and though he works on the farm, he shows disinterest in farming. Pete is not only violent to his wife and shows no sympathy towards her disease, but he is also separated from the farm, although it is the community he lives in. Pete attempts to poison Larry by using ammonia, but Harold Clark, their neighbor and Larry's friend, got blinded instead of Larry. This incident displays the use of deadly chemicals not just in farming, but in harming people's lives. Pete, then, becomes indulged in drinking and drowns in the quarry. His wife is comfortable with the news of his death; she curses him for treating her badly and beating her. Pete receives his punishment in the text as a result of his cruelty to his wife and his carelessness towards the farm.

Jess is another character who has an egoistic and self-centered character. He is the son of Harold Clark. After thirteen years of absence from Zebulon County, he returns back to the farm to help his father. He has studied organic farming, aiming to apply his studies to the farmland. He says “I’m going to practice what I learned when I ran those gardens and I’m going to really dedicate myself to organic farming and make something of my beliefs”<sup>56</sup> Jess has a relationship with Ginny, then her sister Rose. He turns out to be a womanizer. Each of them seeks in Jess an emotional and a physical compensation, nevertheless she fails to provide them with what they needed, adding more pain and suffering to their lives. Iska Alter comments on his character by saying that Jess “sees land as an instrument upon which he can practice theory, just as he sees the bodies of women as sexual landscapes to test, to probe, to use.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, Jess’s bookish understanding of the needs of fertile land is the reason behind his mistaken understanding of the emotions and needs of women. His so called consideration is in vain. He travels to the Pacific Northwest leaving both women (Ginny and Rose) with broken hearts, and leaving the farm without any progress or organic modifications. Moreover, Jess is the one who provides the reasons behind their diseases, Rose’s cancer and Ginny’s barrenness when he says to Ginny “Have you had your well water tested for nitrates?...people have known for ten years or more that nitrates in well water cause miscarriages and death of infants.”<sup>58</sup> Although Jess exhibits a deep insight into nature and women, he does not offer anything to either, which associates his character with the character of Larry Cook. Again, Jess’s false rationality does nothing to women and land. Although he comes to Zebulon land with profound

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<sup>56</sup> P. 74

<sup>57</sup> P. 156

<sup>58</sup> P. 164-165

enthusiasm to apply the study of organic farming, he fails to change either the condition of the land or the condition of women. This proves that his neglect of land is related to his neglect of women.

Hence, every male figure in the novel verifies the fact that no progress can be achieved by men if they deny their dependency on women and on land, and if they continue to see themselves as having the upper hand over women and nature. Larry, Jess, Ty, and Pete receive their fate as a result of damaging Ginny and Rose, and destroying the farm. It can be said that if the male figures admitted the female roles and position in life, and if they consider land as a crucial part of the environment, they would gain a better life, never damage land, or hurt the females in their spheres.

Glynis Carr asserts that Smiley uses a critique of “post modern agriculture (capitalist agribusiness) that underscores its dangerous devaluation of women and nature in general, and reproduction in particular.”<sup>59</sup> She says that Smiley focuses on the necessity of valuing women as well as nature by the patriarchal society, without promoting production over reproduction or getting occupied by the sustainable world. Male figures in the novel are preoccupied with expanding land, thinking they will receive respectability in this way, in turn; they exploit nature and women, imposing their powers to increase production.

In a similar vein, Scott Hicks declares that *A Thousand Acres* displays a model for ecocritical studies through calling for an eco-cosmopolitan enclosure. An eco-cosmopolitan paradigm means the inclusion of human within a planetary, non-human world. Thus, the novel, for Hicks, denotes the consequence of factory farming: meaning machinery and herbicides, on breaking up family farming: meaning the act of protecting the farm using the traditional methods of farming and

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<sup>59</sup>P. 120

natural components. He believes that factory farming is the root of all environmental devastation and that the greed of the family members in *A Thousand Acres* expounds their failure to hold a successful domestic life and agribusiness.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, Hicks mentions that the men in the novel are disconnected from nature and that fails them to preserve the farmland. Larry, for instance, is not “much for untamed nature...he’s deathly afraid of wasps and hornets. It’s a real phobia with him’,”<sup>61</sup> Rose's words refer to her father's alienation from the natural world.

