

Trauma, Gender, and Silenced Memory in Jane Smiley's A Thousand Acres

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Abstract

This paper studies Jane Smiley's book *A Thousand Acres* (1991) as a case study of how feminists interpret trauma and create alternative narratives to Shakespeare's play, *King Lear* (1606). Using both psychological and sociological concepts, based on the theories of trauma developed by Cathy Caruth (1996), Judith Herman (1997), Shoshana Felman (2007), Dori Laub (2008) & Dominick LaCapra (2009), along with ecological concepts of feminism developed by Vandana Shiva (1991), Carolyn Merchant (1980), Val Plumwood (1994), Greta Gaard (2002) & Ariel Salleh (2000), this research paper presents an in-depth examination of Jane Smiley's book *A Thousand Acres*, demonstrating how she has constructed a trauma narrative that combines the concepts of trauma with an ecological perspective and has allowed her to build a trauma narrative structure based upon her experience as a woman experiencing various forms of gender based oppression. From the perspective of trauma, *A Thousand Acres* is a representation of how women are subjected to gender-based violence, through their lack of autonomy and agency in a patriarchal structure, the systemic control of women's bodies, and their inability to create a coherent narrative of their experience. Ginny Cook Smith, the main narrator of *A Thousand Acres*, narrates a fragmented and chaotic account of her abusive upbringing, showing the impact that trauma and repression can have on the construction of narrative and on the experience of narrative closure. In addition, *A Thousand Acres* also demonstrates how the production of food and land use through industrial agriculture and ecological degradation connects directly to the exploitation of women's bodies. The author uses the concept of catharsis to illustrate her belief that there is no way to achieve justice through healthy, supportive relationships. In *A Thousand Acres*, the only possible response to long-standing trauma is through endurance, dislocation, and survival. *A Thousand Acres* also

exposes the interconnectedness of gender-based oppression and ecological exploitation, demonstrating that trauma is a systemic process rather than an individual pathology.

Keywords: Trauma theory; ecofeminism; feminist literary criticism; gendered violence; silence and memory; postmodern narrative; patriarchal power

INTRODUCTION

Among the most influential feminist rewrites of a classical canon of late twentieth-century American literature is Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1991). Smiley relocates tragedy from royal courts to farm kitchens, fields, amongst families and households by setting William Shakespeare's *King Lear* in the nexus of Iowa's countryside. This revision affects more than simply the setting, geography or characterization; it also modifies the fundamental theme and comprehension of the text. Smiley concentrates on the process and rationale of silencing in the phallogocentric world order that emerged from times immemorial to the present-day world. The experience of voicelessness in the female gender- whose sorrow is barely recognized as tragic, often develops as trauma. Whereas Shakespeare's tragedy emphasized upon the fall of masculine "empire of the self-same" yet reading it's revision by Smiley infuses a new interpretation and latent silencing of the female agency in it. This silencing is elaborated by the detrimental repercussions of phallogocentric society which runs upon male control of women's voice, bodies, memories, labour, and the land itself as depicted in *A Thousand Acres*.

Fundamentally, *A Thousand Acres* tells a story of women's trauma which is associated with the traumatised environment of the postmodern world. While critiquing male dominance over women and nature Smiley aligns feminine energy to the core of creativity. Greta Gaard defines ecofeminism clearly when she says, "Ecofeminism draws connections between the oppression of women and the domination of nature" (Gaard 1). As such, Smiley's novel illustrates this idea by showing how women and land are treated as commutable resources, recognized, controlled, and victimised in a system that values and thrives upon productivity, obedience, and silence. This proliferation is however, based upon the submission and silence of the feminine gender- the giving aspect of nature. Consequently, *A Thousand Acres* presents trauma as both a gendered and environmental condition. In the novel, trauma is not just an individual psychological injury; it is a systemic result of male authority upheld through violence, silence, denial, and ownership.

