JOURNAL OF NARRATIVE AND LANGUAGE STUDIES | ISSN: 2148-4066
NALANS
Journal of Narrative and Language Studies – December 2020, Volume 8 – Issue 15

"Everything is Toxic": Ecological Loss and Grief in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*[1]

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APA Citation:
Köroğlu Çallı, Neslihan (2020). "Everything is toxic": ecological loss and grief in jane smiley's a thousand acres. *Journal of Narrative and Language Studies, 8* (15), 187-201

Abstract

'Ecological grief' can be termed as the feeling that we experience due to 'ecological loss' caused by either natural or man-made events. Given that we have been living through the age of Anthropocene in which environmental changes are mostly man-made, American writer Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1991) can be counted as a novel that sheds light on the destructive consequences of exploitive human actions enacted on valued landscapes. As a powerful feminist retelling of William Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1606), Jane Smiley reimagines the playtext in the American Midwest in 1979 when the United States underwent an agricultural crisis and the land was systematically exploited with chemicals and pesticides to increase capitalistic productivity. Smiley's critique of equating the land with the female body in *A Thousand Acres* is put forward provocatively as an ecofeminist concern since eco-blind and patriarchal ideology results in loss of deep contact with the natural world and brings 'grief' to the lives of particularly female characters in the novel. To this end, the scope of this article is to analyse 'ecological loss and grief' concept in relation to Jane Smiley's ecofeminist vision as it is embodied in *A Thousand Acres*.

Keywords: ecological loss, grief, Anthropocene, ecofeminism, *A Thousand Acres*

Introduction

Jane Smiley is the first contemporary woman writer who retold William Shakespeare's canonical play *King Lear* (1606) from a feminist perspective in her 1992 Pulitzer Prize recipient work *A Thousand Acres*. However, telling 'the other side of the story'[2] through the lenses of Ginny – equivalent to Goneril in *King Lear* – and thus, creating a domestic account of the

[1] I hereby declare that some parts of this article have been extracted from my unpublished PhD dissertation entitled "Shakespeare Retold: Contemporary Visions of the Bard" which was submitted to Ege University Social Sciences Institute in August 2020 and supported by TUBITAK International Research Fellowship Programme.

[2] In her book *The Other Side of the Story*, Molly Hite (1989) notes that women writers engaged in rewriting the literary canon have produced alternative texts through which they made a "critique of a culture and a literary tradition apprehended as profoundly masculinist" (p. 2).

tragedy in prose form is not the only characteristic which distinguishes *A Thousand Acres* from other adaptations and appropriations of the playwright. Another distinct characteristic which makes the novel a pioneering example of contemporary women's rewriting practices is its ecofeminist perspective. As regards, Julie Sanders (2001) maintains that not only 'the land' stands as "an extra character in Smiley's densely populated novel" (p. 207) but also "the soils, rivers, pesticide-polluted watercourses – even the farm machinery used to work the land" take part as "crucial players in the particular drama of *A Thousand Acres*" (p. 203). Since the theme of 'exploitation' of the natural world by man-made actions permeates the narrative, Jane Smiley's novel furnishes us with a ground to analyse 'ecological loss and grief.'

Jane Smiley acknowledges that there were two motives for her interest in rewriting *King Lear*. In the first place, she found the conventional readings of the play in which Goneril and Regan are silenced and marginalized frustrating. As she narrates, "[t]here had to be some reason [Lear's] daughters were so angry. Shakespeare would attribute their anger to their evil natures, but I don't believe people in the 20th century think evil exists without cause. I knew where that anger came from" (as cited in Schiff, 1998, p. 370). Smiley's second motive for rewriting *King Lear* is her ecofeminist concerns. In her interview appeared in *Time* magazine, Jane Smiley expresses her distress about the hegemonic idea which views both women and nature as "something to be used," valuable "according to usefulness to men":

> Right before I started the novel, I felt a growing sense of a link between a habit of mind that perceives daughters and children as owned things. I felt, viscerally, that a habit of mind exists in our culture of seeing nature and women in much the same way. In fact, they represent one another in a lot of writing. That's a strong element in King Lear. Lear's always talking about nature and his daughters, conflating the two. (as cited in Farrell, 2011, p. 48)

In *King Lear*, the recurrent appearance of the word 'nature' and its cognates permeate the play with certain references to physical world, human nature and animal world. Simon Estok (2005) contends that "the positioning of natural world in the object status is a thematic and structural status in *King Lear*" (p. 20). As the female body is associated with nature throughout the play, both are degraded into an object position, reflecting the patriarchal ideology the play embodies. Also, Goneril and Regan, who seem at odds with their attributed 'feminine nature' in Lear's eyes, are interpreted as a threat which disturbs the balance and order of the patriarchal world. For King Lear, "women and the environment are each viciously unpredictable and dangerous, and women who communicate freely are monsters" (Estok, 2005, p. 17). In this respect, *A Thousand Acres* can be analysed as a direct counter response to this hegemony embedded in its source text. What Jane Smiley challenges in *A Thousand Acres* is this patriarchal ideology which relies on the dynamics of anthropocentricism viewing 'nature' and 'women' in terms of their service to humankind.

