

**The Slaughter of the Innocent: An Ecofeminist Reading of Jane
Smiley's (A Thousand Acres)**

Muhammad Jalal Khalifa (*)

Abstract

Jane Smiley's avowed purpose in writing *A Thousand Acres* was to condemn "the patriarchal appropriation of women and the exploitation of the land" (Leslie 38). Smiley's ecofeminist efforts are devoted to subverting the patriarchal, male-centered culture that used to cast "oppressed groups as part of a separate lower order whose domination is natural, part of the order of nature" (Plumwood 73-74). The link between the oppression of women and nature is explored by Smiley through an interconnecting pattern of domestic violence against not only the land, but also against the force of family itself. As the sterile relationship of man to land grew, so too did the development of dysfunctional relationship between Larry Cook and his daughters, eventually giving rise to a life of emotional and sexual abuse. Only after Ginny is able to dismantle or deconstruct these dualistic structures does she achieve victory and create a female space for herself.

* Azzagazig University Department of English Faculty of Arts.

ذبح الابرياء: قراءة في نظرية النسوية البيئية وتطبيقها على رواية "ألف فدان"
لجين سمايلي

محمد جلال خليفة

ملخص

كان الغرض المعلن لجين سمايلي عند كتابة رواية "ألف فدان" هو إدانة الاستغلال الأبوي أو الذبح المعنوي للمرأة والأرض. وتكرس سمايلي جهودها إلى تقويض الثقافة الذكورية التي تضطهد الضعفاء وتعتبر أن الهيمنة عليهم أمر طبيعي، فتستكشف سمايلي العلاقة بين اضطهاد المرأة والطبيعة من خلال دراسة أنماط متشابهة من العنف الأسري ضد الأرض المملوكة للعائلة، وكذلك أيضا ضد فكرة العائلة نفسها. فكما أن العلاقة بين لاري كوك و الأرض علاقة تحكمها المصلحة، فكذلك العلاقة بينه وبين بناته التي شابها الخلل ووصل ذروته في معاشرتهم جنسياً. ولم تستطع بطلة الرواية جيني تحقيق النصر على تلك الثقافة الذكورية القائمة على استغلال الضعيف وخلق مساحة خاصة بها كأنثى إلا بعد تفكيك هياكل تلك الثقافة فأصبحت بحق خير من يناصر قضية المرأة والبيئة.

Man seeks in woman the Other as Nature and as his fellow being. But we know what ambivalent feelings Nature inspires in man. He exploits her, but she crushes him, he is born of her and dies in her; she is the source of his being and the realm that he subjugates to his will; Nature is a vein of gross material in which the soul is imprisoned, and she is the supreme reality; she is contingency and Idea, the finite and the whole, she is what opposes the Spirit, and the Spirit itself....Woman sums up Nature as Mother, Wife and Idea; these forms now mingle and now conflict, and each of them wears a double visage. (Simone de Beauvoir; *The Second Sex*, 163)

In an interview with Martha Duffy, Jane Smiley (1949-) asserts that at the time of writing her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *A Thousand Acres* (1991), she found herself increasingly interested in the relationship between nature and women: "Women, just like nature or the land, have been seen as something to be used" (Duffy 92). This is not surprising since *A Thousand Acres* is set in an era that marks the demise of the second wave of the feminist movement and the emergence of ecocriticism. This quickly gave rise to the theory of ecofeminism which sees "both women and nature as inherently feminine and therefore oppressed by masculine or phallographic regimes of meaning and power" (Cuomo 22). This paper is an ecofeminist reading of Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* through a discussion of the character of the female narrator, Ginny, who interacts with the surrounding environment.

Before turning to this ecofeminist reading of Smiley's novel, it is fitting to trace the literary influences on ecofeminism. Historically, feminism and ecocriticism were the intellectual movements that provided the basic framework for ecofeminism. The feminist movement describes a long period of activism as a means of achieving equality between men and women, and ending male domination of society as well. According to *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories*, feminism "may be understood as theory—systems of concepts, propositions, and analysis that describe and explain women's

situations and experiences and support recommendations about how to improve them" (Frye 195). The origins of feminism can be traced back to the struggle for women's rights that began with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), a feminist treatise that describes the psychological and economic damages done to women through their forced dependence on men and their exclusion from public life.

The movement for women's rights evolved through what critics often call the three waves of modern feminist thought. The first-wave feminist movement, which took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, focused largely on women's right to vote (known as women's suffrage). In the aftermath of the acquisition of voting rights, however, some women started to develop a second wave of feminist writing that sought to change the prevalent social relations between men and women. This new wave of feminism focused predominantly on discrimination against women, especially with regard to equality in the social, political and legal spheres.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, first published in English in 1953, marks a crucial turning point in feminist writing. Thematically, it questions the gender distinctions that rendered women second-class citizens. Beauvoir begins the second volume of *The Second Sex* with the now much-cited phrase, "one is not born a woman: one becomes one;" that is, being a woman is not naturally or biologically determined. Rather, women are made as such by the historical, social, and cultural forces surrounding them: "Having a female-sexed biological body does not automatically make one a woman; rather one becomes a woman through a process of initiation into a socially constituted identity" (Kruks 40).

The second wave culminated with the 1963 publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, a work that challenged the limitation of women to homemaking roles, shedding light on the frustrations that women felt about patriarchal hegemony. As second-wave feminists sought to break free from the confines forced on them by patriarchal institutions, they began to insist that "the personal is political," arguing that patriarchy is:

...at work in the home, the state, the church or other religious systems, the law, education, the workplace, in

culture at large, and even in women themselves since women often internalize the values they are fed by powerful external institutions. (Wolfreys 51)

This shows how profound the impact of patriarchal institutions is on personal life. As a result, the meaning of the political sphere extended "to include areas of social life previously treated as 'personal' and positioned in the private realm of the household" (Mack-Canty 154).

