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Feminist Rewriting of *King Lear* and Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*: A Comparative Study

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Abstract:

A Thousand Acres is the Pulitzer Prize winning novel by American author Jane Smiley. The novel published in 1991 is a rewriting of Shakespeare's one of the great tragedies *King Lear*. The plot of the tragic drama *King Lear* is woven around Lear, a king who decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters Goneril, Regan and Cordelia based on their ability to prove their love for him. Jane Smiley's novel recreates *King Lear* in the Zebulon County in America where Larry Cook a farmer decides to divide his farm between his three daughters Ginny, Rose and Caroline and traces the past and present in the due course of the novel. The focus of the paper will be a critical analysis of Smiley's novel from feminist point of view. The paper will compare and contrast characters and relationships of Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres* with that of William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The paper will analyse the portraiture of the elder daughters in the novel against their representation as monsters in the play by Shakespeare. Larry resembles Lear in his impulsiveness, insecurities and whims. The paper will further explore the father- daughter relationship in both the works.

Keywords: Feminist, Rewriting, Representation of women, abuse.

Feminism as a movement started in last decades of twentieth century to voice against gender inequality and for the equal rights to women in social and economic spheres of life. Feminist criticism "seeks to uncover the ideology of patriarchal society in work of art." (Nayar 83) Feminist literary criticism deals with the role of women in literature and marginalization of female writers in literary world. It is in the light of second wave feminism, initiated by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* which dealt with the myths related to women in texts of male authors (Abrams 121), feminists have been occupied with the discriminating and stereotype images of women in literature by male writers. The stereotype portrayal of female characters as either virtuously good or deviously bad has been the target of feminist critics. The literary representation of women and women characters has been of great concern for the feminists. As Lois Tyson says with reference to portrayal of women in fairy tales:

Patriarchal ideology suggests that there are only two identities a woman can have. If she accepts her traditional gender role and obeys the patriarchal rules, she's a "good girl"; if she doesn't, she's a bad girl." These two roles—also referred to as "madonna" and "whore" or "angel" and "bitch"—view women only in terms of how they relate to the patriarchal order. (93)

The issue of stereotype portrayal of women was also taken up by gynocritics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar who have questioned the presentation of woman as angel or monster in the works of male writers as Helene Moglen says in her review of the latter's book:

Everywhere in literature women discover images of themselves as angel- the perfect woman frozen into art, spiritualized to death- and as demonic double- the monster bitch who must pay for the existential creative autonomy she claims by being transformed into the madwoman in the attic: sensual, murderously angry, socially unacceptable. Here are two sisters fair and dark- Snow white and her wicked stepmother- the angel in the house and the whore on the pavement outside. (Moglen 226)

A Thousand Acres a Pulitzer Prize winning novel by Jane Smiley, published in 1991 adds another canonical work to the large body of feminist works written in this league. The novel written as a rewriting of William Shakespeare's famous tragedy *King Lear* is written to set the things right for the characters of Lear and the three sisters, Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. Smiley is against the evil portrayal of the elder sisters Goneril and Regan in the play. Jane Smiley puts before us the perspective of the daughters and tends to focus on the victimization of women in Shakespeare's play by presenting a contrasting portrayal of Lear, Goneril and Regan as Larry, Ginny and Rose.

The constant production of various works of rewritings brings to our notice that rewriting of Shakespeare's work never became out dated. Claude Maisonnat, Josiane Paccaud-Huguet and Annie Ramel in the introduction to their edited work *Rewriting/Reprising in Literature: The Paradoxes of Intertextuality* question the reason of such uprising in the rewriting of great authors and answer that the appropriation of the works of the dead authors can be seen as a mean of reviving the dead author (xi). They also bring to our notice that rewritings are one of the characteristics of the post- colonial age. They say "In the postcolonial age when the semblances of Empire have collapsed and laid bare the predatory vacuity on which they were founded, detestation may give birth to various forms of writing, such as 'writing back'"(xi). Thus Smiley's act of writing this novel can be seen as an act of writing back to the empire of patriarchy in literature.

