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The Failure of Promoting a Sense of Sisterhood in the Face of Patriarchy  
A Feminist Reading of Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*

Essay in English

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Autumn 2012

## Abstract

This study is a feminist reading of Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres*. It focuses on the Cook sisters and their lives in a farming community at a time that coincides with the end of second wave feminism. In particular, it pays attention to the absence of sisterhood among the three sisters in the novel. It analyses first each individual sister including their different approaches to sisterhood and then their failure to unite in the type of strategic, politically motivated notion of sisterhood that was promoted by second wave feminism.

By looking at different reasons why the sisters cannot establish a strong sisterhood my essay aims to demonstrate that *A Thousand Acres* not only criticises patriarchal society in its portrayal of the Cook family but also, and more importantly, that it criticises second wave feminism by pointing out its failure in terms of promoting a sense of sisterhood.

Keywords: Jane Smiley, *A Thousand Acres*, Second wave feminism, sisterhood, failure of sisterhood, patriarchal society, women's living conditions, farming community.

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# 1. Introduction

I have chosen to examine Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres* from a feminist point of view as a perceptive portrayal of the patriarchal society at the end of the 1970s and as such the perfect novel for a feminist study. The aim of this study is to critically analyse the Cook sisters and their relationship to each other at a time that coincides with the end of second wave feminism. I will limit my analysis to the sisters in the Cook family and their different approaches to sisterhood against the backdrop of a certain idea of sisterhood promoted by second wave feminism at the time in which the plot of the novel is set.

# 2. Previous Research

*A Thousand Acres* is Smiley's best-seller as well as her most widely discussed creation. Literary critics have analysed the novel from numerous perspectives each focusing on their own field of interest. For example, the novel has been viewed from an ecocritical perspective focusing on the agricultural setting by Sharon O'Dair in "Horror or Realism? Filming 'Toxic Discourse' in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*". Glynis Carr, an ecofeminist, explored the connection between the exploitation of the environment and the exploitation of women that are depicted in the novel. In addition, other scholars have examined the significance of food (Olson), capitalism (Amano), memory (Kessel) and social life (Hall).

Several literary critics have described *A Thousand Acres* as a modern interpretation of William Shakespeare's *King Lear* (Strehle, Kelly). Although the connections between *King Lear* and *A Thousand Acres* must not be dismissed, one should keep in mind that Smiley has created a novel that includes so much more than just a story about a modern kingdom, sister rivalry and disinheritance. Indeed, by rewriting an old English play Smiley has created a 20th-century novel that not only deals with family relations but also modern rural life, American life and Mid-western culture, senility, madness, appearances, incest, diseases and so much more. Smiley has created a profound and forceful story about three sisters and their living conditions at a time that coincides with the end of second wave feminism and their complicated relationship to each other.

## 2.1 Feminist Theory and Criticism

One important feminist theorist for my study is Toril Moi and I have been particularly influenced by the book *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction*. Moi is particularly useful when it comes to understanding patriarchy and the origins of feminism and defining modern feminist literary theory. In the chapter "Feminist Literary Criticism" Moi describes feminist criticism as "a specific kind of political discourse: a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism" (204). Although Moi describes the term feminist criticism in the chapter she points out that it is a bigger challenge than one may think since the word feminist is often confused with words like female and feminine. For that reason Moi specifically points out the importance of understanding the differences between these terms in order to understand the correct interpretation of contemporary feminist criticism.

Moi points out that it is important for feminist critics to be careful when conducting feminist analysis. She emphasises the danger of looking at femininity as a natural concept since this is exactly what patriarchal society wants: "it is in the patriarchal interest that these...terms (femininity and femaleness) stay thoroughly confused. Patriarchy, in other words, wants us to believe that there is such a thing as an essence of femaleness, called femininity" (209). The idea of essential femininity is part of the structure that oppresses women particularly effectively since women themselves help reinforce it. Therefore, Moi argues that the most important task for feminist critics is "to prevent the patriarchs from getting away with their habitual trick of silencing the opposition. It is up to us to make the struggle of the sign—the meaning of the text—an explicit and inevitable item on the cultural agenda" (220). She further argues that feminist critics can use different methods or theories to achieve this goal simply because "the point is not the origins of an idea" but rather "the use to which it is put and the effects it can produce" (205).