'Ecofeminism' and 'Ecological loss and grief'

The ecofeminist perspective in *A Thousand Acres* recognizably highlights that eco-blind policies and agricultural methods exploit both women and nature to sustain capitalism for the sake of more products and profit; and in the end, here is what we have been living through: the age of Anthropocene. Ashlee Cunsalo and Neville R. Ellis (2018) describe the Anthropocene as "an era in which people the world over are confronted with the prospect of unyielding ecological decline and the loss of environmental futures" (p. 276). Drawing on this definition, an ecofeminist reading of *A Thousand Acres* lays bare that exploitative agricultural policies cause ecological loss which triggers destructive physical and emotional breakdowns in women's lives which they grieve. Exploring ecological loss and grief in *A Thousand Acres*

requires a brief look into 'ecofeminism' since the novel exhibits that ecological decline is rooted in the interrelated oppression of nature and the female body.

As a blended approach of 'ecology' and 'feminism,' ecofeminism emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s as "a woman-identified movement" (Mies and Shiva, 2014, p. 14) to underline that "ecological and feminist issues are inextricably intertwined" (Oppermann, 2013, p. 21). As Ynestra King declared at 'Women and Life on Earth: A Conference on Eco-Feminism in the Eighties,'[3] ecofeminist theory mainly draws attention to "devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors, and the threat of nuclear annihilation, and the military warriors" (as cited in Mies and Shiva, 2014, p. 14). Although ecofeminism is diverse in its genealogies[4], a large number of ecofeminists object to the generic assumption of Western ideology which sees women and nature in a subordinated position to men and culture. Ecofeminism claims that it is this ideology which provides a basis for the oppression of all "others" whom Karen Warren (2000) describes as "women, people of color, children, and the poor, and 'earth Others,' such as animals, forests, the land" (p. xiv). In this sense, ecofeminism utilizes gender as its genesis to lay bare the unjustified domination of those who have been "marginalized, devalued, pathologized, or naturalized" (p. xiv). Warren's remarks on ecofeminism are also echoed by Greta Gaard (2001), in her article "Women, Water, Energy: An Ecofeminist Approach", as she maintains that ecofeminism is "more than a theory about feminism and environmentalism, or women and nature" (p. 158) as its name suggests, rather it aims to reveal "environmental degradation and social injustice" in our world are rooted in our actions: "how we treat nature and how we treat each other are inseparably linked" (p. 158). Ecofeminism highlights that inequalities which are reinforced by "multiple system of dominance" (Mies and Shiva, 2014, p. 14) cannot be fully eliminated unless hierarchal dichotomies in all parties such as man / woman, culture / nature, reason / emotion and master / slave are deconstructed. According to Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (2014), these dichotomies are simply "antagonistic" (p. 5) because patriarchal ideology views 'the other' as "the enemy" – not "the different" (p. 5). These oppositional parties have been integral to the Western ideology since the Enlightenment period and they constitute the backbone of "the European project of so called modernity or progress" (Mies and Shiva, 2014, p. 5). Although the ideals of the Enlightenment manifested itself through the advances in science and technology and thus made a made a promise of "a hopeful future" (Head, 2015, p. 314), they ironically induced ecological crısis of our time. Intertwining with capitalistic productivity, the rationality of these ideals has perceived nature as an entity to be mastered for the sake of humankind which has deepened ecological crisis in the environment. This ecological decline is the cause of ecological loss and the feeling we are left with is grief.

In their article "Ecological grief as a mental health response to climate change-related loss," Ashlee Cunsalo and Neville R. Ellis (2018) point out that 'grief' can manifest itself in myriad forms of mental health disorders, including:

> strong emotional responses, such as sadness, distress, despair, anger, fear, helplessness, hopelessness and stress; elevated rates of mood disorders, such as depression, anxiety,

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[3] The meltdown at Three Mile Island which was caused by the Nuclear Generating Station in Pennsylvania brought women around the United States together to organize the first ecofeminism conference in Amherst, in March 1980. Topics explored were "connection between feminism, militarization, healing and ecology" (Mies and Shiva, 2014, pp. 13-14).

[4] Serpil Oppermann (2013) lists four different categories of ecofeminism as follows: 'liberal ecofeminism', 'cultural ecofeminism', 'social ecofeminism', and 'socialist ecofeminism'. For further reading, please consult *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism* (2013) published by Routledge, pp. 21-22.

> and pre- and post-traumatic stress; increased drug and alcohol usage; increased suicide ideation, attempts and death by suicide; threats and disruptions to sense of place and place attachment; and loss of personal or cultural identity and ways of knowing. (p. 275)

Drawing on ecologist Aldo Leopold's ideas who related the concepts of emotional pain and ecological loss, Cunsolo and Ellis (2018) argue that although 'grief' is commonly associated with the loss of a beloved one and studied widely in psychological literature, its scope can be extended to ecological literature since 'ecological grief' is "a natural response to ecological losses" (p. 275) which is "felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change" (p. 275). 'Ecological grief' is particularly common among individuals who "retain close living, working and cultural relationships to the natural environment, and one that has the potential to be felt more strongly and by a growing number of people as we move deeper into the Anthropocene" (p. 275). In this context, analysing ecological loss and grief in literature is more than a necessity but it is an imperative action. As Lesley Head (2015) maintains, we are now all 'Anthropoceneans' – "citizens of Anthropocene" (p. 315) – and "it feels as though we are hurtling down a hill without any brakes, through an unfamiliar landscape, to an uncertain destination" (p. 314). In this chaotic scenario which will worsen without serious precautions and awareness, more literary attention is needed for 'ecological loss and grief' because literature can provide us with a ground to acknowledge it as a key concept which will enhance our awareness and understanding of the Anthropocene.