Acutely aware of the problems facing women in the patriarchal societies, second-wave feminists launched an unrelenting critique of the patriarchal dualistic thinking that provides support to the oppression of woman. This dualistic thinking divides the world into hierarchical dichotomies such as reason/emotion, mind/body, culture/nature, heaven/earth, and man/woman. These binary poles give priority to the first pole, which is "regarded as superior," over the second pole, which is "regarded inferior" (Mack-Canty 158). As a result of this "hegemonic notion of hierarchical dualism," male is superior to female (Sandilands 19). It was such an increasing sense of superiority that "played a major role in constructing gender in a way so as to distort or exclude women" (Mack-Canty 155). According to Beauvoir, "humanity is male, and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him....He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other" (15-6). As a result of this exclusion, second-wave feminists sought to eradicate "any alignment of women with nature," claiming that "women's liberation can only be achieved by severing the woman-nature connection" (Roach 47).

Third-wave feminism began in the late 1980s in response to the realization that second-wave feminists did not exert much effort to fully eradicate the political and cultural inequalities that are still bombarding women. According to Shukla, third-wave feminists argue that "equality with men as targeted by second wavers has not been achieved and the feminism will not be "dead" until it is achieved" (5). Noticeably, third-wave feminism is primarily concerned with definitions of gender, race, femininity, and sexuality. Furthermore, it "refutes dualistic thinking...recognizing instead the existence of multiplicities" (Mack-Canty 158). As a consequence, third-wave feminism puts "a decreased emphasis upon addressing and overthrowing a perceived oppression by patriarchy and instead

focuses on equality between the sexes" (Shukla 5).

Besides feminism, ecocriticism helped create the atmosphere in which ecofeminism flourished. According to Barry, the roots of ecocriticism can be traced back to British Romanticism—mostly represented by Wordsworth—and American Transcendentalism—embodied by Emerson, Thoreau and Fuller (Barry 161-2). Ecocriticism began in the 1990s, although its roots go back to William Rueckert's 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." Since then, critics have been getting into heated debates about the definition of ecocriticism. Cheryll Glotfelty defines it as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). In a similar vein, David Mazel declares that ecocriticism is the analysis of literature "as if nature mattered" (5).

No longer satisfied with these broad definitions, other critics felt a compelling need to put some definition that would accurately explain the concept. Thus, Richard Kerridge defines ecocriticism as a promising literary project that "seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis" (5). According to this definition, a discussion of texts and ideas is inseparable from a discussion of its strong affinity with environmental crises of modern times. In his essay "Literature, the Environment, and the Question of the Posthuman," Louise Westling describes ecocriticism as "a new critical movement" that is "still working to define itself precisely" (27-8). She takes the discussion to yet another level when she emphasizes that ecocriticism "helps to define the human place within the ecosystem by interrogating or erasing the boundary that has been assumed to set our species apart from the rest of the living community" (30).

While ecocriticism studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment, ecofeminism, short for ecological feminism, is an interdisciplinary movement that blends ecological concerns with feminist ones. According to Eaton and Lorentzen, ecofeminism "encompasses a variety of theoretical, practical, and critical efforts to understand and resist the interrelated dominations of women and nature" (1). The term "ecofeminism" was coined in 1974 by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne, who argues that "the destruction of the planet is due to the profit motive inherent in male

power" (qtd. in Nhanenge 98). Hence, she urges women to lead an ecological revolution "to combat the ecological crisis and the systems of male dominance that have given rise to it" (qtd. in Sherilyn 20).

However, ecofeminism was not fully developed as a consistent literary movement or theory until the 1990s. Of greatest significance in any definition of ecofeminism is the fact that it should interweave the domination of women and the domination of the environment or nature so that the strands are virtually inseparable. Bronwyn James explores this connection convincingly when she says: "As a result of women's close association with the environment, their domination and oppression has occurred in conjunction with the domination and degradation of the environment" (8). At the same time, *Encyclopedia Britannica* asserts that this logic of domination "arises from political theories and social practices in which both women and nature are treated as objects to be owned or controlled."

The basic premise of ecofeminist theory is that the subjugation of both nature and women has its origin in the patriarchal notion of hierarchical dualism as well as in conventional Christianity. The dialectic of duality, which always asserts a superiority of the masculine over the feminine, "has resulted in devaluing whatever is associated with women, emotion, animals, nature, and the body, while simultaneously elevating in value those things associated with men, reason, humans, culture, and the mind" (Gaard 4-5). Perhaps the most striking dualism in that dominant hierarchical vision is the nature/culture dualism which serves to reinforce the idea of essentialism, which could be "interpreted as the claim that women share an inherent, biologically-based affinity with the natural world that men lack" (Armbruster 210). The notion that women are inherently and biologically closer to nature than men has functioned for centuries to promote, enforce and even naturalize "gender inequality by maintaining that it is women's special nature to care for children and men's special nature to create culture and commerce" (Hovey 483). Not only do males take their superiority over females for granted, but they assert their mastery of the natural world as well. Indeed, this is due to the dominant patriarchal culture that male power is emphasized at the expense of women and nature.

In addition to this cultural construct that is often used to justify the oppression of one group by another, ecofeminists sharply criticize conventional patriarchal Christianity for "its anthropocentric arrogance and dominating attitude toward nature" and woman (Glotfelty xxvii). White, for instance, claims that conventional patriarchal Christianity has contributed to promoting woman's as well as nature's inferiority and subordination. He argues that Christianity encourages the exploitation of natural resources by promoting the mastery of man over nature and by advocating the idea that nature has been created for the benefit of man: "We shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man." It is the effect of this masculine, patriarchal ideology that made White conclude that "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" (1205).

Unlike feminism, which "has historically sought to explain and overcome women's association with the natural," ecofeminism, in an effort "to re-embed humanity in its natural framework," champions the positive association of woman with nature (Mellor 180). This close connection to nature will give woman special ways of knowing the world. Moreover, it will enable her "to respond to environmental crises more thoughtfully and productively than men who are invested in dominating nature"(Wilson 431-2). Apparently, what ecofeminists add to feminism is an analysis of "the connections *within* social systems of domination between those humans in subdominant or subordinate positions, particularly women, and the domination of nonhuman nature" (Warren 1). Interestingly enough, the link between the oppression of women and the oppression of natural surroundings within male-dominated cultures leads to another form of oppression called speciesism, the oppression of animals. Singer defines speciesism as "a prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of the other species" (7). For this reason, most ecofeminists are critical of anthropocentrism that places the human being in a transcendent God-like relation to nature.