Moi's description of feminist criticism in theoretical terms can be linked to *A Thousand Acres* because the novel draws attention to women's living situations in the rural community at the end of second wave feminism as it was turned into a practice and implemented in real life. In other words, *A Thousand Acres* adds a new dimension to Moi's description of the field of feminist criticism since it challenges not only patriarchal society during second wave feminism and its way of silencing women, but also the failure of second wave feminism to include all women in its notion of sisterhood.

In her article "Ambiguity and Alienation in *The Second Sex*" Moi distinguishes between the oppression of women and the oppression of other social groups. Her article will be used in this study in order to draw attention to the history of oppression of women and the effect it has on feminism. It is important to point out that feminist criticism and theory has progressed and developed since Moi first analysed the oppression of women, in some ways in a direction which

undermines or at least challenges some of Moi's assumptions. Nevertheless, Moi's article is still useful for this study since it demonstrates that women themselves contribute to reinforce the influence of patriarchal society by turning against each other.

Another influential feminist critic that I will use in this study is Kate Millett. Millett is the author of *Sexual Politics*; a book that made her one of the most important figures of second wave feminism. In *Sexual Politics* Millett explains patriarchy as a political institution that portrays itself as an obvious matter of nature and a necessity of society. She supports this claim by pointing to the "power-structured relationship" of "dominance and subordination" that exists in patriarchal societies "whereby males rule females" as a "birthright priority"(25). In her book she specifically criticises the silent and immediate acceptance of male dominance as a "birthright priority" (25) within patriarchal society.

Millett also discusses femininity and masculinity and explains how these terms are not only constructed but also maintained by patriarchal society. Just as Moi, she emphasises the danger of looking at femininity and masculinity as natural concepts and shows how these stereotypical gender identities affect people. In her discussion she points out that it is not only women who are imprisoned by the preconceived ideas of femininity and masculinity and claims that "boys are also confined by the stereotypical dominance prescribed for them lest they wander into henpeckey or homosexuality" (233). Millett continues by explaining exactly how powerful these gender identities are by pointing at the consequences of resisting these roles: "a painful identity crisis is...imposed upon every member of either group—to fail to be adequately masculine or feminine is to fail to be true to one's nature. And as we are born undoubtedly male or female, we imagine that should we lose the certainty of gender identity we may fail to exist; gender identity being the primary identity allowed to children as to adults" (232). This fear that Millett describes is important for this analysis since it indicates that both women and men can for fear of being viewed as unnatural fail to resist "femininity" or "masculinity" and thus strengthen these stereotypes. In other words, Millett shows that women as well as men help maintain patriarchal rule through the way in which they live and act.

The idea that women themselves contribute to continued female oppression is also brought up by Millett in her book when she refers back to earlier attempts to rebel against patriarchal society : "for in most places the sexual revolution collapsed from within and was undermined more through its own imperfections than from hostile forces which combined to crush it" (176).

Millett further demonstrates in her book that patriarchy is not solely about male domination over females but also a ruthless and militaristic hierarchy among males which has psychological effects on the entire nation and for that reason she persistently asserts that this regime must be terminated not only for the sake of women but for the sake of humanity itself.

It is important to point out that although it has now been some time since Moi and Millett

described the situation thus, their work is still cited, and it is particularly pertinent for a discussion of this novel, which is set in the late 1970s and early 1980s. For that reason Millett's perceptive analysis of patriarchy will be used as a foundation in my study not only to describe the patriarchal society that is being portrayed in *A Thousand Acres* but also to demonstrate how this unequal social order is being maintained and how it affects the involved characters.

Agatha Beins is another important critic that focuses on women's and gender studies. Within her field of interest Beins particularly concentrates on histories of feminism and feminist geography. For example, she has explored the role of radical and lesbian feminism during the 1970s as well as other social factors that influenced feminism at that time. In this study I will use her article "Sisterly Solidarity: Politics and Rhetoric of the Direct Address in US Feminism in the 1970s" to illustrate the failure of second wave feminism to include all women in the type of strategic, politically motivated notion of sisterhood that was promoted at that time.