A Novel of Toxic Anthropocene: *A Thousand Acres*

Jane Smiley (1999) admits that *A Thousand Acres* was the most difficult to engage among all her books and for this reason, she "blame[s] Mr. Shakespeare" (p. 171). *King Lear* is complex and challenging for any writer who decides to reimagine it on parallel grounds in terms of character formation and plot. However, *A Thousand Acres* refashions the characters and parallels the plot of *King Lear* skilfully. Jane Smiley also follows the subplot of *King Lear* closely and rewrites the Gloucester story by reimagining them as the Clark family. *A Thousand Acres* is set in Iowa, Zebulon County, on a thousand acres of farmland, in 1979. The family patriarch Larry Cook (equivalent to King Lear) decides to divide the land among his three daughters. Whereas the youngest Caroline expresses her doubt about the plan, Ginny and Rose's response to it was "a good idea" (Smiley, 1991/1995, p. 19). Larry excludes Caroline, and his decision results in events which pave the way for physical and emotional breakdown of the family. Larry regrets his decision after having learnt that his daughters and sons-in-laws, Ty (equivalent to Albany in *King Lear* – Ginny's husband) and Pete (equivalent to Cornwall in *King Lear* – Rose's husband) have decided to farm the land at odds with his expansionist farming methods. Once he loses his authority over the land and his daughters, he curses Ginny at a stormy night, accusing his daughters of stealing 'his' land. At the end of a series of events, Ginny has an affair with Jess Clark (Harold's younger son – equivalent to Edmund in *King Lear*); Harold (equivalent to Gloucester in *King Lea*r – Larry's neighbour) is blinded in a farm accident because of spraying himself with ammonia; and Larry dies at a grocery store. Rose dies because of her breast cancer and Ginny leaves his husband Ty. The novel ends with the loss of a thousand acres land to Heartland Corporation and Ginny's decision to start a new life in the urban after adopting Rose and Pete's children Pammy and Linda.

Jane Smiley's ecofeminist perspective instantly arrests the reader's attention as she entitles the novel as *A Thousand Acres*. Such a title disinherits the role of Lear as the human protagonist and hints that "power, status, place, and spirit" that a thousand-acres farm symbolizes will be

the site on which the "tragedy and loss" are enacted for all characters (Mathieson, 1999, p. 128). This subtle revision also serves to undermine the authoritative tone embedded in the title of the play privileging Lear over nature because in Smiley's novel "a thousand acres" connotes a landscape that has boundaries. In Shakespeare's play, the kingdom of Lear has no constraints, thus his power "seem[s] immeasurable and his fall cataclysmic" (Alter, 1999, p. 152). On the other hand, in *A Thousand Acres*, Larry's authority is defined by "a narrow and restricted territory" which is "a thousand acres" (Alter, 1999, p. 153).

The novel is centred on quarrels over land. In this regard, it is important to note that Smiley's ecofeminist perspective in *A Thousand of Acres* owes its development to various ecological crises which led to ecological loss during the 1960s and onwards, and to the texts produced as the critique of this ecological ignorance. One of the most important texts produced at the time was Rachel Carson's[5] *Silent Spring* (1962), referred to as "the spark that ignited the modern day environmental movement" (Jameson, 2012, p. 17). Carson's book gives a detailed insight about ecological loss as it exhibits how aggressive agricultural policies resulting from industrialized farming destroy the environment with the use of chemicals and pesticides. The opening sentence of *Silent Spring*, "The history of life on earth has been a history of interaction between the living things and their surroundings" (Carson, 1962/1987, p.5) demonstrates the interrelatedness of living organisms, which is echoed the epigraph[6] of *A Thousand Acres*: "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" (Smiley, 1991/1995). As Hestetun (2017) comments, whereas the first part of the epigraph points out the interrelatedness of nature and living organisms, the second part lays bare that "this harmonious relationship was disrupted in the process of the conquest of the 'virgin land', implicating male domination and the gendering nature" (p. 256). In this respect, the epigraph of *A Thousand Acres* hints that ecological loss in the United States dates back to the first settlement. The ideals of American farming through conquest, possession and control originate in the frontier ideals of the first settlers and colonizers of 'the New World.'

Attending to this conclusion, Annette Kolodny (1975) notes that although the ideals of American pastoralism presents a picture of "harmony between man and nature" and "a return to the primal warmth of womb or breast in a feminine landscape" (p.4), there exists a hidden paradox in the fundamentals of colonization since the success of colonial deeds "depended on the ability to master the land, transforming the virgin territories into something else" (p.7). In the opening pages of *A Thousand Acres*, the reader finds out that the desire to conquer the land had destructive impacts on nature, and these impacts have triggered the ecological loss in the fertile land since the first times of the settlement. When Ginny speaks of her family history, she narrates that her grandmother's parents Sam and Arabella Davis immigrated to the Zebulon County. Their venture started "from the West of England, hilly country, poor for farming […] in the spring of 1890" (Smiley 1991/1995, p.15) and ended in the 'promised land.' The Davis family transformed the land which was "under two feet of water part of the year and another

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[5] Rachel Carson (1907-1964) was a marine biologist and writer. She decided to write *Silent Spring* after receiving a letter from her friend, Olga Owen Huckings in 1958, which narrates "[Olga's] own bitter experience of a small world made lifeless" (1962/1987, "Acknowledgements"). In 2013, Conar Mark Jameson published *Silent Spring Revisited* to give an account on environmental politics since 1962.

