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Of Fathers and Daughters: Reimaging *King Lear* in *A Thousand Acres*

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Abstract

Aim: *The paper examines the feminist and postcolonial reimagining of King Lear in A Thousand Acres, focusing on how canonical narratives are revised to foreground marginalized female perspectives and critique patriarchal authority.*

Methodology and Approach: *The study adopts a comparative and interpretative approach, drawing upon feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks. It analyses narrative strategies, characterization, and thematic shifts in Smiley's novel in relation to Shakespeare's original play, with particular attention to narrative voice, gender politics, and intertextual rewriting.*

Outcome: *The analysis reveals that A Thousand Acres reconfigures the moral and emotional center of King Lear by granting agency and psychological depth to Goneril and Regan through the character of Ginny. The novel exposes suppressed histories of abuse, challenges traditional sympathies aligned with Lear and Cordelia, and reinterprets familial and social power structures through a feminist lens.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *The paper concludes that feminist rewritings such as Smiley's not only contest canonical authority but also expand interpretative possibilities by recovering silenced voices. It suggests that further research may explore similar rewritings across cultures to understand how gender, memory, and narrative perspective reshape literary traditions and challenge entrenched critical assumptions.*

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The history and concerns of feminist theory have strong parallels with postcolonial theory. Bill Ashcroft et al remark that feminist and postcolonial discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalised in the face of the dominant, and early feminist theory, like early nationalist postcolonial criticism, sought to invert the structures of domination, substituting a female tradition in place of a male dominated canon. As writing back to the canon is one of the chief items on the postcolonial and feminist agendas, it is hardly surprising that Shakespeare *the* canonical writer par excellence should feature highly as one of the targets of contemporary revisions. Shakespeare is an obvious choice in seeking to debate the canon, since his corpus of work stands so clearly positioned in the hierarchy within it. The contesting of this master narrative is essentially effectuated through the prisms of ethnicity and sexual identity.

Some contemporary feminist rewritings of Shakespeare make their points partly by placing women in central roles Shakespeare devised for men. Other feminists more explicitly rewrite the plots of Shakespeare's female characters. Marianne Novy in three of the works edited by her—*Women's Re-Visions of Shakespeare* (1990), *Cross-Cultural Performances: Differences in Women's Re-Visions of Shakespeare* (1993) and *Transforming Shakespeare: Contemporary Women's Revisions in Literature and Performance* (1999) has studied the revisions or rewritings of Shakespearean plays from these two overlapping perspectives of feminism and feminist postcolonialism, respectively. In the earlier works she gives an overview of such revisions from 1664 to 1988, spanning more than three centuries of responses to Shakespearean themes and including such works as Charlotte Bronte's *Shirley*, George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* down to *The Diviners* by Margaret Laurence. In the later works she refers to the transforming of *Othello* in *Oroonoko* by Aphra Behn, Lillie Wyman's *Gertrude of Denmark* and Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* as colonial and feminist reworking of Shakespearean plays. She also refers to the rewritings of *The Tempest* from the point of view of Miranda in Canadian literature.

Particular Shakespearean plays recur again and again in the appropriations by the rewriters for revision with greater frequency than others. The special

pertinence to feminist writers of plays such as *King Lear* or *The Tempest*, with their obvious themes of fathers and daughters and patriarchal rule, cannot be overstated. While John Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius* is a feminist uptake on *Hamlet*, as is Margaret Atwood's short story '*Gertrude Talks Back'*, King Lear has also been subjected to rewriting by Jane Smiley in her *A Thousand Acres*, a feminist novel concerned with the abuses of patriarchy that is written from the perspective of Goneril and Regan, and at the same time voices environmentalist concerns as well. Julie Sanders in her book *Novel Shakespeares: Twentieth Century Women Novelists and Appropriation*, has referred to two more direct rewritings of *King Lear* in *A Walking Fire* (1994) by Valerie Miner and *Sweet Desserts* (1988) by Lucy Ellmann.

Shakespearean fathers are one of the main reasons of the plays demanding resistance and creating tensions in some of the women's rewritings of Shakespeare. For this reason, *King Lear* is a popular reference point. A number of works directly invoke Lear in the form of a sustained understanding of plot and structure. In an afterword to her play *Pinball*, the Australian feminist Alison Lyssa calls it "a play where King Lear's daughter Cordelia (I called her Theenie) refused to let her father's madness continue until it led her to her death" and she further contrasts the mutual support of her female characters with the behaviour of the sisters in *King Lear*.