A Thousand Acres a novel by American writer Jane Smiley is a rewriting of William Shakespeare's great tragedy *King Lear*. *King Lear* as we all know is a story of an impulsive king named Lear who decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters on the basis of the ability of the daughters to express their love for him. The elder daughters mouth their love in highly eloquent words while the youngest daughter Cordelia just says that she loves him as much as a daughter is supposed to love her father:

...I love your majesty

According to my bond, no more nor less (1.1. 94-95).

She is ousted from her father's division of the kingdom and is married off to the King of France without a dowry. However soon Lear gets disillusioned by his elder daughters Goneril

and Regan, and drifts towards madness as a result of their cruel treatment towards him. The play ends in tragedy with the death of both Lear and Cordelia. Smiley's novel set in Zebulon County in America is a story of a farmer Larry Cook, who one day decides to divide his farm among his three daughters Ginny, Rose, Caroline and to form a corporation, the youngest and favourite daughter Caroline however submits her averseness to the cause. As a result Larry in rage eliminates her from the plan saying "You don't want it, my girl, you're out. It's as simple as that". (21) This sets the course for a chain of events which are quite similar to the Shakespearean play. The wide canvas of characters in *A Thousand Acres* has their Shakespearean counterparts, where Larry, Ginny, Rose, Caroline, Harold, Loren and Jess are portraiture of King Lear, Goneril, Regan, Cordelia, Gloucester, Edgar, and Edmund respectively.

A Thousand Acres is written from a feminist point of view. Smiley feels unhappy about the play when she says "I found conventional readings of *King Lear* frustrating and wrong" ("Shakespeare in Iceland" 42). She was displeased with both Lear and Cordelia, Lear "struck me as the sort of person, from beginning to end, that you would want to stay away from- selfish, demanding, humourless and self-pitying... I didn't like Cordelia, either... On the other hand, the older sisters, figures of pure evil according to conventional wisdom, sounded familiar, especially in the scene where they talk in between themselves about Lear's actions, and later, when they have to deal with his unruly knights. They were women, and the play seemed to be condemning them morally for the exact ways in which they expressed womanhood that I recognized. I was offended" ("Shakespeare in Iceland" 42-43). It is quite evident from the above mentioned remarks of Smiley that she was highly displeased with the portrayal of the elder sisters in the play thus she sets out to present an altogether different version of the play, where Ginny and Rose are the victims of their father's rage and abuse.

Larry shares a great number of characteristics with King Lear. In the novel Larry, the modern day Lear, is impulsive, rash, short-tempered. The way Lear becomes angry at Cordelia's response and ousts her from his kingdom similarly Larry too, impulsively excludes Caroline from his property transfer as well as his life. Larry's characteristic as a father is anger; even Ginny reminisces "My earliest memories of him are of being afraid to look him in the eye, to look at him at all" (19). He never showed his daughters any love except for Caroline. He demands respect from his daughters but never shows any regard towards their emotions and desire. Lear too is impulsive and who in the fit of the moment decides that Cordelia does not love him. He is short-tempered also and gets displeased easily. After the division of the kingdom Lear gets irritated when Goneril and Regan do not fulfil his wishes and order to lessen his aides of knights. This dissatisfaction in Lear can be seen as a result of his loss of authority. So is the case with Larry who after the transfer is not able to cope up with his loss of authority. He takes to drinking and driving and even causes a car accident. He not being ready for his retirement starts feeling unwanted and the result is his descent into insanity. He spends many hours just watching and contemplating Ty and Pete work in the field. The rage attains a climax when he takes away Pete's truck without the latter's knowledge. The result is the storm scene where he curses his own daughters, Ginny and Rose in the meanest possible abusive words and says "I'll throw you whores off this

place. You'll learn what it means to treat your father like this. I curse you! You'll never have any children, Ginny, you haven't got a hope. And your children are going to laugh when you die!" (183). This is in no way different from Lear's rage in the play when he while cursing Goneril asks the goddess to:

Into her womb convey sterility!
Dry up in her the organs of increase;
And from her derogate body never spring
A babe to honour her (1. 4. 256-259).