[6] Jane Smiley borrows the epigraph from Meridel Le Sueur's "The Ancient People and the Newly Come". Meridel Le Sueur (1900-1996) was an American writer, poet, activist and lecturer. During the 1940s and 50s, she was blacklisted due to her left-wing ideas. Le Sueur was widely interested in feminism, human rights and environmentalism. Her famous treatise "The Ancient People and the Newly Come" first appeared in the collection *Growing up in Minnesota: Ten Writers Remember Their Childhoods*, edited by Chester G. Anderson. The article was republished in Le Sueur's collection, *Ripening: Selected Work* in 1990.

year […] spongy" into an agricultural farm (p. 15). Ginny says that this transformation changed the essence of the landscape and it was no more "the primeval mold" (p.15), but it was "created by magic lines of tile my father [Larry Cook] would talk about with pleasure and reverence" (p. 15).

After two generations, Larry's treatment of the land is more antagonistic since he adheres to industrial agricultural methods which treat nature as an object and an owned good. For the sake of more products, he not only poisons the land and water with pesticides, chemicals and fertilizers but also kills insects and animals with his farming machinery without hesitation. However, when he confronts something that he cannot govern, he is paralyzed because of being "unable to bear the existence of anything that he will not be able to tame and thus turn to enterprise" (Smiley, 1991/1995, p. 65). Ginny speaks of Larry's distress: "Daddy is not much for untamed nature … [d]eathly afraid of wasps and hornets. It's a real phobia[7] with him. He goes all white and his face starts twitching" (p. 132). To that end, Larry demonstrates the characteristic of the male hero in the pursuit of 'conquest', and his hostile treatment of nature destroys the circle of life in the physical environment. Moreover, it is not only Larry Cook but also his neighbours Loren and Harold Clark applying industrial farming methods without considering their fatal effects on living organisms, both human and nonhuman. Jess, who is the second child of the Clark family and appears in the novel as an advocate for organic farming, says that Loren and Harold farm the land as "twin robot farmers": "Time to plow! Time to plant! Time to spray!" (Smiley, 1991/1995, p. 77). Larry, Harold and Loren's dedication to industrial farming can be considered as a reflection of agricultural politics in the United States which made destructive impacts on people's lives and nature especially after the 1960s. In this respect, when 'ecological loss and grief' is analysed in *A Thousand Acres*, it is important to note that the setting of the novel in 1979 in the US Midwest is not a coincidence but a self-conscious choice to make the critique of the crisis American agriculture underwent during these years.

The years 1977-81 were under the presidency of Jimmy Carter in the United States, and Carter, who was a former peanut farmer from Southern Georgia, was accounted for the death of small family farming. During Carter's era, the farmers had no chance but to get loans, therefore their lands were under the threat of foreclosing a mortgage (Cakebread, 1999, p. 88). Although Carter was elected with the hope of "competence and passion" (Sanders, 2001, p. 206), he found himself in the midst of an oil and Iranian hostage crisis. As Peter Conrad observes, during his presidency, "[t]he Iowa land-owners are themselves held hostage by the banks which lend them money and which later, calling in these loans during Reagan decade, ruined the country's agriculture" (as cited in Nakadate, 1999, p. 165). In *A Thousand Acres* direct references are given to the president: "Jimmy Carter ought to do this, Jimmy Carter will certainly do that, all spring long" (Smiley, 1991/1995, p. 7). As Sanders (2001) remarks, Carter's era was marked by loss and failure, and remembered as the years of "the recurring theme of debts, repossessions and suicides" (p. 207). Similar to the rules of Monopoly game they play one night, the Cook family lose their family farm to Heartland Corporation and what they have done so far in terms of farming and living are destroyed in the end. More importantly, the use of fertilizers and pesticides to enhance productivity in Carter's era for more profit costs the health of the people who live on agricultural spaces, hence bringing grief especially to the lives of women.

Ecological Loss and Grief: The Female Experience in *A Thousand Acres*

[7]Larry's hatred for the untamed nature is a symptom of his "ecophobia," which Simon Estok (2011) defines as "irrational and groundless fear or hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism" (p. 4).

It is significant to note that Jane Smiley is remarkably successful in filling the gaps *King Lear* has in her retelling. The novelist casts the protagonist of the playtext as Larry Cook whom Iska Alter (1999) describes as the governing "farmer-monarch" (p.153). As *A Thousand Acres* progresses, the reader finds out that Larry has abused his daughters, Rose and Ginny after their mother's death. Barbara Mathieson (1999) argues that "the most daring act of revision" (p.128) in the novel is to revolve the events around an incest story that creates "a domestic history" (p. 128). However, it is not only his daughters' bodies that the family patriarch Larry Cook penetrates into literally but also his abuse of the physical environment with pesticides, chemicals and fertilizers to increase productivity are rapacious. In this respect, 'incest' becomes the key theme in a larger context which foregrounds Smiley's critical view in "linking 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" (Mathieson, 1999, p. 128). Smiley's feminist revision transforms the story of *King Lear* into a pioneering example of contemporary women's rewriting by touching on the ecological crisis the world has long been going through, and, thus, furnishes us a with ground to explore ecological grief and loss through the lenses of female characters in the novel.