Jane Smiley's Pulitzer Prize winning novel *A Thousand Acres* (1992) displaces Shakespeare's play in the American Mid-West. Her defiant decision to rewrite *King Lear*, providing the vilified older sisters Goneril and Regan with both sympathy and motive, has a lot to do with her leaning towards essentially realist and psychologically believable forms of narrative. Smiley endeavours to find motive where Shakespeare keeps things open and to fill the gaps in the events where the play allows issues to remain enigmatic. Smiley's frustrations with *King Lear* and her desire to reconfigure its stances derive from what she refers to as the inbuilt misogyny of the play: "I wanted to communicate the ways in which I found the conventional readings of *King Lear* frustrating and wrong" (Smiley, "Shakespeare in Iceland" 159). She is referring to the readings which identify Goneril and Regan as the chief perpetrators of evil and Lear as the sympathetic

heart. She clearly felt uncomfortable with the apparent lack of motive for Goneril's and Regan's actions. By opting for the singularity of first-person narration and by assigning the part of the narrator to Ginny, the Goneril of the play, Smiley opened up the possibility of explaining the sisters' actions, offering them a history which is supposedly suppressed in the play, a history of incest and abuse within the family.

Narrated in the first person by Ginny Cook Smith, eldest daughter of Larry Cook, the Lear equivalent, the novel carefully reworks the central characters and images of the play in a twentieth century American farming community. We are introduced to Larry Cook and his three daughters, Ginny Rose and Caroline, corresponding to Lear and his three daughters Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. Edmund and Edgar become Jess and Loren Clark, the former a Vietnam draft-dodger and exponent of organic farming techniques, the latter a hard-working conservative farmer easily sidelined by the return of his glamorous and controversial sibling. Their father Harold is an intriguing reworking of the Earl of Gloucester in *King Lear*, an ambivalent figure, boastful about his new tractor but omitting to mention that he has taken loan to finance it, quick to reject Loren in favour of Jess and equally hasty in accusing Ginny and Rose of being responsible for the Cook family's break-up.

In the novel, King Lear becomes Larry Cook, farmer-patriarch of a thousand acres of Midwest agricultural land. Presented to us only through the medium of Ginny's narrative, Larry is a less multifaceted or sympathetic figure than Lear. One of the more intriguing changes Smiley makes is to the character of the Duke of Cornwall, Regan's husband. In the novel he is represented by Rose's husband Pete who at times seems to be guilty or at least capable of the same acts of random violence as the Duke. We learn that he once broke Rose's arm and taunted the blinded Harold but he is a more three-dimensional figure than Cornwall. His complexity of character is demonstrated in Ginny's narrative by her allusions to her sexual attraction to Pete, which in turn tells us something about her dissatisfaction with her married life with Ty.

Ty is *A Thousand Acre*'s equivalent to the Duke of Albany, Goneril's husband, well known for his good manners though sceptical of his wife's

responses to her father. Like Albany Ty is a sympathetic though passive character. He discusses his concerns with Caroline, the Cordelia of the play, and inadvertently provides the means for the court case that results in the loss of the farm. The farm is clearly the driving concern of Ty and his reason for acquiescing in Larry's questionable treatment of Caroline, cutting her out of her inheritance just because she doesn't show her enthusiasm for Larry's scheme of turning the farm into a corporate project in which all three of them were to have a share. Cordelia, rejected by her father and refused a dowry, is accepted by the king of France as a wife and in the novel Caroline marries Frank, a fellow lawyer in a private ceremony following the rift with her family.

Throughout the play Larry and Caroline remain mostly offstage, in the margins and defined only by Ginny's perspective, in direct opposition to the play where Lear and Cordelia are given most of the stage presence. In contrast to Cordelia's winning and persuasive asides to the audience, Smiley ensures that the readers are kept at a distance from the 'perennially innocent' Caroline. The shadowy portrayal of Caroline is just one element in Smiley's rewriting of the play in order to shift the attention from her to the much-maligned older sisters.