In this study I will also use two other literary critics who have done their own feminist readings of Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*. In the article "Memory, Nostalgia, and Gender in *A Thousand Acres*" Sinead McDermott conducts a feminist reading of *A Thousand Acres* in which she analyses the importance of memory. In her analysis McDermott particularly focuses on the suppression of Ginny's traumatic memories and explores the effect it has, in feminist terms. Margaret Rozga is another critic that has read *A Thousand Acres* in the light of feminism. In her article "Sisters in a Quest--*Sister Carrie* and *A Thousand Acres*: The Search for Identity in Gendered Territory" Rozga focuses on Ginny's search for her own identity as an independent woman and argues that by pointing out Ginny's longing for an independent self, the novel establishes the fact "that a woman's identity may be better found by moving against, rather than following or embodying, prevailing myths about women" (n.p.). This analysis is interesting since it points out that women like Ginny and her sisters have to revolt against their assigned roles as women in patriarchal society in order to achieve true emancipation. In other words, if they cannot move against the myth of proper womanhood they will never achieve complete freedom from patriarchal society since they will continue to act in a way which maintains and reinforces patriarchy.

### 3.Thesis

As I stated earlier this study will examine *A Thousand Acres* from a feminist point of view. My analysis of the novel will move beyond the readings of earlier feminist critics by arguing that the novel can be interpreted as a criticism not only of patriarchy but also of second wave feminism.



## 4. Setting

The plot of the novel takes place in the late 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, right at the end of second wave feminism—a period of change when feminist agitators fought for equal conditions and preached about the importance of a powerful sisterhood. This revolutionary period inspired many women across the United States. In other words, women's liberation was one of the most popular subjects of the time. In "Women History" Napikoski describes how American women finally tired of living up to the "expectation that women should fulfill a 'happy housewife' destiny" and furiously united to fight for a better future. Napikoski also points out that during this period of time women "marched, lobbied and protested" hoping that all women's voices would be heard, devoutly arguing that "it was not an oppressed woman's fault that she behaved like an oppressed woman" and persistently "advocating fundamental changes to patriarchal society" ("Women History" n.p.).

Although second wave feminism resulted in many improvements for women around the United States, unfortunately most of these improvements were implemented in the urban parts of the U.S. It is this lack of ubiquitous results of second wave feminism and failure to reach out to the farming community that is being depicted in *A Thousand Acres*. On the farm one cannot see the results from second wave feminism simply because the situation has not changed; the rule of male authority is still as powerful as ever. As a result it is difficult for women to unite in the type of sisterhood that second wave feminism promoted.

Smiley introduces the novel by describing the farm through the eyes of Ginny. This perspective draws attention to the seclusion of the farm from the rest of the country and how this alienation not only results in people looking at the farm as the center of the earth but also ultimately leads to the farming community creating their own society within American society:

No globe or map fully convinced me that Zebulon County was not the center of universe...because the intersection was on this tiny rise, you could see our buildings, a mile distant, at the southern edge of the farm. A mile to the east, you could see three silos that marked the northeastern corner, and if you raked your gaze from the silos to the house and barn, then back again, you would take in the immensity of the piece of land my father owned...if you looked west from the intersection, you saw no sign of anything remotely scenic in the distance...you saw only this, two sets of farm buildings surrounded by fields (3-4).

This passage which describes the setting of the novel maps out the isolated Midwestern landscape as well as the cultural isolation from the rest of society and how it affects one's view of the world. The temporal setting at the beginning of the story is 1979. The Cook farm which is described above is situated hours away from civilisation. The Cook family possesses the biggest farm in the county.

It is a stereotypical representation of traditional Iowa corn production. In this small and secluded farming community everything revolves around farming; which means that other aspects of life that do not involve farming are of no importance for the farmers in Zebulon County. Since this is the only world Ginny has seen throughout her life she has no experience of anything outside the farming community and therefore she continues to think of the farm as the "center of the universe" (Smiley 3). As a result of this isolation, the farming community also remains unchanged by the progress of second wave feminism. The sisters Ginny and Rose still live in the patriarchal society that second wave feminism had fought against and partly overthrown in the cities where they are being controlled by the men and in particular their father who functions as the leader of the farm.