Barbara Mathieson (1999) contends that the portrayal of the land in *A Thousand Acres* "unfolds a narrative of loss, alienation and exploitation" (p. 128). Throughout *A Thousand Acres*, the reader learns the fragmented story of the Cook family, of the Zebulon county as an exploited land and, more broadly, "decaying of the country that is America" through the lenses of Virginia Cook Smith / Ginny / Goneril" (Alter, 1999, p. 148). Thus, Ginny as the narrator[8] becomes Smiley's instrument to problematize Larry's hegemony over women and nature. Jane Smiley's portrayal of the natural world in the opening pages of the novel is vivid and the beauties of the natural world are visualized in the eyes of the reader easily. However, the novelist depicts these natural beauties "a lost pastoral vision" (Mathieson, 1999, p. 134). At the beginning of the novel, when Ginny takes a walk along the Zebulon River, this 'lost pastoral vision' is apparent in her words:

> And there was a flock of pelicans, maybe twenty-five birds, cloud white against the shine of the water. Ninety years ago, when my great-grandparents settled in Zebulon County and the whole county was wet, marshy, glistening like this, hundreds of thousands of pelicans nested in the cattails, but I hadn't seen even one since the early sixties. I watched them. The view along the Scenic, I thought, taught me a lesson about what is below the level of the visible (Smiley, 1991/1995, p. 9).

In Barbara Mathieson's opinion (1999), the portrayal of the Zebulon County as "a landscape of uncurbed beauty and pleasure" (p.134) permeates the narrative; yet, these images of nature are constantly depicted as the lost beauties devastated by man-made actions enacted on nature. The past tense – "I used to like" – Ginny uses to describe Zebulon County in the following quotation reveals that nature is no more fertile in 1979:

> For millennia, water lay over the land. Untold generations of water plants, birds, animals, insects, lived, shed bits of themselves, and died. I used to like to imagine how it all drifted down, lazily, in the warm soupy water – leaves, seeds, feathers, scales, flesh, bones, petals, pollen – then mixed with the saturated soil and became, itself soil. I used to like to imagine the millions of birds darkening the sunset […] I liked to imagine them because

[8] Ginny's status as an unreliable narrator makes the issue of incest ambiguous similar to its sensitive status in the traditional criticism of the play.

> they were the soil, and the soil was the treasure, thicker, richer, more alive with a past and future abundance of life than any soil anywhere. (Smiley, 1991/1995, pp. 141-142)

Here, it is important to note that the issue of 'fertility' needs to be touched on carefully in ecofeminist debates because it has been long discussed as a shared reproduction capacity of women and nature, which has received controversial reception. As already pointed out, the main concern of ecofeminism is the interconnectedness of the oppression of women and nature; however associating them with fertility and thus characterizing both merely as procreative, life-giving and nurturing 'mothers' sound essentialist. Such association deviates ecofeminism from its political concerns and presents the issue of fertility through the lenses of 'spirituality'. As Marlene Longenecker (1997) maintains, ecofeminist 'spirituality' serves only to "revive or adapt ancient or indigenous forms of 'goddess' worship for a late-twentieth century woman-centered theology" (p. 8) because defining women as 'mother earth' and 'mother nature' does reinforce the patriarchal ideology which posits nature and women under the cloak of a "mythic status" (Longnecker, 1997, p. 9). In the light of this discussion, it is apparent that Jane Smiley is cautious about not falling into the trap of this mythic tale as its source text *King Lear* does. Whereas several references to nature as 'goddess' in the playtext associate the female body with a nurturing image, *A Thousand Acres* points out the core of the issue and lays bare that the cause of infertility in nature is man-made, not spiritual. It is this man-made greed that has transformed Zebulon County into a toxic landscape "whose fertility surpassed hope" (Smiley, 1991/1995, p.141). Consequently, all living organisms endure the irrecoverable effects of infertility and ecological loss in nature. To give an example, as the novel progresses, it is revealed that the unknown cause of Ginny's five miscarriages is the contaminated well water and chemical fertilizers used for the land to harvest more crops.