If second-wave feminists have disassociated women from nature entirely in order to dismantle the hierarchical dualisms,

ecofeminists are eager not only "to expose these dualisms," but also to explore "the ways in which feminizing nature and naturalizing or animalizing women has served as justification for the domination of women, animals, and the earth"(Gaard 4-5). Significantly, ecofeminists stress that unless the values of patriarchal culture are successfully exposed and counteracted, it will be difficult and almost fruitless for women to break free from oppression, and it will be equally fruitless to restore harmony to the damaged earth. As Ruether puts it:

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of society. (*New Woman* 204)

Ruether's view is shared by Gaard who, in a similar vein, argues that "no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature" (1). Indeed, it is this connection to nature that makes it nearly possible for women to oppose oppression in all its forms.

Finally, ecofeminism is far from being a homogeneous, fully coherent theory. Instead, it is extremely diverse. Interestingly enough, Eaton holds an interesting comparison between ecofeminism and a roadway intersection, a meeting place of activists, environmentalists, and feminists, along with local and national groups (*Introducing* 3). On the other hand, Plumwood explores how ecofeminism draws on the various branches of feminism: liberal, radical, and socialist or Marxist. She explains that from liberal feminism, ecofeminism "takes the impulse to integrate women fully as part of human culture." Moreover, from socialist feminism, it draws "an understanding of the processes and structures of power and domination." Finally, from radical feminism, ecofeminism takes "the critique of the masculinity of dominant culture and the aspiration to replace it, to affirm what has been denigrated" from radical feminism ("*Feminism*" 13). The result is a variety of "ecofeminisms" that "have some claim to be the most

inclusive forms of feminism, recognizing in the treatment of nature and animals a greater variety and depth of oppression than other feminist positions"(Plumwood, "ecofeminism" 151). For this reason, Warren practically defines ecofeminism as "multicultural", in the sense that "it includes in its analyses of women-nature connections the inextricable interconnections among *all* social systems of domination" (2).

Smiley is one of the contemporary American novelists who seek to overcome the "twin dominations of women and nature" (Warren 1). Her avowed purpose in writing *A Thousand Acres* was to condemn "the patriarchal appropriation of women and the exploitation of the land" (Leslie 38). Set in rural Iowa in 1979, *A Thousand Acres*—like Shakespeare's *King Lear* which Smiley turns to as a source of inspiration—focuses on a highly dysfunctional family headed by the aging patriarch Larry Cook who lives on a thousand-acre farm in Zebulon County. Suddenly, Cook decides to divide his thousand-acre farm equally among his three daughters: Ginny, Rose, and Caroline.

While Ginny and Rose, who have a passion for farming and the land, immediately accept their father's proposal, the youngest daughter Caroline dismisses her father's plans as ridiculous and is therefore disinherited: "You don't want it, my girl, you're out. It's as simple as that" (21; ch.4). The events unfold through the eyes of Ginny, the first-person narrator of the novel, who focuses on the potential dangers that can be brought on through the misuse of patriarchal power. According to Mathieson, Smiley links:

...the social, political, and personal problems of patriarchy inherent in Shakespeare's play with a twentieth-century awareness of the physical domination and economic exploitation of the natural world by industrialized human cultures. (128)

Smiley's ecofeminist effort is devoted to subverting or deconstructing the patriarchal, male-centered culture that used to cast "oppressed groups as part of a separate lower order whose domination is natural, part of the order of nature" (Plumwood, "*Ecofeminism*" 121). Smiley explores the link between the oppression of women and that of nature through an interconnecting pattern of domestic violence against not

only "family farms" or the landscape, but also against "the force of family itself" (Carlson 12).

The ecologically-aware narrator states that the effect of working on the land of Zebulon County is terribly negative. The first section of the novel focuses on several examples of exploiting and abusing the land. Many years earlier, when the narrator's grandparents came to settle in Zebulon County, the land "was under two feet of water," (14; ch.3) never meant to be farmed. Nonetheless, they began to clear it for farming, claiming that they were "not much for untamed nature" (123; ch.17). Although they have no feeling for the land or its history, they demonstrate an indefatigable interest in using its resources for making large sums of money as quickly as possible. Indeed, this is a palpably clear answer to the questions that plagued Le Sueur since she began her meditation on the human relation to the land:

What does an American think about the land, what dreams come from the sight of it, what painful dreaming? Are they only money dreams, power dreams? Is that why the land lies desolate like a loved woman who has been forgotten? Has she been misused through dreams of power and conquest?" (qtd.in Alaimo 35).

The theme of predation of nature motivated by the illusion of materialistic comfort has been one of the most frequently recurring themes for ecofeminists. Ginny recalls in vivid detail how John Cook, one of her ancestors, persuaded her "great-grandparents to use the money remaining to them to drain part of their land" and farm it using "the newest agricultural and industrial innovations"(14; ch.3). The end of the third chapter reflects how the eco-conscious Ginny conceals a simmering rage at the reckless habits of the prairie settlers who, despite having a land wealthy with "a sea or an ocean of grass," quickly exhausted the land's natural richness and abundance so much that the "grass is gone"(16; ch.3). Grass is normally associated with life, growth, and peace. In the meantime, the absence of grass evokes an image of death and decay, giving the reader a clearer picture of how the land's fertility that had once "surpassed hope" has now disappeared (131; ch.18).

As an ecofeminist, Smiley examines with a discerning eye the

brutal subjugation of the weak by the strong in a patriarchal society. Her novel is an unrestrained attack on the dualistic vision of patriarchy, which is oppressive for women, nature and animals, creatures that are generally regarded as naturally inferior to men. The patriarchal dualistic view of the world, where rational man is the master of unthinking nature,

has given rise to a new world-view in which nature is (a) inert and passive; (b) uniform and mecha-nistic; (c) separable and fragmented within itself; (d) separate from man; and (e) inferior, to be dominated and exploited by man. (Shiva, *Staying* 39)

Internalizing the patriarchal values of his grandparents, Larry Cook "always spoke of the land" they "found with distaste those gigantic gallinippers, snakes everywhere, cattails, leeches, mud puppies, malaria, an expanse of winter ice skateable"(46; ch.8).

