Unbalanced World: An Eco-feminist Approach to *A Thousand Acres*

LIU Yuan
Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China

Jane Smiley is one of the most famous female novelists in the contemporary literary world. So far, she has published more than a dozen novels, and the most famous one is her novel *A Thousand Acres* published in 1991. *A Thousand Acres* received extensive attention once it was published and won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1992. At the same time, this work also laid the foundation of Jane Smiley in the contemporary American literary world. This novel mainly depicts the agricultural life of the American Midwest. In *A Thousand Acres*, Smiley combines ecological themes with feminist issues, which coincides with the theoretical pursuit of ecofeminism that emerged in the 20th century. From the perspective of ecofeminism, this paper interprets women’s struggle and revolt against nature under men’s control and suppression in a patriarchal society depicted in the novel. It also hopes to awaken people to realize the supposedly harmonious relationship between them and nature, and between men and women.

*Keywords:* ecofeminism, nature, female, unbalanced

**Overview of Ecofeminism**

The concept of “ecofeminism” was first put forward by French feminist scholar Francoise d’ Eaubonne in her work *Le Feminisme ou la mort* in 1974, and its core idea is that the oppression of women by human beings is directly related to the oppression of nature (Gates T, 1998). Contemporary American philosopher, C Spretank, a leading exponent of ecofeminism, points out that ecofeminism theory holds that “there is a historical, symbolic and political relationship between the debasement of nature and the debasement of women in Western culture” (Spretank, 2001, p. 249). This relationship is the patriarchal world view, which has three important characteristics: dual mode of thinking, the concept of value hierarchy and the logic of domination (Zuo, 2004). Ecofeminism is often regarded as feminism in ecology or ecology in feminism, which is the zeitgeist formed by the combination of ecological movement and feminism. From the perspective of feminism, it is against the control of men over women in a patriarchal society. The combination with ecology makes ecofeminism regard human’s control over nature as the root of global ecological crisis. But ecofeminism is not simply the sum of feminism and ecology, it emphasizes the existence of the inherent relationship between men’s control of nature and women. Ecofeminism opposes patriarchy and advocates the liberation of women and nature from the male-dominated social system.
K.J. Warren, an ecofeminist, also points out clearly in her book *Ecofeminism* that “controlling nature and controlling women operate under the same system, which is the patriarchy central system, and overthrowing the patriarchy is the basic work of the female movement and the environmental movement” (Karen J, 1994, p. 102). The ecofeminism advocates a link between male discrimination against nature and gender and seeks a special relationship between the debasement of women and the debasement of nature that is common in patriarchal societies. The ecofeminism advocates a new kind of relationship between men and women, men and nature, which is equal, harmonious and interdependent, while opposing the oppression of nature and women under patriarchy.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, with the worsening of global ecological issues, more and more countries have paid attention to them, which is also an inevitable problem for every country. During the same time, the ideas of ecofeminism have expanded into politics, culture, history and other fields as the study of ecological problems has expanded and deepened. The subsequent ecofeminist literary criticism has drawn increasing attention to people, and the ecofeminist thoughts in literary works are also common, and *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley is one of them. The theme of *A Thousand Acres* is to warn people, especially women, of the consequences brought by the deterioration of ecological environment, and criticize the male-centered agricultural ideology and the negative impact of the deterioration of ecological environment represented by the materialized land on women’s bodies. These themes are very suitable for analysis from the perspective of ecofeminism (Du, 2011). Therefore, this paper takes *A Thousand Acres* as a typical text to introduce and analyze this idea.

**Jane Smiley and *A Thousand Acres***

Jane Smiley (1949-) is one of the most famous women writers in contemporary American literature. Her novels are famous for their profound description of the family life of the American middle class and writing is characterized by vivid and delicate brushwork and incisive depiction. Published in 1991, the novel *A Thousand Acres* won the 1992 Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Review Award for his profound description of the psychology of characters and the awakening of female self-consciousness. Because the novel is based on *King Lear*, one of Shakespeare’s famous “Four Major Tragedies,” the *A Thousand Acres* is also known as “*King Lear* in the Midwestern United States.” Once the novel was published, it attracted widespread attention in the critics.