Ashlee Cunsalo and Neville R. Ellis (2018) argue that 'grief' can manifest itself in two forms, either "acknowledged" or "unacknowledged" (p. 280), and ecological loss is "the source of much hitherto unacknowledged emotional pain, particularly for people who remain deeply contacted to, or observant of the natural world" (p. 280). It is my contention that in *A Thousand Acres*, Ginny's grief is 'unacknowledged' which Kenneth J. Doka (2002) terms as "disenfranchised grief" (p. 5) through which "survivors are not accorded 'a right to grieve'" (p. 5). Ginny cannot openly acknowledge the grief she felt for her unborn children whom she lost due to the chemicals in water. She remains silent because of the limitations of the agricultural community in Zebulon County imposed on women. When she recalls her repeated miscarriages, she says: "we never told people […] we'd had miscarriages. We kept it all secret. What if there are women all over the country who've had miscarriages, and if they just compared notes – but God forbid we should talk about it!" (Smiley, 1991/1995, p. 279). Since the farm life in the Zebulon County is marked by silence for women and the issue of infertility has long been the one that needed to be kept private, Ginny had to endure the feeling of grief in an unacknowledged way: "We've always known families in Zebulon County that live together for years without speaking, for whom a historic dispute over land or money burns so hot that it engulfs every other subject, every other relationship or affection" (p. 8). Even Ginny's husband Ty thought that Ginny has had three miscarriages because after the third one, he refused to sleep with her unless they used birth control: "He didn't tell me why, but I knew it was because he couldn't take another miscarriage" (p. 26). Since then, motherhood has become Ginny's "private project" in which she kept her efforts to become pregnant in secrecy. Ginny remembers her most recent miscarriage after the Thanksgiving that "no one knew" (p.27) and she mentions feeling "lucky again" (p. 27) because no one saw her "wad[ding] the nightgown and the sheets and the bed pad into a paper and tak[ing] them out and bury[ing] them under the dirt floor of the dairy barn" (p. 27).

In this respect, Julia Just is correct to define the land as "the novel's overriding metaphor – a rich but deceptive topsoil yielding up secrets of the buried past … layered with long-festering intrigues among jealous neighbours, and poisons blamed for miscarriages and cancer" (as cited in Ploeg, 2005, pp. 37-38). However, as Julie Sanders (2001) comments, there are two more metaphors that permeate the novel when its ecofeminist perspective is taken into consideration: "water and poison" (p. 209). When Jess reveals Ginny that her infertility is due to nitrates added to well water, this revelation stuns Ginny: "Didn't your doctor tell you not to drink the well water? […] People have known for ten years or more that nitrates in well water cause miscarriages and death of infants" (Smiley, 1991/1995, p. 177). Water, as the symbol of fertility in literature and mythology, provides both nature and women with the power of creation and reproduction. Poisoning water means violating female power by man-made chemicals and in this respect, the loss of natural water means the loss of the maternal. Ginny's nostalgic vision for the loss of natural water becomes apparent when she takes Rose's daughters, Linda and Pammy, to the Pike swimming pool. She remembers her time with Rose in the farm pond when they were young and she says: "What Rose and I once did in our pond, simply float on our backs for what seemed like hours, soaking up the coolness of the water and living in the blue of the sky, was impossible here" (Smiley, 1991/1995, p. 101). What becomes impossible now for Ginny and Rose was natural in the past when the pond, "an ancient pothole that predated the farm" (p. 91) was not destructed. Ginny says it was "not long before the death of [their] mother" that "Daddy [Larry] drained the pond and took out the trees and stumps around it so he could work that field more efficiently" (p. 91). Julie Sanders (2001) argues that "unseen and invisible" (p. 211) water pollution which Rachel Carson draws attention to in *Silent Spring*[9] is a major point of discussion in *A Thousand Acres*. According to Teal Willoughby, the presence of the natural water is "archetypal" and it is "a primary element of life on earth, water as common component of both ocean and body, water as a flowing liquid that moves and absorbs other things, water that has unknown depths and unknown origins" (as cited in Mathieson, 1999, p. 140). Smiley shares the same vision since she empowers Ginny with an awareness of the archetypal role of the water:

> I was 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, rising upward to the surface and fogging the cool air or sinking downward, dissolving this nutrient and that, quick in everything it does, endlessly working and flowing, a river sometimes, a lake sometimes. (Smiley, 1991/1995, p. 16)

The novel ostensibly emphasizes the tragic consequences of the loss of this archetypal connection. Gradual poisoning of natural water disturbs the cycle of life for all characters: Pete is drowned in the quarry although it is not known whether it is a suicide after learning Rose's affair with Jess or an accident. Harold's sudden blinding (which is similar to that of Gloucester in *King Lear)* is caused by ammonia sprayed in his face. The only remedy to clear ammonia out is washing it with water immediately; however, the water tank was drained. As for the female characters, it is not only Ginny who faces the appalling effects of the poison in the land and water, but all women in Zebulon County live through the side effects of this poisoning. As Rose speaks of the fate of women in Zebulon County: "First their wives collapse under the strain, then they take it out on their children for as long as they can, then they just reach the end of their rope" (Smiley, 1991/1995, p. 202). Ginny remembers the early death of their mother because of cancer, and says that she died "before I knew her, before I liked her, before I was

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[9] In the chapter entitled "Surface Waters and Underground Seas," Rachel Carson (1962/1987) warns about the seriousness of poisons in water: "one of the most alarming aspects of the chemical pollution of water is the fact that here – in river or lake or reservoir, or for that matter in the glass of water served at your dinner table – are mingled chemicals that no responsible chemist would think of combining" (p. 44).

old enough for her to be herself with me" (p. 99). Jess and Loren Clark's mother dies because of cancer which "started out as breast cancer" but turned out to be "just plain cancer" (p. 55). Rose fights breast cancer throughout the novel and, in the end she loses her life because of its relapse.