The most obvious means by which Smiley revises *King Lear* in *A Thousand Acres* are her changes to the representation of Goneril and Regan. In the play there is little that is redeeming about these characters. The speed with which they exploit their father's handover of power is too rapid to be sympathetic, and their complete failure to resist their younger sister's banishment is troubling. Before the first scene has drawn to a close, they are already conspiring against their father. Unlike Edmund, who opens the next scene with a witty and partly persuasive soliloquy winning at least a modicum of audience's sympathy or Cordelia, whose concerned asides are shared with the audience throughout the tense first scene, we are denied access to these sisters' thoughts and motivations. Smiley clearly felt uncomfortable with the apparent lack of motive for Goneril's and Regan's actions:

> I always felt that something else was going on in the family life of these people and that presenting the same events from a different point of view would result in a different story. I also felt that Regan and Goneril could

> not have been as bad as they're portrayed. I saw that the play had the organizational principles for a novel and that I could use one of the older sister's point of view to show some things that I felt were implied in the play but not explicit. (Smiley, interview 69)

The latter statement is revealing. Smiley believes that Larry's sexual emotional and psychological abuse, as it is explored in the novel, is implicit in the play's depiction of Lear's relationship with Goneril and Regan and as such her novel is not merely a feminist rewriting of Shakespeare but a response to matters implicit within the original text. Her claim is that she is rewriting not the play so much as the critical interpretations of it, those conventional readings that would locate sympathy with Lear and Cordelia:

> Smiley has made it clear that .... *A Thousand Acres* was conceived not only as a response to the masculine distortions of perspective that she finds in Shakespeare's most apocalyptic play, one that theatrically embodies and linguistically generates femaleness as the cause of the fallen world, but also as a response to that interpretation of King Lear 'which privileged the father's needs over the daughters'. (Alter 145)

It is not difficult to find what Alter describes as "various forms of feminine silencing" in the play (145). Regan and Goneril have very little stage time in which to explain themselves. It has been calculated that their lines combined together add up to only twelve percent of the play (Alter 147). In her desire to give these sisters a chance to explain and justify themselves, Smiley has made use of the first person narrative. From Ginny's perspective we can sense the demands made on her and Rose over the decades by their father who, after the death of their mother, was the reigning patriarch of the family:

> 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. If he kissed me, I endured it, offered a little hug in return. (*A Thousand Acres* 19-20)

In view of the sexual abuse plotline that emerges later on in the play, the way Ginny shrinks from her father's physical attentions is very significant. Their

mother is an absent presence in the novel and Ginny sometimes wonders if the continued presence of her mother in their lives would have made some difference to the power equations between Larry Cook and his daughters:

> 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. I wish we had understood him. That, I see now, was our only hope. (*A Thousand Acres* 20-21)

But her mother dies of cancer at an early stage of their lives and we later come to know that even during her lifetime she was completely dominated by her husband and as such couldn't shield them against the physical abuse that he indulged in as a kind of punishment for small mistakes. This sense of fear is implicit in the sisters' meek acceptance of their father's decision to cut Caroline out of her inheritance. Seeing things from Ginny's point of view makes the episodes that are direct appropriations of events in the play, even more sinister and darker in tone. In *King Lear* the king curses his daughters for their refusal to obey him once he has ceded power to them. He curses Goneril with infertility but in the novel when Larry calls Ginny a "barren whore bitch" (181) it is even more shocking as the reader is privy to the miscarriages Ginny has suffered.

Ginny's perspective is crucial to Smiley's intentions of redeeming Goneril and Regan but the usual questions of bias that accrue around first-person narrators are an issue here also. Ginny's view is at times confused and at others highly prejudiced. She herself admits to a bias against Caroline and in favour of Rose. She has also suppressed the experiences of sexual abuse by her father to such an extent that she is not ready to accept that she has been a victim of incest even when Rose reminds her of it. She loves Rose but when Rose is about to marry Jess towards whom Ginny is also attracted, she plans her sister's murder in a retelling of Goneril's plan to murder Regan in the same fit of sexual jealousy. In reality Rose does not die as a result of Ginny's poisoning of the sausages only she liked to eat but because of a recurrence of breast cancer which, it is suggested, might be a result of underground water poisoning which is partly held responsible for the occurrence of so many cases of cancer as well as for the various miscarriages suffered by Ginny. It provides a physical parallel to the emotional

poisoning caused by the memories of incest running underneath the subconscious that destroys their chances of happiness in later life.

