chapter 4

Palimpsest of Subjugation: Inscriptions of Domination on the Land and the Human Body in Jane Smiley's A Thousand Acres

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Abstract

Jane Smiley's A Thousand Acres (1991) is best known as a novel that rewrites Shakespeare's King Lear, transposed to a contemporary setting in the American Midwest of the 1970s. This chapter focuses on the novel's representation of the land and the interaction between humans and their environment, set against the history of the settling of the American West, and played out in the conflict centered on a family in crisis in a rural community. As the narrator-protagonist uncovers the palimpsest of the history of land acquisition, exploitation, and toxification, she also recovers from the amnesia that protected her from repressed personal memories of abuse, rooted in patriarchal domination and "unnatural" family relations. The novel's exposure of the destructive forces at work in the agrarian landscape implies a reversal of some of the structures of the pastoral mode, and its dystopian vision of the contemporary agrarian landscape entails a severe critique of industrial farming and agribusiness.

Keywords

Jane Smiley – nature – the land – male domination – agricultural exploitation – toxification – environmentalist critique

1 Introduction

Jane Smiley's A Thousand Acres (1991) opens with the narrator-protagonist Ginny Cook Smith contemplating the landscape of her home, a farming community located near the fictional town of Cabot in Zebulon County, Iowa. From her vantage point at an intersection, the buildings of her father's thousand-acre farm are set in the vast expanse of flat fields, stretching in every direction, reminding her of how he had been convinced as a child that "the earth was unquestionably flat" (3). She later recalls that as a child, her father Lawrence Cook seemed to her to rule the entire universe, and when she was in her first year at
school, she felt that he “defined both categories” of farmer and father (19). Her father dominated the farmland to the extent that, “However much these acres looked like a gift of nature, or of God, they were not. We went to church to pay our respects, not go give thanks” (15). These remarks bring us to the core of the thematic conflict of the novel, which centers on male mastery and violation of the land and of women.

Smiley’s novel is perhaps best known as a novel that rewrites Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, transposed to a contemporary setting in the American Midwest of the 1970s, and told from the narrative perspective of Ginny, the oldest of three sisters.\(^1\) Rather than discussing how the novel revisits Shakespeare’s tragedy, interrogating the ideology of *King Lear* by granting voice to Goneril of the play, my reading will focus on the representation of nature, the land and landscape, and the interaction between humans and their environment, as set against the history of the settling of the American West, and as played out in the conflict centered on a family in crisis in a rural Iowa community.\(^2\) The novel’s thematic focus on nature, land, landscape, and environment involves a reversal of some of the literary structures of the pastoral and the agrarian tradition. Tracing the narrator-protagonist’s uncovering the palimpsest of family history and local history, I intend to examine the gendered implications of patriarchal dominance of nature and women’s bodies. The rural landscape of the novel – transformed by agricultural management practices resulting in the depletion and toxification of the soil and aquifer – takes the contours of an anti-landscape as defined by David E. Nye in *When the Lights Went Out*: “An anti-landscape is a man-modified space that once served as infrastructure of collective existence but that has ceased to do so, whether temporarily or long-term” (Nye 2010, 131). The toxins have had detrimental effects also on the human body – women’s bodies in particular – and the family conflict turns out to be rooted in patriarchal domination and “unnatural” family relations.

2 The “Nature” of *A Thousand Acres*: Delving into the National Imaginary

Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* draws on regional history of the settling and agricultural development of the American Midwest to address both local and global

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1 See e.g. Alter, Brauner, Cakebread, Leslie, Lindhé, Mathieson, Schiff, and Strehle.

2 A number of critics have considered the novel in reference to the pastoral or the agrarian tradition, or from an ecocritical perspective, noting the ways in which it levels a critique of patriarchal violence on the land and women’s bodies. See e.g. Carden, Conlogue, Farris, Kirby, Levin, Malmgren, Ozdek, and Schauman.