Although the sustainability and development of capitalist economy depend on viewing the human body and nature as exploitable sources in *A Thousand Acres*, Jane Smiley offers an alternative vision: organic farming. Although Ginny cannot acknowledge her grief openly for the loss of nature, she turns to the physical environment to find peace. In her private small garden where she grows plants in Zebulon County, she practises organic farming methods. It is the place that totally belongs to Ginny. With her care and affection, this private zone does not display any signs of decay:

> Something that has always amazed me is the resilience of plants. My tomato vines showed no ill effects from the onslaught storm, weren't even muddy, since I had made it a pint to mulch them with old newspapers grass-clip pings. Some of the tenderest marigolds had been beaten down, and the trellis of the peas had fallen partly off its framework, but all the greenery sparkled with new life. I didn't touch anything, certainly didn't tread among the rows, but I stood off to the side and took it all in as if it were a distant promise. (Smiley, 1991/1995, p. 214)

It is not only Ginny but Jess Clark also appears as a character who advocates organic farming openly as a new method against machinery based farming. Instead of the competitive and robotic industrial agriculture**,** Jess "dedicate[s] [himself] to organic farming and make[s] something of [his] beliefs" (Smiley, 1991/1995, p. 78) as he embraces the method of an organic farmer whom he describes:

> He hasn't used chemicals on his land since 1964. He's seventy-two years old and looks fifty. They've got dairy cattle and horses and chickens for eggs, but his wife only cooks vegetarian meals. They get great yields! Just with green manures and animal manure. The vegetable garden is like a museum of nonhybrid varities … I mean it was like meeting Buddha. (p. 234)

Julie Sanders (2001) argues that *A Thousand Acres* is "scarcely optimistic about the fate of this method" since it lasts for a short span of time (p. 206). Although Jess seems "an alternative male figure who could offer Ginny a vent in this system" (Ozdek, 2008, p. 68) and the first person who makes Ginny aware of the harmful effects of the chemicals, he leaves Zebulon County behind after his short-lived affairs with both Rose and Ginny which creates rivalry between sisters. In the end, Jess, whom Iska Alter (1999) describes as "the novel's spokesperson for a fashionable environmentalism" (p.156) turns out to be a womanizer, treating "the bodies of women as sexual landscapes to test, to probe, to use" (p. 156). What Jess represents is ruined similar to the devastation of the landscape and the family. In the end, all human interaction with the landscape is ceased in Zebulon County. In this respect, the novel appears to echo what Carolyn Merchant (1983) states in *The Death of Nature*: "The world we have lost was organic" (1). Smiley depicts the loss of the organic world in a similar way that she portrays the land and the water. They are all lost archetypal figures. To this end, as the title of this article suggests, banker Marv Carson's toxic discourse, which he expresses at the very beginning of the novel, is reassured: "everything is toxic. That's one point. You can't avoid toxins. Thinking you can is just another symptom of the toxic overload stage" (Smiley, 1991/1995, p. 30).

Ginny has a 'darkened vision' for the future of the world when the novel is analysed through the lenses of ecofeminism. When she recalls the polluted quarry in Zebulon County, she speaks

of it as a place full of "hubcaps, tin cans, bashed-in oil drums […] Now I saw the place with a darkened vision. No telling what was in there" (Smiley, 1991/1995, p. 267). It is also important to bear in mind that Ginny's 'darkened vision' is related to the Reagan era in the United States. At the end of the novel, transfer of property to "anonymous, and cynically named" (Sanders, 2001, p. 207) Heartland Corporation is an insightful critique of Ranold Reagan's presidency (1981-1989) which "promoted US supremacy at all costs, and encouraged the American people to buy into the capitalist dream wholesale" (p. 207). Imagining *A Thousand Acres* were written during Donald Trump's presidency, Jane Smiley would adopt the darkest vision; as the president Trump reacts to ecological crisis of climate change by simply asserting: "This is not for time for pessimism," or labelling people with eco-awareness as "perennial prophets of doom" and rejects "their predictions of the apocalypse" (The Strait Times, 2020). In this respect, *A Thousand Acres* also functions as a prophetic novel which envisions the ecological crisis the world would be enduring if the capitalistic or eco-blind policies would continue to ignore what nature says.

Smiley slightly depicts this apocalyptic vision at the end of *A Thousand Acres*. Book Six begins with Ginny's individual course of action in an urban setting where she lives in an apartment and starts to work as a waitress at a restaurant near the highway which is surrounded by "the hum of the air-conditioner" and the sound of the traffic: "There was nothing time-bound, and little that was seasonal about the highway or the restaurant. Even in Minnesota, where the winter was a big topic of conversation and a permanent occasion for people's heroic self-regard, it was only winter on the highway a few hours out of the year. The rest of time, traffic kept moving" (Smiley, 1991/1995, p. 361). Her new life in urban dazzles Ginny and leaves the reader with a feeling of ambiguity about her future: "I saw this as my afterlife, and for a long time it didn't occur to me that it contained a future. That it didn't, in fact, was what I liked about it. I felt a semisubmerged conviction that I had entered upon the changeless eternal" (p. 362). Entering this new phase of life costs Ginny her primal bonds with nature.