Larry was so out of sympathy with the wildness of nature around him, and so out of touch with its quiet beauties, that he developed an aggressive, destructive attitude toward it. His ownership and control of the land "slowly spread as inevitably as ink along the threads of a linen napkin" (132; ch.18)—a fitting image that describes his growing obsession with dominating, controlling, and ultimately destroying the land. Ginny reveals how deeply frustrated she is through her inability to protect the pond from being destroyed by her father who, following his ancestors' example, drained the pond to its last drop, and "took out the trees and stumps around it so he could work that field more efficiently"(85; ch.13). Apparently, the reference to the barren pond emphasizes the decadence and sterility of the life in which Larry's daughters are trapped.

Indeed, Larry is bent not only on controlling the land and draining its flora, but also on clearing its fauna. His usurpation of nature and his wanton rape of virgin wilderness make Ginny so uncomfortable that she is unable to cope with the changes that swirl around her. She is obsessed with a rural world filled with "generations of water plants, birds, animals, insects" that "lived, shed bits of themselves, and died"(131; ch.18). Her real present can never be as beautiful as the imagined past. In one of the most revealing moments in the novel, she says:

I used to like to imagine the millions of birds darkening the sunset, settling the sloughs for a night, or a breeding season, the riot of their cries and chirps, the rushing *hough-shhh* of twice millions of wings, the swish of their twiglike legs or paddling feet in the water, sounds barely audible until amplified by millions. And the sloughs would be teeming with fish: shiners, suckers, pumpkinseeds, sunfish, minnows, nothing special, but millions or billions of them. (131-2; ch.18)

Trapped in an anthropocentric mindset completely dominated by feelings of human superiority, Ginny's father unwittingly follows his instinctive enmity to "members of the other species" lower than him (7 Singer). As Ginny remembers, "Daddy killed animals in the fields every year. Just because they were rabbits and birds"(235; ch.30). Further, she complains that he feels no remorse for cruelly killing vulnerable creatures like "wasps and hornets"(123; ch.17).

As the narrative progresses, Larry goes much further than his ancestors by committing violence against his own female offspring, being seen as a dangerous, wild land that needs to be domesticated. In many respects, the abuse of the land parallels the abuse that Ginny and Rose are forced to undergo. Larry thinks of his daughters and the land as his own exclusive property to treat and use as he wishes. Ginny emphasizes that her father successfully sought to "discipline the farm and ourselves to a life"(46; ch.8) that suits him. Just as the land is exploited and abused by Larry, so are Ginny and Rose rendered in his view to mere possessions rather than human daughters. Rose reminds her sister Ginny of a time when their father used to have undisputed control over them and over environmental resources as well:

You were as much his as I was. There was no reason for him to assert his possession of me more than his possession of you. We were just his, to do with as he pleased, like the pond or the houses or the hogs or the crops. (191; ch.24)

As the relationship of Larry to land grew sterile, so too did the development of dysfunctional relationship between him and his daughters, eventually giving rise to a life of emotional and sexual abuse. The father's complete misreading of daughters stems largely from his arrogant, patriarchal assumption that "children were born to

serve their elders, and that their service was to be directed rather than requested"(89; ch.13). According to "the dominant father-daughter discourse," daughters "are expected ultimately to be compliant and to accept that father and the system he represents" (Sheldon 14). It is no coincidence that Larry feels likewise about his relationship with nature; he believes that "nature has no reason for existence save to serve man"(Benstein 16). According to Ginny, Larry "has a right to everything. He thinks it's all basically his" (179; ch.23). Given this background, it is no wonder that Ginny is always overwhelmed by an unmistakable feeling that the whole landscape belongs, more or less, to her father "the fields, the buildings, the white pine windbreak were as much my father as if he had grown them and shed them like a husk" (20; ch.4). Indeed, Larry learns to treat others, nature and women especially, as objects to manipulate to his own advantage or to destroy, to "shed like a husk," when they are no longer necessary or desirable.

Like King Lear, Larry sees women as "a potently dangerous material" that, "like the natural environment, lacks reason, is morally inconsiderable, and must be kept silent"(Estok 27). Ginny and Rose are frequently taught to succumb to the dictates of their father and never to challenge him. Ginny's "position," like Rose's, "can only be whatever role" her father "gives her, because she submits to his power and depends upon it for protection"(Nothstein 4). Ginny remembers key moments from her early life when she could hardly speak in the presence of her father:

My earliest memories of him are of being afraid to look him in the eye, to look at him at all. He was too big and his voice was too deep. If I had to speak to him, I addressed his overalls, his shirt, his boots. If he lifted me near his face, I shrank away from him. (19; ch.4)

Ginny consciously suppresses her voice simply because her father bends her to his will: "When my father asserted his point of view, mine vanished. Not even I could remember it" (176; ch.22). On the other hand, Rose recognizes family life as a continuing lesson on how fathers have "set out to hurt us!...they've subordinated us to every passing principle and whim and desire"(238; ch.30).

Significantly, the plight of both Ginny and Rose is remarkably

reminiscent in many ways of that of their female predecessors, including their own mother, who were routinely subjected to the whims of man. Like their female precursors, Ginny and Rose are forced to participate in stereotypical female activities and follow women's traditional roles that often place them in the home as mothers and homemakers, reliant upon and subordinated to men. Due to the early death of their mother, they have lost the mentor or role model who could guide them to a sense of family, belonging, and community and to an understanding of their uneasy father as well. As Ginny complains:

My mother died before she could present him to us as only a man, with habits and quirks and preferences, before she could diminish him in our eyes enough for us to understand him. (20; ch.4)

Having a low opinion of women, Larry imposes his will on his daughters, a process that renders them "worthless and unlovable"(185; ch.24), and finally puts them on a lower social rung. Caught between the oppressive expectations of their father and the traditions of his masculine community, the two sisters fail to take on a role beyond the household; they are thrust into unfulfilling conventional domestic matters related to running the household. From an ecofeminist standpoint, the only choice available to women in a patriarchal culture is for them to be "located in the spheres of reproduction, child raising, food preparation, spinning and weaving, cleaning of clothes and houses, that are devalued in relation to the public sphere of male power and culture" (Ruether, "Ecofeminist" 39).