Another example of male's brutality to nature is represented in converting the farmland from corn production to hog operation. Ty's loan of 300 thousand dollars in order to buy 4000 hogs elucidates the rational economic thinking of male figures. According to Hicks, globalization and economy promise liberation, that is why the male figure in the novel gives out everything so as to attain commodification and economic stability, yet after failing to pay the debts and with increasing the interest rates of the bank loan, Ty sells the land and loses at the end. Hence, the promising investment of Ty's hog operation is converted to "divestment" and this "indebtedness" marks the loss of power, autonomy, and agency.<sup>62</sup>

The tragic ending of *A Thousand Acres* supposedly denotes the defeat of patriarchal society. Larry Cook's death, Pete's drowning, Ty's loss, and Jess's departure signify the fate of the male figures as a result of failing to maintain a healthy relationship with women and land. However, for Bolmefalk, the ending of the novel indicates the failure of the Cook sisters to revolt against patriarchy, achieve any of their goals, or confront any of the male figures with their deeds. Ginny and Rose leave the farm and escape male dominance. Nevertheless, sadly enough, Rose dies and

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<sup>60</sup>P. 4

<sup>61</sup>*A Thousand Acres* 21

<sup>62</sup>Hicks 11-3

Ginny loses her family and lives in nostalgia of the farmland life. Caroline becomes cast away of the family, loses her share in the land.<sup>63</sup> As a result, the loss of the land is also connected with the failure of the sisters to maintain a strong connected family.

Ecological feminism is the feminist study which combines the exploitation of women with the corruption of nature. It asserts that male domination is the cause of both environmental degradation and the oppression of women. Plumwood rejects the philosophies of dualism and false rationalism, claiming that false rationalism and dualism are what generate disparity and distinction among entities. She asserts that the western culture and tradition tend to reduce the concept of humanity to the male figure solely, while all the other beings; namely women and natural objects, are excluded. In other words, the male figure is the only human being who has ultimate power and authority. Jane Smiley in her ecofeminist *A Thousand Acres* draws on the master model, embodied in the male figure, who suppresses women, applies destructive activities to land, and tends to exploit both to serve his desires and physical needs. Smiley illustrates how the false male rationalism and dualistic manners make them lose everything: land, female and self.

Jane Smiley, in writing *A Thousand Acres*, proves to be an environmentally conscious writer. She stresses the fact that there is a link between the oppression of land and women by showing that the female deep suffering and land corruption are done by the male master. The novel verifies that men cannot be independent, but rather dependent on the female characters. Therefore, Larry's heart attack, Pete's drowning, Ty's loss, and Jess's failure are consequences of their vicious arrogance. When the male characters in the novel attempt to exclude the female

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<sup>63</sup>P. 17-18

characters and have an abusive attitude toward nature, they suffer an inevitable terrible end.

In *A Thousand Acres*, concepts of dualism and rationalism demonstrate a deep impact on the characters. Dualism is there in treating women as inferior, dependent, and degraded characters, and in treating nature as an invaluable instrument. Hence, dualism leads the male characters to devalue the intrinsic worth of nature and ignore the female figure's emotion, needs, and consider them not more than servants. In spite of the fact that rationalism is supposed to be related to the male character, however all the male characters' rationality is irrational. Their decisions are just to fulfill their materialistic and social interests; for example: Larry's incorporation decision, Ty's loan and hog operation, and Jess's affairs and organic farming failure. *A Thousand Acres* delivers a significant message that male figures should recognize and consider females as equal partners, and should view land as an integral player in the eco-cosmopolitan paradigm.

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