Larry Cook, one of the main characters in the novel, is the owner of the largest farm in Zebulon County. Larry Cook has three daughters, his eldest daughter Ginny and second daughter Rose are married and live on a farm near his home. His favorite young daughter, Caroline, is a lawyer in Des Moines, Iowa’s capital. This story was told by Ginny in the first person. Larry Cook decided to distribute his farmland to three daughters in order to avoid high inheritance taxes for his family. Ginny and Rose accepted the decision, but her younger daughter Caroline refused. Caroline’s indifference and hesitation angered Larry, and she was immediately deprived of her right to inherit Larry’s land. Soon, Larry regretted his hasty decision and clashed with Ginny and Rose. And he started to drink and even caused a car accident. He felt his position at home plummeted and his spirit felt extremely empty. Caroline, who did not know the truth, believed her two sisters were abusing her father, so she allied with Larry to sue her sisters. As family conflicts intensified, a horrific memory of childhood emerges: their father Larry sexually assaulted them and often abused them when Lenny and Rose were young. The two sisters began to change in character because of what his father did. Ginny became more and more afraid of his father and
became receptive and Rose became rebellious and revengeful. In order to avoid Caroline repeating their mistakes, they tried to persuade their sister to stay away from their father and the farm, and remained silent about their father’s actions, not to resist. Later, with the help of lover Jesse, Ginny learned about her sister Rose’s breast cancer and the reasons for her five miscarriages, so her female consciousness gradually awakened, and her attitude towards her father also changed from being obedient to daring express her own ideas. At the end of the story, with the deaths of Larry and Rose and the farm being annexed by a larger company, Ginny found work in the city and began a new life.

**Similarity: Women and Nature**

Ecofeminist insists that women and the earth have an undeniable interconnection in creating life, which means that the characteristics of female childbearing and nurturing offspring are closely linked with the earth that breeds everything. Therefore, from a conceptual and symbolic perspective, women’s bodies are closely linked to the earth as well. Stacey Alemo once strongly expressed support of this view: “The body is an important job for ecofeminism, especially when male identity has been equated with thought itself. The body, as it has been animalized and naturalized in various ways, is considered inferior and antithetical to cultural progress” (Gaard & Patrick, 1998, p. 167). Since the earth was conquered and oppressed by the male masters, and at the same time, the female body was subjected to domination and oppression, one of the purposes of this novel is to explore the interconnection between the female body and the earth.

The inscription of this novel is quoted from *The Ancient People and the Newly Come*. The author said: “The body repeats the scenery. They are the source of each other and the creation of each other. We are characterized by the seasonality of the earth and the terrible migration. It is a century of rapid reincarnation, which is almost an unprecedented change on this green planet” (Wang, 2003, p. 176). This quote explains the general intention of the novel and makes clear the connection between the human body and nature. The earth is personified as a mother earth. In modern society, the earth is likened to a woman who has endured a lot, and the reason that the earth needs to endure is due to human’s irresponsibility. In the novel, the land of Zebulon County was swampy and wetland and was not suitable for farming at all. After Ginny’s ancestors came to this land, they began to lay tiles under the topsoil for drainage, and then miraculously welcomed the prosperity of agriculture. This practice meant that industrial farming controlled the nature, but later this method of farming caused serious damage. Jesse said Larry’s farming practices caused water poisoning in the land and the residents there. “Don’t you know that the fertilizer is flowing into the aquifer?” (Smiley, 2004, p. 165). Ginny looks healthy and fertile, but in fact her internal system has been catastrophically contaminated. Physical and social poisoning, as well as her father’s abuse, caused her great harm.

Ecologists believe that one’s body can recognize itself and even the world. This view can be found in the novel when Ginny uses nature through landscapes. In addition to the green, fleshy cattails, the natural scenery also constitutes a system and is similar with her body. In this landscape, the reappearance of pelicans hunted by Ginny’s ancestors heralded Ginny’s depressed life again. For Ginny, her understanding of nature is understood through the interconnection between the past of nature and the past of her body. Sexual assault is the most heinous crime Larry imposed on Ginny and Rose. Larry’s sexual control of his daughter made Ginny overly concerned about her body and was ashamed of it. In *A Thousand Acres*, the farmland of the Cook family is a piece of land
attacked by agricultural chemistry and technology. The female characters in the novel gradually became the objects in this land field. Therefore, according to the provisions of the right, the body of the woman and the body of the land together are poisonous.