Embodying and perpetuating the traditions of a deeply masculine, patriarchal society, Larry expects that his daughters, like their mother, only set aside their personal interests in favor of maternity and domesticity. Their mother dead, the responsibility of taking care for Caroline, their baby sister, is assigned to them. "My father," Ginny explains, "declared that Rose and I were old enough to care for our sister, and that was that"(63; ch.10). Although the burden of Caroline's upbringing is an entirely new thing for them, they succeed in protecting her from their father's abuse, a goal they ironically fail to secure for themselves. As Ginny observes,

Rose and I were always proud of how well we had done

with Caroline, proud that we had taken good care of our doll, and the reward was the knowledge that she would live a life that each of us had thought about with some longing. (318; ch.40)

Since patriarchy limits the female realm to maternal and domestic chores, it is no wonder that Ginny and Rose's proper sphere is the home where they should show considerable interest in "the look and size of the house and garden, the colors of the buildings"(5; ch.1). This is a typically patriarchal concept that aims at establishing masculine domination, a concept that is graphically outlined by Tennyson in *The Princess: A Medley*:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey;
All else confusion. (5.437-41)

According to Tennyson's conventional rules of social order, an ideal woman is the one who prefers the comfort of caring for a husband and children. Otherwise, she descends into chaos.

Neither Ginny nor Rose scores any real point beyond the household activities. A real challenge, however, faces Ginny when Rose is unfortunately diagnosed with breast cancer. Seeing her sister withering away, Ginny feels bound by duty to provide her with loving care. Not only does she do her sister's share of the household chores, but she also takes on the responsibility of cajoling her back to normal life, "driving her to Zebulon Center for her treatments, bathing her, helping her find a prosthesis, encouraging her with her exercises"(9; ch.2). Almost against her will, she ends up spending her days in cooking and taking care of three families:

I was cooking for three households -for my father, who insisted on living alone in our old farmhouse, for Rose and her husband, Pete, in their house across the road from Daddy, and also for my husband, Tyler, and myself. (7; ch.2)

The situation worsens when Ginny is compelled to slip into conventional feminine roles where her "morning at the stove started before five and didn't end until eight-thirty"(7; ch.2).

In an effort to identify the interrelated oppression of women

and animals, a metaphor of particular interest to ecofeminists, Smiley portrays Ginny as a caged bird consigned to a private and socially peripheral space. At home, Ginny, like Virgilia of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, is walled off from the real world and hence becomes "one of the commodities of the controlled space that home...represents." If home "is a safe place (for men) where men are in control," it is ostensibly a place of "submission" for women (Estok 42). This suffocating environment denies the two sisters the freedom necessary for the development of a truly satisfying life. They anxiously seek to recapture a spirit of freedom so that they can overcome the sterility enveloping their life. Reflecting on the lack of freedom in her life, Ginny muses, "It was such a lovely word... 'freedom,' a word that always startled and refreshed me when I heard it" (109; ch.15).

It should be stressed that the final goal for Larry is to make sure that his daughters, being "exploitable resources" and "possessions that satisfy his needs," are quite supportive of his life choices or "his farm system" (Carden 186). This calls attention to the ecofeminist idea that masculine identity is based primarily, perhaps exclusively, on controlling and even conquering women as well as nature. This demonstrates how women's oppression has become "a part of a larger scheme of domination, mistreatment, and exploitation," a scheme that is "described variously as a rape mentality, a patriarchal mindset, a drive to conquer" (Cuomo 26). Indeed, Ginny and Rose are so disabled by their masculine culture that their effort to move into a better situation is doomed to fail from the start. Ginny feels that she and her sister are placed at the mercy of a repressive, domineering father from whom "there was no escape" (219; ch.28). Hall notes that "the isolation of living on a farm and under their father's dominance and control reveals the potential danger for women and girls in traditional patriarchal society" (373).

One of the concerns that lie at the heart of ecofeminism is the portrayal of man as a relentless hunter and destroyer. From the Neolithic epoch onward, hunting was literally an exclusively male occupation. According to ecofeminists, man is closely connected with hunting, a practice that should metaphorically as well as literally be interpreted. This striking metaphor is reminiscent of Alfred

Tennyson's poem "The Princess" in which he says: "Man is the hunter, woman is his game" (5.147). On the metaphorical level, this brings into light the archetypal dominance of males and submission of females. Moreover, it draws parallels between aggressive exploitation and colonization of nature and that of the female body. It is noteworthy that the colonization of the bodies of women and animals emerges as a dominant aspect of ecofeminism. Gruen explicitly focuses on this particular aspect of ecofeminism when she says:

The categories "woman" and "animal" serve the same symbolic function in patriarchal society. Their construction as dominated, submissive "other" in theoretical discourse has sustained human male dominance. The role of women and animals in postindustrial society is to serve/be served up; women and animals are the used. Whether created as ideological icons to justify and preserve the superiority of men or captured as servants to provide for and comfort, the connection women and animals share is present in both theory and practice. (61)

In their persistent "attempts to combine a feminist with an environmental politics to provide a route to the liberation of both" (Sandilands xix), ecofeminists fully support the female claim that "posits a continuum between the 'body of nature' and female bodies" (Gairn 177). A sophisticated predator, Larry has a malicious intent to treat woman's body, in Adrienne Rich's words, as "the terrain on which patriarchy is erected" ("*Of Woman Born*" 38). In other words, he treats woman's body as a battlefield or a site where he practices his patriarchal game. According to Rich, "patriarchal culture...has literally colonized the bodies of women" (*On Lies* 225). Appropriately enough, Smiley begins her novel with an epigraph from Meridel Le Sueur:

The body repeats the landscape. They are the source of each other and create each other. We were marked by the seasonal body of earth, by the terrible migrations of people, by the swift turn of a century, verging on change never before experienced on this greening planet.