At the same time as Ginny and Rose are left behind in the patriarchal structure of the previous period, second wave feminism did result in substantial progress for women in urban America. In *A Thousand Acres* we see this progress personified in the youngest sister Caroline who gets away from the farm and makes a life and professional career for herself in the city. It is this difference between the modern working women in urban America and the housewives in the farming communities that is being depicted in *A Thousand Acres*. By showing us this difference the novel demonstrates that second wave feminism has not been as successful or as widespread as one thinks. The novel also demonstrates that the feminist idea of sisterhood has failed since the urban feminist activists seem to disregard the farming community as a place for women's emancipation.

## 5. Sisters

This section analyses the three Cook sisters, Ginny, Rose and Caroline, and outlines their roles in the family. Besides focusing on their roles in the family each analysis of the sisters pays particular attention to their view of sisterhood.

### 5.1. Ginny

Ginny is the oldest of the sisters and the one that lives up to the role of a happy housewife and loving daughter. Instead of focusing on the creation of a strong sense of sisterhood among the sisters Ginny focuses entirely on the maintenance of a strong family. This means that Ginny does not only listen to the men's wishes and act accordingly, she also tries to persuade her sisters to comply with the men's rules. Whenever a conflict arises Ginny functions as the voice of reason. When Caroline refuses to accept the farm from their father Ginny is the one that tries to reason with her in order to keep the peace in the family: "come along, be around...you can do that...this is important...we have to receive it in the right spirit. Just do this once. Last time, I promise" (Smiley 35-36). Ginny is always there to reason with Rose. For instance when Rose gets upset, Ginny talks

her out of her anger and makes her look at things logically: "what good is that?...what good does it do to be furious? We still have to deal with it" (203) or when Rose complains about Caroline, Ginny is there to defend her: "she sent flowers and came to visit...she's very busy" (106). Throughout the text, Ginny is always there to help her sisters when they are in need of help, no matter what, and to talk about the importance of sticking together and maintaining a united front.

Ginny—unlike her sisters—takes her role as a housewife and daughter very seriously and does everything to satisfy other people's needs. Just as she does anything to maintain the peace among the sisters Ginny does anything to please the men. Whatever the men ask of her, Ginny does. In *Sexual Politics* Millett talks about this kind of behaviour and she points out that it is the woman's inferior economic role that makes her "continually obliged to seek survival or advancement through the approval of males" (54). Millett's statement is useful when it comes to explaining Ginny's desperate need of pleasing other people and especially men. As a housewife, Ginny does not receive pay for her work and therefore she has to depend on her father and husband to support her. In order to survive Ginny needs to gratify the men and their wishes.

The inferior role that Millett describes can be noticed for example when Ginny explains her strange relationship with her father and what he expects from her: "my job remained what it always had been—to give him what he asked of me, and if he showed discontent, to try to find out what would please him" (Smiley 123) and "my father was easily offended, but normally he was easily mollified, too, if you spoke your prescribed part with proper appearance of remorse. This was a ritual that hardly bothered me, I was so used to it"(35). Here one can see the unequal relationship that exists between Ginny and her father. Moreover one can also see that Ginny herself is aware of her inferior role in her relationship with her father since she acknowledges it in these passages but for some reason she seems to accept her unjust living situation and continues to behave according to her father's rules. In her article "Memory, Nostalgia, and Gender in *A Thousand Acres*", McDermott points out that Ginny's immediate acceptance of her situation is a clear example of "the danger of forgetting" (393). McDermott clarifies her argument by explaining that Ginny's immediate acceptance of her situation and her "inability to explain her 'annoyance' has left her stuck in a cycle of repetition, where her father continues to exert dominance over her life". In other words, McDermott points out that Ginny's suppression of the reality of her living situation creates a vicious circle since it prevents her from expressing her own feelings which ultimately is the reason why the men can continue to control her.

In her theoretical explication of the structure of patriarchal domination, Millett also explains that the inferior role of the female does not only lead to "an ingratiating or supplicatory manner invented to please" but also to an "assumed air of helplessness" (57). Ginny's desire to please everybody can best be noticed in a conversation between Ginny and her father. In this conversation one notices Ginny's nervous and desperate attempts to please her father as well as her acceptance of her inferior

position: "I try to show respect, Daddy...That's not true, Daddy. We do our best...I just want to get along, Daddy. I don't want to fight. Don't fight with me?...Okay, Daddy. I don't want you to be mad...We'll try harder, Daddy" (Smiley 188-189). Ginny's need to maintain the peace in the family affects her own identity to the point where she cannot distinguish between what she wants and what her father wants, a problem that Ginny acknowledges to the reader: "when he talked, he had this effect on me. Of course it was silly to talk about 'my point of view'. When my father asserted his point of view, mine vanished. Not even I could remember it" (190).