In addition to the connection between the female body and the land, the women in the novel are also closely related to water. Take the first-person narrator, Ginny, for example, she can always feel the water in the soil, even if it is invisible to the naked eye. For Ginny, the meaning of water is more important and special than water itself. Ginny describes water in a special way, more precisely, in the way of a silent woman who has invisible power. The words she uses to describe water are: “molecules attach, gather, evaporate, cool, freeze, rise to the surface and fog cold air, sink ...”(Smiley J, 2004, p. 16). In fact, this invisible element is the incarnation of another “self”, which is being awakened in Ginny’s mind. Once this sleeping “self” wakes up, she will have subversive power to change herself, even her surroundings, like the water below, which also foreshadows the awakening of Ginny’s self-consciousness.

By comparing the above women with land and water, it can be concluded that under the rule of patriarchal culture, women and nature are only the property of men, and their only value is to satisfy the desires of men. Therefore, in a male-dominated society, women and nature have very similar positions. As Griffin once said: “Women talk to nature and she hears voices from below. The wind blew through her ears, the trees whispered in her ears, the deceased sang in her mouth, and the baby cried in her ears clearly ... for him, the conversation is over, but we (the woman) heard it” (Smiley J, 2004, p. 162).

Losing Voice: Women and Nature

In a patriarchal society, women are considered a kind of attachment to men. A woman should obey her father before marriage, and a woman should obey her husband’s orders after marriage. In the family, the woman’s responsibility is to take on all the housework, but at the same time bear the responsibility of giving birth and raising children. In the eyes of men, women are only a tool for liberating sexuality and breeding offspring. These are all unequal treatments for disadvantaged women in patriarchal society.

In *A Thousand Acres*, the women of the Cook family are often seen as underdogs. According to Foucault’s discourse theory, discourse is embodiment of rights. Women of the Cook family have no rights at all in the family, so naturally there is no so-called right to speak. Women should remain silent and unconditional obedience, which has become a fact in the society at that time and gradually has become a stereotype. Men should rightly think that they have the right to physically and psychologically control women. In a patriarchal society, male hegemony deprives women of the right to speak and ignores women’s self-awareness and the carrying capacity of nature. While men break the ecological balance of nature, they also hurt women’s bodies (Chen, 2013). Ginny is the narrator of the whole novel and is also a typical female figure in the novel. She is the representative of those women who are silent and obedient under the shackles of patriarchy. When Ginny was in front of her father who symbolized power and rights, she lost her voice and even thought, “When my father insisted on his opinion, my opinion is disappearing and I don’t even remember” (Smiley J, 2004, p. 176). Even though her sister Rose reminded her that their father had abused them as a child, it was clear that Ginny had no strength and courage to accept this fact. Apparently, Ginny was forcing herself to ignore everything she saw, heard or experienced. Larry’s abuse was the reason Ginny lost her sense of self.
In patriarchal and capitalist societies, it is natural for men to tame and control women and nature. Smiley pointed out that *A Thousand Acres* showed “a complex view against some kind of agriculture and land use, which is tempting us to go to environmental disasters and destroy human life and national moral life” (Baker & Calvin, 1992, p. 10). For thousands of years, land has been of great significance to people, and it has also been the goal of farmers’ struggle. At the beginning of the novel, Smiley pointed out that land in Zebulon County is an important criterion for measuring a person’s socioeconomic status. “The area of land and funding in Zebulon County is the most basic fact, just like the name and gender,” Ginny said (Smiley J., 2004, p. 124). This clearly illustrates the importance of land, which symbolizes rights and pride. It is an indisputable fact that greed and scramble for more land will never stop.