Barbara Mathieson (1999) comments that although the novel deals with ecofeminist concerns critically, "Ginny's loss of deep contact with nature at the end of the novel […] evades the goal and intention of ecofeminist consciousness" (p. 141). As Val Plumwood (1993) notes, distancing the female self from the natural world needs to be approached cautiously since "fully human" (p. 22) perspective reinforces "the concept of the human itself, which has in turn been constructed in the framework of exclusion, denial and denigration of the feminine sphere, the natural sphere and the sphere associated with subsistence" (p. 22). Jane Smiley's pessimistic tone does not ignore the fact that the US "grows to possess the largest capital in the world" (Ozdek, 2008, p. 73); that's why the land remains polluted and no hope for its regenerative power is presented at the end of the novel. In the Epilogue, Ginny's awareness about the impossibility of lifting the burden of her toxic past life is apparent:

> although the farm and all its burdens and gifts are scattered, my inheritance is with me, sitting in my chair. Lodged in my every cell, along with the DNA, are molecules of topsoil and atrazine and paraquat and anhydrous ammonia and diesel fuel and plant dust, and also molecules of memory: the bracing summer chill of floating on my back in Mel's pond, staring at the sky; the exotic redolence of the dresses in my mother's closet; the sharp odor of wet tomato vines; the stripes of pain my father's belt laid across my skin […] All of it is present now, here; each particle weighs some fraction of the hundred and thirty-six pounds that attaches me to the earth. (Smiley, 1991/1995, pp. 397-398)

However, Ginny's 'loss of contact with nature' discussion which Mathieson raises might be enhanced. In the midst of the novel, Ginny remembers the abuse of her father which she has long repressed in her memory, and recalls that she did not show any reaction because her father

used to tell: "Quiet, now, girl. You don't need to fight me" (p. 280). In a way, Ginny was advised to be silent. After Rose's revelations, she was left with a feeling as if she "had been shaken to a jelly […] and didn't know how to reconstitute [her]self" (p. 208). Repressing her memories of abuse was indeed her way of creating a shelter. When this shelter is knocked down, Ginny raises her voice to 'reconstitute herself.' When her ex-husband Ty visits herself in the urban, she says:

> You see this grand history, but I see blows. I see taking what you want because you want it, then making something up that justifies what you did. I see getting others to pay the price, then covering up and forgetting what the price was. Do I think Daddy came up with beating and fucking us on his own? […] No. I think he had lessons, and those lessons were part of the package, along with the land and the lust to run things exactly the way he wanted to no matter what, poisoning the water and the topsoil and buying bigger and bigger machinery, and then feeling certain that all of it was 'right', as you say. (p. 371)

Following this quotation, Iska Alter (1999) writes that Ginny is aware of the "paradigm of gendered exploitation" (p. 156) and nature as the victim of this destruction "is, perhaps has always been, irreparably spoiled" (p. 156). Therefore, Ginny follows her own path and decides to "escape" from nature in order to "survive, and tell the story" (p. 156). In a way, through this loss of contact, Ginny, who is now "a fragmented, urbanized, isolated individual" pays the price which "human delusion and greed exact upon our world" individually (Mathieson, 1999, p. 141).

The loss of contact with natural world at the end of the novel is an elegy and 'mourning' for nature. In "Environmental Trauma and Grief" (2012), Marie Eaton describes mourning as a process of "adaptation to loss" (p. 7) which one experiences because of grief (p. 7). According to William Worden (2009), an individual needs to go through four tasks while mourning which he specifies respectively as follows: 'accepting the reality of loss', 'to work through the pain or grief', 'to adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing' and 'to invest energy in life, loosen ties to the deceased and forge a new type of relationship with them based on memory, spirit and love' (p. 39). As nature is a living organism in which human and nonhuman species accommodate themselves, Worden's stages of mourning can also be applied to ecological loss and grief concept. When Ginny's self-realization journey in *A Thousand Acres* is analysed in terms of her relatedness to nature, it can be concluded that she is in the process of mourning when the novel comes to an end. As the first task of 'mourning process' which Worden suggests, Ginny realizes and accepts the environmental loss as she fully understands how the destruction of nature has had a huge impact in her life both physically and emotionally. Secondly, she tries to 'work through' this pain or grief by either raising her voice which had been silenced by patriarchal ideology or being in contact with nature in her small, private organic garden. Her endeavour to live in the urban, an entirely new place for her, is the third phase of mourning process as she tries to adjust her new environment.' The fourth task, that is 'loosening ties to the deceased' and 'forging a new type of relationship with them in memory" occurs through her leaving Iowa farm to invest energy for a life in urban and accepting the inheritance of her toxic past, as previously cited: "although the farm and all its burdens and gifts are scattered, my inheritance is with me, sitting in my chair" (Smiley, 1991/1995, p. 397). When the four stages of mourning are taken into consideration, Ginny is in a new phase in her life, trying to overcome her grief caused by ecological loss and gendered exploitation.

In reaching the end of my paper, I would like to contend that analysing *A Thousand Acres* as an ecofeminist novel in the light of 'ecological loss and grief' has demonstrated that it is urgent to discuss ecological decline and the price we have to pay for it – 'grief.' However, this does not mean to push the paper to a dead end, and my intention is not to leave the reader with a

sense of pessimism. As this paper has discussed in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, there is too much grief that we feel due to ecological losses whether in an acknowledged and unacknowledged way. Therefore, we need to raise 'awareness' about the ecological decline in the Anthropocene and explore 'ecological loss and grief' in the scope of ecological literature. In this way, we may pay our debt to nature that we have failed to live in harmony.

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