Ginny's confusion about which thoughts are her own and which belong to her father ultimately results in the fact that Ginny chooses to listen to the opinions she knows her father will approve of. This can be noticed when Ginny talks about her choice of husband and her real reason for marrying Ty: "the best thing about Ty had been that he attracted Daddy" (283). Here one notices that Ginny has chosen a husband that attracts her father and not her which demonstrates that the choice of husband is yet another way for Ginny to please other people and in particular her father.

Ginny's need to please everybody can be interpreted as a desperate effort to try to maintain some peace in her otherwise catastrophic world. This kind of behaviour is something Millett describes in her book. Millett explains that the unjust conditions of patriarchy has "an effect upon the psychology of both sexes" (54) and points out that "some find their subordinate position so hard to bear that they repress and deny its existence"(56). Millett's explanation could explain Ginny's pliable behaviour and her efforts to keep the family together, because even though Ginny sometimes is aware of her inferior position in the family she still repress some aspects of her subordinate position. It also explains why Ginny denies the years of sexual abuse she has been exposed to by her father and why Ginny constantly forgives anything the men do: "I told myself that all this was okay with me, that a life could be made of this proximity, that maybe that was the only possible life to make, since the other paths, which my imagination had instantaneously traveled, were all equally impossible" (Smiley 184). It also explains why she continues to make excuses for the men's irrational and terrible behaviour "nobody got hurt..." (161), "he's a bear, but..." (162) "...I'm sure if we sat down and worked it out" (164) "maybe I would have been more conciliatory" (203) to the point where she nearly destroys her own identity:"so far, I had restrained myself fairly well, or, maybe, fear had restrained me....shame, and fear" (282-283).

In addition, by suppressing her own memories and opinions Ginny does not only destroy her own life. McDermott points out in her article the importance of Ginny's repressed memories: "Ginny's situation in the novel is an interesting one, because unlike her sister Rose she has forgotten, or repressed, the memories of her father's abuse" (393). McDermott further explains that Ginny's inability to remember is important since the act of "remembering can be a form of resistance to the erasure of women's lives and of domestic histories of abuse within patriarchal discourse" (394). In other words, McDermott shows in her article that by suppressing her own memories of the sexual

abuse Ginny fails to stand up against patriarchal society and thus reinforces the men's impact on her.

Indeed, Ginny does anything to eschew the truth simply because it is too detestable to acknowledge. This is also the reason why Ginny needs support from her sisters because without it Ginny has no choice but to confront the reality of her situation. Ginny needs her sisters behind her in order to repress reality and keep the family together and thus maintain some control in her otherwise uncontrollable environment.

In conclusion, Ginny's inexorable loyalty towards her family and her traditional role of the happy housewife that is depicted in *A Thousand Acres* can be seen as a textual representation of the real-life submissive woman that second wave feminism fought against.

## 5.2. Rose

Rose is the complete opposite of Ginny. Rose is the rebel among the sisters and the one that demands some sort of retaliation for the way the men have treated them. All she wants is to be treated with the same respect as the men and she strongly believes that Ginny and she must revolt against the men's domination. She is well aware of the men's oppressive behaviour and she refuses both to accept it and to blame herself for their bad choices. This means that Rose belongs to the group of women that, in Millett's terms, "recognize and admit their circumstances" (56). Not only does Rose admit the sisters' subordinate position in the family: "we were just his, to do with as he pleased, like the pond or the houses or the hogs or the crops" (Smiley 206) but she is also perceptive enough to understand the cause of it: "he's rigid like this because we've let him be" (103).

Throughout the novel Rose tries to reach out to Ginny and make her realise the truth about their situation: "jeez, Ginny, don't you get tired of seeing his side? Don't you just long to stand back and tell the truth about him for once? He's dangerous! He's impulsive and angry, and he doesn't give other people the same benefit of the doubt that they give him!" (161). However, Rose has trouble making Ginny understand her strong opinions about their own responsibilities to stand up for themselves when there is nobody there to help.