Before Ginny’s great-grandfather settled here, the land in Iowa was covered by two feet of water for some time of the year. Ginny’s great-grandfather built a tile drainage system to make use of the local land and ushered in a bumper harvest. As Ginny said, “Tile drainage systems have brought prosperity, year after year, both in the flood season and the dry season” (Smiley J., 2004, p. 137). In addition, the use of fertilizers and pesticides is also the best way to tame nature. In the novel, the greedy farmers believe that it is the most common thing to make good use of the chemicals on the land because the land is their personal property and they have the right to do whatever they want. The same is true of men’s rule of women. Men use their power to tame nature and women, believing that land and women are available for their needs. In fact, in the process of human development of the land, in addition to land, animals and water have also been seriously polluted. According to Ginny’s memories, there was a swamp that shone, and cattails provided a natural and comfortable nest for thousands of pelicans when her great-grandfather came to Zebulon County 90 years ago. However, due to environmental pollution caused by using fertilizers and pesticides, pelicans and other wild animals disappeared in the early 1960s.

During the development of human society, there are more and more signs showing that nature has been interfered by human beings. The so-called advanced and innovative agricultural practices have caused serious harm to nature and human beings. Smiley once believed that “the application of technology in agriculture came from the biological power that destroyed early civilizations. Instead, large machines and powerful chemicals accelerated their growth” (Farrell, 2001, p. 40). Smiley’s statement is clearly in line with ecofeminist theory, which reveals the relationship between environmental degradation and inhuman depression. As a matter of fact, it is already discernable today that human beings’ excessive exploitation and oppression of the inhabitants of certain areas of the planet have caused the reduction or extinction of indigenous culture and heritage.

**Conclusion**

Through the above analysis of the connection between women and nature and the oppression suffered by women and nature, it can be seen that Smiley shows men’s violence and oppression of women and nature in the patriarchal society, and both nature and women’s loss of voice. The female characters in the novel are silent, overwhelmed and poisoned by male rulers. Meanwhile, nature suffers similar situation as women.

Ecofeminists, after recognizing the tragic encounters and fate of women and nature, strive to find the root causes of oppression of women and exploitation of nature. The ecologists have conducted the most critical analysis of them. Ecofeminism critically analyzes that Western dualism is accompanied by the western ideology of patriarchy, and specifically explains why patriarchy is the cause of global ecological destruction. By balancing...
the asymmetric dualism of culture and nature, men and women, ecofeminists try to balance all dualism in patriarchal society. Ecofeminism is not only committed to eradicating the oppression of nature and women, but also strives to eliminate all inequalities and imbalances existing in male-dominated societies, such as racism, classism, and imperialism. From the perspective of ecofeminism, this paper analyzes the female characters and nature in *A Thousand Acres*, which were both oppressed by the Cook family. This paper further proves that ecofeminists have made the contributions in the process of eliminating the imbalanced dualism for the world.

**References**

Baker, J., & Calvin, R. (Ed.). (1992). *17th NBCC Awards: Idealism meets commercialism*. New York: Publishers Weekly.

Charlene, S. (2001). The complete Non-Dualism in ecofeminist philosophy //Falk. *Conflict and deconstruction: Contemporary western academic terminology*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press.

Chen, J. (2013). Viewing ecofeminism from “A Thousand Acres”. *Jiannan Literature (classical school)*, (10). (In Chinese)

Du, L. L. (2011). An ecological feminist interpretation of “A Thousand Acres”. *Contemporary Foreign Language Studies*, (10). (In Chinese)

Farrell, S. (2001). *Jane Smiley’s A Thousand Acres*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd.

Gaard, G., & Murphy, P. D. (1998). *Ecofeminist literary criticism: Theory interpretation, pedagogy*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Gates T., B. (1998). *A root of ecofeminism: Ecoféminisme*. In G. Gaard and P. D. Murphy (Eds.), *In Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Karen J., W. (1994). *Ecological feminism*. New York: Routledge.

Plumwood, Val. (1993). *Feminism and master of nature*. London: Routledge.

Smiley, J. (2004). *A Thousand Acres*. New York: Harper Perennial; New ed edition.

Wang, N. (2003). *Ecological literature in Europe and America*. Beijing: Peking University Press.

Zuo, J. M. (2004). The ecological feminist ideas in *A Thousand Acres*. *Foreign Literature Review*, (3). (In Chinese)