Lear is portrayed as a victim of the greedy and evil daughters in the play. He is the object of pity. The daughters are presented as an epitome of evil who show their old and weak father the door. However the tables turn drastically in Smiley's novel where Ginny (Goneril) and Rose (Regan) become the victims. Being impulsive and short tempered which are Lear's character traits in the play turn him into a villain in the novel. Larry is like a dictator to his daughters, not only this he even molests his young daughters. In the case of the division of property the daughters are not motivated by any lust of money as is the case in the play. They just nod in approval of the plan. The point to note here is that Caroline is a modern woman, a lawyer. She just speaks her mind as an independent woman which surely Ginny and Rose cannot because to them their father had always been a figure of authority and fear whose every whim is to be obeyed. Ginny is aware of the liberty that Caroline had taken with their father, when she contemplates if Caroline made a mistake when asked of her opinion about the transfer of the farm. She comes to the conclusion that "perhaps she hadn't mistaken anything at all, and had simply spoken as a woman rather than as a daughter. That was something, I realized in a flash that Rose and I were pretty careful never to do" (21). This brings to our notice the wide gulf of freedom between Caroline and the older sisters.

Caroline the alter ego of Cordelia is also not presented in good light in the novel. The evil sisters are not so evil anymore but caring and compassionate for Caroline, though the latter is dissatisfied with the elder sisters. The rival relation between Cordelia and the older sisters as presented in the play is provided a different facet. Goneril and Regan are hateful towards Cordelia. However in the novel Caroline had been raised by her elder sisters in a much affectionate environment. After their mother's death Ginny and Rose try their utmost to provide for Caroline what they themselves lacked in their childhood. They made sure she had a normal life, no strict routine, protected from the anger of their father. The sisters took every care of her and in the words of Ginny "...gave her an allowance... We were her allies. We covered for her and talked Daddy out of his angers" (64). As stated in the beginning Smiley was not much pleased with Cordelia in the play. The characteristic she attaches to Cordelia in reference to the play is presented in the characterisation of Caroline. Smiley in her work "Shakespeare in Iceland" says she found Cordelia "ungenerous and cold, a stickler for truth at the beginning, a stickler for form at the end" (43). Similarly Caroline is ungrateful to her sisters. She turns a cold shoulder to Ginny and Rose without delving into the reality of the situation. Caroline previously is annoyed with Larry, but later in the novel sides with Larry. She sues Ginny, Rose and their husbands to get the farm back on the pretext of abuse and mismanagement of the farm. She holds her sisters in contempt for being the cause of Larry's

madness. Caroline also differs from Cordelia in a way that the exile was thrust upon Cordelia as punishment while Caroline chooses her distance from her father on her own after her disagreement with him. There is not much in the text that shows Caroline's deep love for Larry. Caroline's love for her father only surfaces when he is infuriated at the elder daughters. It is evident here that she lacks the ability to stand for truth.

If one looks at the play from the point of view of binaries of angel or monster as found by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, one can see that Cordelia is the angel and the elder sisters Goneril and Regan the monsters. Jane Smiley questions this portrayal of elder sisters in the novel. In the novel the evil sisters are no longer the monster and the angelic younger sister is not so much of an angel.

Sexual abuse is also another important theme dealt in the novel. Jay L. Halio remarks that Critic Mark J. Blechner is of the view that there are hidden hints of incestuous love of Lear for her daughter Cordelia (67). Blechner says in the reference to Lear that "We have, then, the pathos of an old man, horribly alone, seeking, perhaps erotically but certainly passionately, to maintain the companionship and intimacy with his one daughter who remains unattached"(qtd. in Halio 67).The hidden hint is dealt with at great length in the novel by Smiley. We get to know after the storm scene through Ginny and Rose's conversation that Larry used to sexually abuse his daughters in their childhood. He used to threaten them into compliance and insisted that Ginny and Rose should sleep in separate rooms. The pernicious memory of childhood still haunts both the elder sisters.