The events of the novel take place in Iowa in the 1970s. Ginny Cook Smith is the oldest daughter of Farmer Larry Cook who has 1000 acres of farmland and is wealthy and "respected." The act of Dividing the farm amongst Ginny, Rose and Caroline is seen as generous when Larry makes this decision. But soon it becomes apparent that this act only further reveals the tension already present within the

family. Caroline ends up disinherited in the end, as she too made a mild protest. This is a parallel to Cordelia's banishment in *King Lear*, but Smiley has changed the moral message presented by Shakespeare. Instead of seeing Ginny and Rose as ungrateful or monstrous, Smiley has used Ginny and Rose's history of sexual and emotional abuse from their father to show why these girls reacted the way they did when the farm was split. The reader learns about the trauma gradually through each of the girls' experiences and therefore understands how trauma works.

Through her first-person narrative, Ginny is able to express the impact of trauma on her life. Trauma is described as being "fragmented" and "emotionally restrained" while still being unable to be understood completely when it occurs. This view of trauma has been supported by Cathy Caruth, who describes how traumatic events are often too intense for a person to process at the moment they happen (Caruth 91). Ginny's recollection of the incest she experienced is consistent with the way trauma operates. She is unable to remember her experience clearly and instead recalls bits and pieces of it, and often recalls those memories in ways that are out of her control. When describing the impact of memory on her, Ginny writes, "Memory is alive and breathing" (Smiley 77). This metaphor is also consistent with how trauma impacts memory, where memories will arise over and over again in a person's mind without the person's being able to control when these memories arise. Ginny does not try to recall the events of her past; instead, those memories will arise on their own and will interrupt the chronology of the stories Ginny is telling.

In *A Thousand Acres*, trauma has a powerful influence on the body in addition to its powerful influence through time. Ginny, for example, expresses how her body communicates truths that she cannot accept ("My body told me things I didn't want to know" [Smiley 168]). Ginny's response is an example of what feminist trauma theorists refer to as "somatic memory," or how the body holds onto and expresses trauma long after the mind tries to erase it. The fact that Ginny has suffered from infertility and multiple miscarriages are visible manifestations of her long-term suffering, confirming that the effects of trauma occur both in our thoughts and hence they are not confined to the brain but also present in the body. Additionally, Ginny's submission demonstrates another way in which trauma produces effects on her. In looking back at her life, Ginny states, "I was not brave or strong or smart. I was compliant" [Smiley 191]). This simple statement reflects the emotional numbness created by her trauma and reflects Judith Herman's discussion of a survival response characterized by hopelessness.

The absence of public acknowledgment surrounding the abusive actions of Larry Cook demonstrates the impact of patriarchal systems on repressing trauma. When Ginny learns the truth of her father's actions, she responds with a remarkable amount of reserve: "Larry Cook was, indeed, my father, and he had done what he did" (Smiley 281). When read in succession with the absence of emotional emphasis

and repetition, it is clear that she is exhibiting dissociative behaviour. Dominick LaCapra states that trauma creates a split between the individual and their ability to express their feelings, making it difficult for victims of trauma to articulate their pain in the way that is typically expected. Suzanne Keen states that "Smiley's novel demonstrates how incest creates silence instead of confession and displacement rather than recovery" (Keen 132). Thus, the narrative that Ginny provides for us does not produce either justice or acknowledgment from society; it remains individual and unresolved.

A Thousand Acres illustrates how male dominance runs throughout the family structure as well as through land ownership. According to Ginny, "He owned us. He owned the land." (Smiley 110). This can also be related to Vandana Shiva's assertion that "the domination of nature and the domination of women are two sides of the same coin." (L. 41). Larry's controlling of the farm and of his daughters are indicators of how ownership is a tool of control; examples of this are the treatment of a woman's body and the treatment of her labour, just like the land, as property available for the purpose of managing or using.

The ecofeminist theory illustrates the relationship between women's labour and the degradation of the earth. Women are viewed as closer to nature than men, not only based on their biological ability to reproduce, but also on the fact that women are viewed through the societal lens of being the providers of food and drink (Shiva 38).

Ginny's identity as a woman is built on her domestic labour, which includes cooking, cleaning, taking care of others, and managing the household. This type of work for Ginny is often overlooked or undervalued. According to Ariel Salleh, "The value of women's labour is often invisible in economic and ecological assessments" (Salleh 5).