In this way, Smiley appears to invite readers to read the book as an ecofeminist critique of male appropriation of the female body as a

microcosm of the landscape.

The female body has become one of the most recurrent preoccupations of ecofeminist thought which insists "that women's bodies and Earth have each been treated as the 'other' within a framework of hierarchical dualism" (Isherwood 53). A control or colonization of the female body as a kind of landscape acts as an important catalyst in the development of the characters of both Ginny and Rose. Just as Larry left his subtle marks, his anthropocentric history, or his masculine culture on the intact landscape or feminine nature, so did he on the female bodies of Ginny and Rose. Given that man regards "woman's body" as "his property, his thing," (Beauvoir 176), it is perhaps not surprising that Larry considers the female body the site of his violent hunt. Indeed, the two sisters' bodies suffer various types of abuse similar to those afflicting the land; as Mies and Shiva put it in their book, *Ecofeminism*: "aggression against the environment was perceived almost physically as an aggression against our female body" (498).

With a physically abusive father, Ginny and Rose are regularly subjected, as vulnerable children, to psychological and physical abuse that grows increasingly from worse to worst. Ginny is haunted by a host of indelible childhood memories that reflect her own upbringing and family dynamics. McDermott notices that "almost all of the memories of childhood that emerge in the novel are associated with punishment" (400). For instance, she clearly remembers her father spanking her "with the flat of his hand, on the rear and the thighs" for losing "a shoe in the cloakroom" at school (182; ch.23). When the mother attempts to protect her vulnerable child from her father's predatory acts, her attempt is not successful as usual. "I backed up," Ginny remembers, "till I got between the range and the window, and I could hear Mommy saying, 'Larry! Larry! This is crazy!' He turned to her and said, 'You on her side?'" (182; ch.23). The mother is particularly bitter about the hardship inflicted on her child, to whom she is deeply attached. The father ultimately asserts his authority over the child, proving himself capable of infinitely suppressing her.

When I got to the middle of the room, 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. That was what a united front meant to him. (183; ch.23)

As a consequence of his ruthless treatment, the female members of the family conclude that the real lesson is that they live in a male-dominated society that has no place for the female viewpoint: "There's only one side here, and you'd better be on it" (183; ch.23).

Obviously, Ginny's father is depicted as a monstrous man who forces his daughters to submit unquestioningly to his own impulsive anthropocentric desires. Ginny confesses: "He made me see things from his point of view" (212; ch.27). In order not to expose herself to further jeopardy, she deludes herself into believing that "it was silly to talk about 'my point of view.'" When my father asserted his point of view, mine vanished" (176; ch.22). Finally, she states categorically that her father's "presence in any scene had the effect of dimming the surroundings" (48; ch.8). Even when he is not around, she can feel his presence, an inescapable presence that drains her and her sister, and deprives them from being all that they might be, all that their mother would like them to be. In an attempt to protect her children from the risks they may face in an increasingly dangerous environment, Ginny's mother, a perfect foil to Larry, never stops worrying about them. As her friend, Mary Livingstone, comments:

Ginny, your mother wasn't afraid for herself....She was afraid for you. For the life you would live after she died.... she wanted you to have more choices. I know she wanted you to go to college. She never wanted you to marry so young, before seeing some other places and trying some other things. (91; ch.13)

The domination of the female body does not stop, however, with the physical abuse and the psychological bondage of the two sisters; it continues in the form of sexual abuse that turns the body into "a text created by male prerogatives and written on by male discourse" leaving a permanent mark (Cucinella 38). Clearly, the female body becomes the arena where male power is exercised. Larry's desire to assert mastery and control over the female body allows him to sexually abuse both Ginny and Rose when they were teenagers. Obviously, the rape of the two young sisters closely parallels the rape or exploitation of natural resources. The female body is carefully juxtaposed to the pastoral or rural landscape that man explores and

directly inflicts harm upon. Throughout the development of the plot, there is vivid description of the brutal abuse of both land and women. Their shared predicament is that each is regarded as a wildness or a primitive state that must be contained and made to civilize within patriarchal structures. It is interesting to note that the ecofeminist poet Denise Levertov had an abiding interest—similar to that of Smiley—in associating women, animals and the earth together, creatures that, she felt, are wrongly portrayed and maligned. In "Urgent Whisper," she skillfully depicts the way man maltreats woman and the earth:

a silent delicate trembling no one has spoken of,
as if a beaten child or a captive animal
lay waiting the next blow. (*Breathing the Water* 38)

The earth or woman is described as "a beaten child or a captive animal" that lies "waiting the next blow" (38).

Through rape, Larry directs a devastating blow to his daughters. According to Brownmiller, rape or sexual coercion is about power; it "is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear" (15). With the echo of fear ringing in her ears, Ginny denies that she is raped by her father, and goes through a period of muteness. Her repression of these painful memories renders her unable to identify her father as the main source of her misery. It is in the following exchange between Rose and Ginny that the mystery of rape is discussed most clearly.

"He was having sex with you."
"He was not!"
"I saw him go in! He stayed for a long time!"
"Times always seem longer in the middle of the night. He was probably closing windows or something." (189; ch.24)

It is not until Rose forces Ginny into the confession of the truth about rape that the latter begins to speak candidly about it. She starts to describe in detail the unspeakable cruelties that she endured under an abusive father, masculine cruelties that left her broken, damaged, with an inescapable burden of shame about her body. As she confesses: "My body told me that my shame was a fact awaiting his discovery" (195; ch.25). Soon, she finds out that "One thing Daddy took from me

when he came to me in my room at night was the memory of my body" (280; ch.35). Speaking as an ecofeminist, Ginny asserts that she is truly uncomfortable with her own body: "I saw that I was naked inside my clothes" (278; ch.35). This discomfort in one's own body definitely underlies a diminished sense of self and a feeling of shame.