The effect of this childhood abuse of Ginny and Rose is destructive. Ginny starts practicing escapism and takes resort in a belief that nothing like this ever happened. When Rose confronts her with the evil memories of childhood abuse by their father Ginny refuses to accept the reality. She repeatedly says to Rose "It didn't happen to me, Rose."(192). Becoming an escapist is not the only effect on Ginny. She starts to revile her body; the abuse suffered in the past alienates her from her own body. She says "It went without saying that bodies fell permanently into the category of the unmentionable...One thing Daddy took from me when he came to me in my room at night was the memory of my body." (279-280) Ginny is not the only one who suffers; Rose too in her youth finds it hard to cope with. The instability in her marriage with Pete can be credited to her haunted memories of childhood. She runs into one extra marital affair after another. Her affairs act as a coping mechanism to forget the past. It doesn't end here only she married Pete in the hope that he would reside in Chicago where her Daddy won't be, "All I wanted when I met Pete was someone exciting enough to erase daddy. And I thought sure Pete would end up in Chicago, playing music, somewhere Daddy wouldn't even visit" (298). Here Ginny and Rose are themselves victims of Larry's abuse. Smiley states:

As the lawyer for Goneril and Regan I proposed a different narrative of their motives and actions which cast doubts on the case Mr. Shakespeare was making for his client, King Lear. I made Goneril my star witness, and she told her story with care...The goal of the trial was not to try or condemn the father, but to gain acquittal for the

daughters. The desired verdict was not "innocent", but rather "not guilty", or at least, "not proven" ("Shakespeare in Iceland" 55).

The evil sisters of the play turn out to be protective sisters who try to protect Caroline from what happened to them. Rose says to Ginny that she was afraid and didn't want her father to abuse Caroline in the same manner. She was concerned about her. Caroline, who was raised in the best possible manner by the elder sisters, is ignorant of the abuse the elder sisters suffered at the hand of their father.

The jealousy between Goneril and Regan over Edmund so important in the play is also meticulously interwoven in the novel. The bone of contention between Ginny and Rose is Jess, son of Harold (Gloucester of the play who loses his eye sight because of chemical) is the alter ego of Edmund. Edmund ran away from his home not wanting to take part in the Vietnam War. Ginny who is dissatisfied with her husband Ty finds solace in the arms of Jess. Jess later turns over his affections towards Rose and starts an affair with her. After Pete's death Rose reveals the secret of her affair to Ginny. Ginny is infuriated at the revelation and plans to poison Rose through poisonous sausages. However Rose dies of the recurrence of her cancer and not because of Ginny's poisonous Sausages. The sisters reach a sort of reconciliation towards the end of the novel before Rose's death.

Ginny and Rose are not only victim of the father but they are equally abused by their husbands. Both of them have unhappy marriages. Ginny is not satisfied with Ty. In the novel Ty and Pete the husbands of Ginny and Regan are counterparts of the Duke of Albany, Duke of Cornwall in the play. The Duke of Cornwall is a thoroughly negative character in the play, cruel and villainous. Pete is a portrait of Cornwall but he is a more positive character though he has been violent to Rose at times. Rose suffers domestic violence at the hands of Larry, though when once she takes stand and endures no more beating. Larry doesn't like Pete much in the novel, as is the case in the play, where Lear prefers Albany over Cornwall. However unlike the play Pete is a better human being than Ty. Pete's a better husband than Ty, who has his wife's confidence, to whom Rose had confessed about her childhood abuse. Ty though a good husband on the surface is a person who lacks the ability to take a stand. He doesn't speak a word when his wife Ginny is being humiliated by Larry. Eventually Ginny realises that Ty had been all the while "duplicitous", "passionate", "self-serving" (248). He kept humming Larry's tune all the while just to avoid conflict. His sole interest was the farm which he didn't want to lose. Goneril too is dissatisfied with Albany who fails to support her. Though in the play he is seen as being sympathetic to Lear, in the novel he is portrayed as a selfish man. Anna Lindhé questions "Are Albany's motives for supporting Lear and being disloyal to his wife solely emotional or are they perhaps political?" (68).

The play ends in tragedy, while the novel ends on a much lighter note than the play. Rose, Pete, Larry die by the end of the novel but Ginny who has been oppressed all the while rises in the end as a modern independent woman trying to create her own identity. She leaves her husband to start afresh unlike Goneril who succumbs to suicide. She takes stand for her life. She starts working as a waitress and takes in her care Rose's daughters Pammy

and Linda. Thus Smiley greatly succeeds in her attempt to rewrite the Shakespearean play from a feminist point of view and representing the evil sisters in an altogether different light.

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