While Ginny's labour sustains both her family and farm, it is also a reflection of who she is as an individual. Smiley links the state of the land to the state of women's bodies. Ginny states, "The soil had been depleted, and we had been depleted" (Smiley 152), demonstrating a correlation between the environmental depletion of the land and the exhaustion of women. This idea relates back to Carolyn Merchant's statement that "The language used to describe and label nature is frequently gendered, reflecting a view of women and their places in the world" (Merchant 168). Additionally, images related to agriculture as the source of all growth, control, and productivity are based on society's expectations of women as mothers. Merchant goes on to state, and under the scientific patriarchy worldview that "the earth was seen as a machine" and "therefore exploitable" (Merchant 193). In *A Thousand Acres*, some examples of industrialized agriculture and chemical farming are utilized to illustrate this perspective. As Ginny states, "We poured the

chemicals on, season after season” (Smiley 152), a line that speaks to both environmental harm and emotional excess.

Dualism is a theory developed by Val Plumwood. This theory informs our understanding of the relationship between ideologies that support domination through the use of dualism. According to Plumwood, “Dualisms are not merely a series of conceptual distinctions but rather they represent an underlying structure of hierarchical relation to domination.” The characters in *A Thousand Acres* have experienced instances in their lives where they observed dualistic binary oppositions between: Male vs. Female, Cultural vs. Natural, and Rational vs. Emotional. Each of these examples is an expression of an ideology used to rationalise the destruction of the environment or the use of violence against women.” In addition, the depiction of how women are positioned closer to nature and therefore less worthy of value than males and/or how nature is perceived as an infinite supply of resources reinforces these ideologies”. The purpose of this article is to use these examples to demonstrate how both of these ideologies have become normalised and trivialised.

Trauma is something that is reflected in nature throughout its existence, and as Ginny recalls in a later chapter, “Everything grew wrong since I was a child”, this connection extends beyond the representation of the earth through Ginny’s memory. The transformation of Ginny’s landscape into something that now represents her trauma reinforces the theme of trauma being inflicted on both Ginny and her environment. The phrase “Poison seeped into everything” looks both literally and metaphorically at the effects that chemical pollution, emotional trauma, and the trauma passed down through generations have on both women and the environment. As Ginny experiences her own inability to bear children, the connection between how women and land have historically been evaluated in a patriarchal society as a means of reproduction is drawn out. As Ginny observes: “The land was planted, and I was barren,” illustrates this juxtaposition even more clearly than the prior example.

A Thousand Acres’ lack of closure in the narrative aligns with Post Modern Theories of Trauma (as defined by Michael J Meyer). According to Meyer, “*A Thousand Acres* does not provide the comfort of a tragic storyline; it provides endurance without any catharsis,” as he elaborates, “the character Ginny does not find justice, reconciliation or healing,” and “only limited forms of survival” (Meyer pp. 214, 219), because Ginny never returns to complete wholeness; Weese states this through her assertion that in *A Thousand Acres* “there is no return to wholeness”, because the past “can’t be repaired” (Weese pp. 85, 89); that the harm done by a system of male authority is “not only uncurable, but only escapable” (Weese pp. 89).

Keen states that “Ginny’s emotional restraint”, in the light of this concept, is not strength, but an indicator of her unresolved trauma, resulting in Psychology; thus, the expression “psychological numbness” is used; “those with unresolved

trauma experience psychological numbness,” notes Keen (Keen pp. 135); according to Showalter, “the use of Feminism as a theme in Present Day Literature is indicative of the belief held by modern Feminists (as well as Feminists of the past) of both altering and addressing the writing styles and storylines of those men who created the structure (i.e., on how to give a woman’s perspective to past literature),” means that the concepts of survival over healing are instead the premise for Feminist Rewrites (Showalter pp. 17); according to Hutcheon “post-modern texts dispute the possibility of Narrative Closure” (Hutcheon pp.125) and thus the decision within *A Thousand Acres* to select “survival” over “redemption” reflects both views equally. *A Thousand Acres* calls attention to the people, places, and experiences that have been kept quiet for so long—women's voices, destroyed lands, and fragmented memories. The combination of trauma theory and eco-feminism in the context of this novel reveals the relationship among gender, power, memory, and the earth. The novel offers no resolutions, no healed relationships, or resolved experiences of trauma; it provides a difficult reality in which the only means of resistance left available to those who suffer from the trauma that has long remained ignored is the act of survival itself.

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