The story takes a major turn with the conversation of the two sisters immediately after this awed confession. Up to this point, Ginny has been painted as a submissive woman. After confronting her shame openly, however, she begins to develop a new perception of her own life, of the lives of the people around her and of the immediate surroundings as well. Listening attentively to Rose's painful words, she gradually fits the pattern of her life to the history of the place, a history of exclusively parental ownership. Like "the pond or the houses or the hogs or the crops," she and Rose are conceived by Larry to be "just his, to do with as he pleased" (191; ch.25). Obviously, the force of this ecofeminist story comes from women's identification with all those that are too weak to protect themselves.

This ecofeminist theme also comes into focus when the identification between Ginny and her innocent nieces is underscored. When Ginny goes into the bedroom of her nieces, she finds them sleeping in the bed in which Larry used to sexually abuse her. Naturally, the scene prompts her to recall the forced invasion of her body and to wonder whether this could possibly happen to her nieces.

How could anyone approach them with ill intent? How could anyone be moved not to protect them, but to hurt them, especially like his, in the middle of the night, at the sight of their harmless, resistless sleeping bodies? (193; ch.25)

The bedroom scene gives Ginny a chance to reflect on the values of her oppressive patriarchal society, values that pigeonhole those who are vulnerable into demeaning positions. If Ginny's greatest fear seems to be that her infant nieces may be helplessly fated to become what she and Rose had become, the sight of the "harmless, resistless sleeping bodies" generally refers to all those who are historically considered to be weak and inferior, especially children, women, and nature. As Ginny realizes, "of course, it hadn't been their bodies, it had

been ours, or Rose's, rather. But mine, too" (193; ch.25).

As always, the dominant concern of ecofeminists is the crushing weight of masculine tyranny and ecological sin, and their effects on female characters as well as nature. In fact, this takes on considerable symbolic significance when Ginny literally suffocates under the weight of her father: "I remembered his weight, the feeling of his knee pressing between my legs, while I tried to make my legs heavy without seeming to defy him" (280; ch.35). The weight she carries obviously symbolizes the inescapable burden imposed on her race by an oppressive masculine heritage where male will dominates female lives. Nothing can aptly describe Ginny's situation ~~but~~ better than Sara's final words in *Bread Givers* by Anzia Yezierska, where Sara says "I felt the shadow still there, over me. It wasn't just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was still upon me" (297). What Sara's words emphasize is the nature of the heavy burden a female is forced to carry in a male-dominated society.

The suggestive juxtaposition of the land and the female body also enables Smiley to draw parallels between the polluted agricultural landscape and the poisoned or diseased female body. According to Mathieson, Smiley's "novel repeatedly parallels the technological invasion of the landscape with the mastery and abuse of the female characters" (135). Smiley seems to emphasize the ecofeminist view that the female body is intimately connected to nature that has been demolished in the name of progress. Profoundly influenced by a nature that has been raped and poisoned, most of the novel's female characters struggle against environmental hazards and diseases. Noticeably, "chemical poisoning of farmland for agricultural power not only causes but echoes the poisoning of the women's bodies in the novel, leading to cancer and a plague of miscarriages (Mathieson 135).

Obviously, patriarchal farming practices have stripped the soil of its natural fertility, and damaged the ecosystem. As Ginny's neighbor, Mary explains,

Oh, Ginny, goodness me, everything is toxic. That's the point. You can't avoid toxins. Thinking you can is just another symptom of the toxic overload stage....I was cutting out something every month, desperately looking

for just the right combination of foods. I was crazy. I was getting thinner, but then you store the toxins in your muscles and organs and it's actually worse. (29; ch.5)

Like the polluted land, the female body is obviously impossible to render productive. Ginny has had several miscarriages, and she is desperate to be a mother. Her lover, Jess Clark, insists that her numerous miscarriages are caused by toxins or "nitrates in well water" (165; ch.21). As a direct result of exposure to environmental toxics, female bodies have been disfigured. Ecofeminist critic Catherine Cowen Olson emphasizes that well water "turns out to be laced with poisons that furtively kill off the women and cause their miscarriages" (21). What is even worse, it causes the death of farm wives who "collapse under the strain" (187; ch.24).

Evidently, Ginny and Rose deal with life's horrors differently. If Ginny is motivated by love for those who are close to her, by deep interest in nature, and certainly by a desire to acquire a new self, Rose—like her father—is driven by an urge to self-gratification, regardless of consequences. Ginny observes the parallel between Rose and her father—both are overcome by possessiveness, selfishness, and insensitive manipulation of others. She begins to believe that Rose and Larry "were two of a kind, that was for sure" (68; ch.10). Finally, she realizes that her sister has always been motivated by self-serving interests: "I guess you want everything for yourself" (304; ch.38). She skillfully employs animal imagery to suggest the nature of her relationship with her sister, imagery that paints a picture of the speaker as a submissive, obedient, and harmless dog that constantly seeks its master's approval. In contrast, Rose represents the kind of dog that is notoriously competent at tracking down enemies, barking wildly and scaring them away.

Rose...sometimes...affected me that barking dog way, never resting for all the alarms there were to sound. And the dog in me was one of those other, less alert but still excitable animals who couldn't help joining in and barking with equal frenzy. (244; ch.31)

Rose's selfishness slowly tears her relationship with Ginny apart, especially when she has an affair with Jess Clark, her own sister's lover. "It is Rose's betrayal that hurts Ginny the most – drives her nearly mad, in fact – because that was the relationship she had the

most faith in" (Malmgren 440). If Rose dedicates herself totally in her later life to the cause of punishing her father and intensifying his suffering, Ginny exposes the larger framework of patriarchal society and its institutions that produce significantly different models of aggressive, compelling patriarchs who are bent on draining both women and nature. She expresses her disdain toward the hypocritical nature of male-dominated society:

But he did fuck us and he did beat us. He beat us more than he fucked us. He beat us routinely. And the thing is, he's respected. Others of them like him and look up to him....Either they don't know the real him and we do, or else they do know the real him and the fact that he beat us and fucked us doesn't matter. Either they themselves are evil, or they're stupid. That's the thing that kills me. (302; ch.38)

Ginny's words emphasize the tension between appearance and reality, a central theme that is woven into this story in such a way that male characters, though wrong and inherently blind, are made to seem right basically because they are male. The disparity between the outward appearance of respectability and harmony and the cruel reality that lies beneath disturbs Ginny because it implies that evil is latent in the most bland and seemingly innocuous locations. Obviously, this is an outspoken criticism of conventional patriarchal Christianity that, according to ecofeminists, encourages the exploitation of woman and nature by advocating that woman and the earth are here to serve the interests of man (White 1205). It is perhaps not surprising that Larry, the man who attends church frequently, "beats and fucks his own daughters," and feels no remorse for ruining them. Worse yet, he "can go out into the community and get respect and power, and take it for granted that he deserves it" (302; ch.38). It is for this reason that Ginny has given up seeking inspiration in religion.