Despite her claims to be vindicating Goneril and Regan in the writing of Ginny and Rose, Smiley does not allow an entirely or unambiguously sympathetic response to Ginny's narrative, by retaining this element of the play, the poisoning of Regan by Goneril. Alter notes that, "Smiley has deliberately constructed Ginny as an insecure and therefore potentially untrustworthy or unreliable observer" (148). Smiley's initial frustration with *King Lear* was with the play's implicit condemnation of Goneril and Regan and to counterbalance this, her aim in writing *A Thousand Acres* was to present the story from the opposite point of view, but ultimately *A Thousand Acres* achieves something different. Ginny proves an unreliable narrator in the true postmodernist style and the narrative, despite taking the women's part, unfolds and unravels itself into the shadows of ambiguity that are the real strengths of the play.

Discussing the end of the novel, Smiley has suggested that the outcome is positive for Ginny who sells the farm to get rid of the past associated with it and to a certain extent for Rose's daughters, free from the burden of inheriting the farm at their mother's deathbed insistence (Smiley, "interview" 71). Yet the overriding claim of the epilogue is that the farm, like family memories, can never be escaped. It is in the psyche of all those who experienced it and, in the form of pesticides, quite literally present in their bloodstreams:

> Remorse reminds me of Daddy, who had none, at least none for me. My body reminds me of Daddy, too, of what it feels like to resist without seeming to resist, to absent yourself while seeming respectful and attentive. Waking in the dark reminds me of Daddy. (*A Thousand Acres* 370)

If Jane Smiley reverses the marginalisation of the elder sisters of Cordelia by sidelining the character of Caroline in *A Thousand Acres*, other feminist writers have taken *King Lear*'s exiled heroine as their central focus. Valerie Miner, a US academic and novelist wrote *A Walking Fire* as her contribution to the State University of New York Press series 'The Margins of Literature'. The title is taken from the Fool's speech to describe the approach of a torch carrying

Gloucester across the storm-tossed heath: "Look, here comes a walking fire" (III.iv. 104-5). In Miner's novel located in the 1980s, the term stands for a series of metaphoric and literal fires, from the arson attack on a Vietnam draft board office, through the Napalm burnings of the Southeast Asian Conflict carried out by the US soldiers to a general state of mind. Miner's novel is a rewriting of *King Lear* as a political allegory, in which family affairs are played out against a national and international background. Cora, the novel's Cordelia analogue, has been a radical undergraduate in her youth and her opposition to the Vietnam War has not only forced her to spend most of her life in Canada hiding from the FBI, but has also estranged her from her father Roy Casey (Roy being a pun on roi or the king) and her two brothers George and Ron, the gender transposed Goneril and Regan of the play.

Cora returns to her home town in Oregon only when she learns that her father is dying of emphysema. She travels with her adult daughter Fran, a dancer. Fran's name is another conscious reference to the marriage of Cordelia to the king of France. Once back in Oregon, Cora finds herself again in conflict with her brothers, who are trying to push Roy into a convalescent home against his will to gain access to the property rights of their family home. As Cora learns more about her siblings it appears that they have been siphoning off money for their own political activities. Cora's father dies before all this is revealed to him. His death scene reflects the one in the play except in the novel Cora survives although her brother informs against her and the novel ends with Cora in prison.

The absent mother in *King Lear* on whom Smiley reflects in *A Thousand Acres* is part of Cora's experience too. The theme of madness in *King Lear* in the form of the king's madness is linked here with Cora's mother who suffers numerous breakdowns and in the end commits suicide by hanging herself when she is institutionalised. While this novel is ranged clearly against George and Ron in terms of their politics and their treatment of Roy, it is not without sympathy for the brutality which their father visited on them. Gender issues are at stake in this, as Cora reflects, attempting to understand her brothers even when George has informed on her to the military authorities, falsely accusing her of murdering her friend and co-activist Ralph during her subversive activities in the 1960s. "In

some ways I think the boys were injured more. In some ways I think I got away with a lot" (253). Like Smiley's provision of motives for Ginny and Rose in *A Thousand Acres*, Miner offers the tyranny of domestic patriarchy as an excuse for George's and Ron's cruelties and selfishness in later life. These novels are just a few examples of the desire to reverse, to rethink and re-present the roles of women in Shakespearean narratives and by extension in the canonical texts that dominated over the thoughts and feelings of the world for a long time, shaping a perception of Women that the feminist writers of today wish to change.

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Born on 28 January 1966, Dr. Huma Javed Subzposh is a senior academic in English literature with long teaching and research experience. She completed her graduation in 1983 and post-graduation in 1985 from Kanpur University, and qualified for the Junior Research Fellowship (JRF) in 1986. She joined Deen Dayal Upadhyay Gorakhpur University in April 1987 and has continued her

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