Instead of imitating her broken-in-body-and-spirit sister, Ginny seeks to detach herself from the hypocrisy and pretension that dominate patriarchal society. At the beginning, she appears to be more comfortable in her attempt to emotionally withdraw from her family, reestablishing a right relationship with nature and thus with herself. For Ginny, reminiscence of the natural beauty provides a kind of

solace, a respite from her pain and from her harsh reality. It seems that memory acts "as a catalyst against oppression" (Buckman 93). Through memory, she builds a deep sense of feminine harmony with the natural world around her, a harmony which stands in stark contrast to the masculine exploitation and domination of nature. Her memories of this special connection with nature are nostalgically expressed in the following excerpt:

I also always aware, I think, of the water in the soil, the way it travels from particle to particle, molecules adhering, clustering, evaporating, heating, cooling, freezing...endlessly working and flowing, a river sometimes, a lake sometimes. When I was very young, I imagined it ready at any time to rise and cover the earth again, except for the tile lines. (16; ch.3)

Ginny's love of nature is specifically associated with her happy childhood memories and the joyful times she used to have in a farm untouched by the outside world. She nostalgically describes her own experiences with many of the objects associated with farm life like water, plants, birds, animals, insects, fish, and the soil that used to be "the treasure, thicker, richer, more alive with a past and future abundance of life than any soil anywhere"(132; ch.18). Obviously, these awesome views are overwhelming and indelibly imprinted upon Ginny's memory. Through the process of memory and recollection, she submits to a temporary isolation from her cruel reality until she fully realizes that her society's patriarchal culture is not attuned to the rhythms of nature or woman. The association of incest with nature and woman predominate in Smiley's novel. The flora, fauna, and wilderness which fostered Ginny's love for nature no longer exist. Nature is wiped clean of "all the greenery" that once "sparkled with new life." It is easy to recognize that not only "the pond, but also the house, the farm garden, the well, the foundations of the barn, all were obliterated" (205; ch.26).

Ginny's desire for a more fulfilling life has been prompted by two things: the destruction of nature and the betrayal of her sister. No longer finding solace in nature or seeing her sister as "a savior," she begins to realize that she can never move forward into that fulfilling life without exorcizing nature and women subordination whose strings

are entangled inextricably in the patriarchal doctrine of her society. Once again, Smiley uses a metaphor from nature to describe the situation of her protagonist in patriarchal culture; Ginny says:

I felt another animal in myself, a horse haltered in a tight stall, throwing its head and beating its feet against the floor, but the beams and the bars and the halter rope hold firm, and the horse wears itself out, and accepts the restraint that moments before had been an unendurable goad. (198; ch.25)

This can be read as a metaphor for women's lives under patriarchy. The home, indeed life, becomes a "tight stall" or a prison for woman; only man—the guard—holds the keys. Naturally, in a prison, guards have power over prisoners. With her imprisonment within the larger prison of an unjust world, woman, though strong and patient like a horse, cannot shake off the chains of bondage.

Significantly, this horse metaphor is intended to awaken in the narrator an awareness of both the strength and patient endurance of a horse, an awareness that will help the narrator recall her own inner strength. The narrator's association with the horse represents the enduring connection between animal and man, a theme of particular interest to ecofeminists. Such a connection foreshadows the possibility of change and escape from the patriarchal world; it is a metaphor for freedom. More importantly, the image of the horse and its dormant strength implies that the narrator now experiences a sense of confidence and vision that she previously lacked. She reaches a new understanding of life where she truly sees the members of her family as they really are: "The strongest feeling was that now I knew them all....I saw each of them from all sides at once" (305; ch.39).

It is at this point that Ginny begins to realize that she is capable of being more than the weak and dependent farm wife. She seems to be ready to create a new reality for herself, a reality in which she breaks free from the confining codes of patriarchy, the "unendurable goad" that paralyzes her freedom. She ultimately determines to leave her past history of marginalization behind and move to Minnesota: "I knew I had to do something to rid myself of the sight and sense of their nearness" (309; ch.39). Without the delusions with which her past drained her present of meaning, she is forced to face the past

honestly before she can let it go. She comes to a realization or recognition similar to that of Holgrave, the protagonist of Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, who clearly asks:

"Shall we never, never get rid of this Past? ... It lies upon the Present like a giant's dead body. In fact, the case is just as if a young giant were compelled to waste all his strength in carrying about the corpse of the old giant. (161)

At the end, Ginny becomes strong enough to confront her past and unbind the cords of patriarchal ideas which chain her in a psychological, even physical bondage. She feels a relief that really comes from her first taste of freedom: "I had a burden lift off me that I hadn't even felt the heaviness of until then, and it was the burden of having to wait and see what was going to happen" (367; ch.45).

In conclusion, Smiley's novel represents a significant contribution to expanding our understanding of woman and the environment. This ecofeminist reading of the novel shows that the degradation of nature, the oppression of women, and the suffering of vulnerable creatures under patriarchy are parallel, if not perfectly identical. The devastation of woman and the environment has been caused by the patriarchal dualistic assumption that men are superior to women, and that humans are privileged over animals and nature. Only after Ginny has the will to dismantle or deconstruct these dualistic structures does she manage to "share the world with all creatures and all living things and know that their stories are [her] own" (Sale 305). In identifying patriarchy, Ginny is "loyal to future generations and to life and this planet itself" (Mies and Shiva 14). Eventually, after much perseverance and resistance, she achieves victory by creating a female space for herself and by "retelling...her story through her eyes, in her voice" (Kessel 245).

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