Nevertheless Rose refuses to surrender into a life of submission and she tries to explain to Ginny that they cannot yield to the men's violence: "this is the real me, the stand-up me. He's got to get used to that. If I let him beat me into submission, then what kind of life would I have?" (151). Unlike Ginny she does everything to complicate the men's lives. Rose's refusal to yield to the men's wishes can be noticed when she talks about how she has taken every possible opportunity to provoke their father: "all I wanted when I first met Pete was someone exciting enough to erase Daddy. And I thought sure Pete would end up in Chicago, playing music. Somewhere Daddy wouldn't even visit" (322). In other words Rose not only realises their unequal living conditions but also does anything she can to annoy their father in order to destroy the power balance in the family

in order to be free to live her own life.

Rose needs her sisters and in particular Ginny in order to break free from their oppressive living situation. Rose knows that she will not be able to break free without Ginny because she has tried several times before but never succeeded. Rose needs her sisters to support her in her fight for independence since she knows that she herself cannot stand up to the men of the family.

Rose's perceptive understanding of patriarchal society and her rebellious efforts of trying to make Ginny understand that they together need to stand up against the men, that is being depicted in the novel can be seen as a textual representation of the real-life feminist agitators of second wave feminism who persistently fought for a sense of sisterhood among women and the termination of patriarchy.

### 5.3. Caroline

Caroline is the youngest of the sisters and the one that actually has had the opportunity to leave the farm. The tragic death of her mother was a crucial event in relation to Caroline's future. Caroline was raised by her two older sisters from the age of six and because of this she has been given opportunities that Ginny and Rose never have had. At the critical point of their mother's death, Caroline's sisters, who are only 12 and 14 at the time, decide to give Caroline the freedom and opportunities that they themselves have never been offered:

We agreed that she was going to have a normal high school life, with dates and dances and activities after school...she was going to have friends, and she was going to be allowed to sleep over with them in town if she was invited. Rose...gave her money for clothes, I gave her an allowance...these were our principles, and they stood in opposition to Daddy's...we were her allies. We covered for her and talked Daddy out of his angers...she...went off as we planned, no farmwife...but something brighter and sharper and more promising. (Smiley 67-68)

Caroline has been brought up differently compared to her sisters and she has been allowed to do more things than her sisters. Ginny and Rose deliberately made these sacrifices in order to protect Caroline from their father and to create a better future for her—a future that they have never been offered. As a result of these sacrifices Caroline is the one that has gotten away. Although her sisters have hoped that this would result in a better future for Caroline neither of them could have imagined just how well they would succeed. Caroline's life is the complete opposite of her sisters' lives back at the farm. Far away from the farm Caroline lives in the big city where she works as a lawyer. Caroline lives the life of a modern independent woman in the late 1970s and has no interest in her sisters' obsolete living conditions.

Caroline's total lack of interest in the farm and her old life can be noticed when Ginny reflects

upon her relationship with Caroline: "her visits home every third weekend, when she stayed with Daddy and cooked for him, were generally the only times I spoke to her" (Smiley 71). This passage does not only indicate the bad relationship between the sisters but also shows Ginny's disappointment in Caroline's attitude towards the farm and her old life. Caroline seems to be happy living in the city as an independent and self-supporting woman and has no intention to return to the farm and to fulfil all the responsibilities that come with it. Nevertheless the people on the farm are still her family and every third weekend Caroline visits her father to live up to her role as the daughter of Larry Cook. However, after each visit she has the possibility, unlike her sisters, to return back to the city where she can continue to live her own life as an independent woman. Ginny finds it difficult to understand Caroline's contradictory behaviour towards the family, where she can suddenly disappear and then return and pretend that she has never been gone:

...Caroline's attitude toward our father was a strange alternation between loyalty and scheming. When she came to take care of him every third weekend, she was solicitous and patient. She cajoled him into watching TV with her, or trying something new for dinner that she brought from Des Moines, or even going for a walk. She brought him magazines or articles that she liked from *Psychology Today* and *The Atlantic*. She would consult us about how to get him to do things—go out for supper, go to the movies, buy some new clothes. (125-126)

In this description one can notice how Caroline's behaviour changes between that of a typical working woman and that of an empathetic daughter. Every third weekend she visits her father and plays her role as the loyal and patient daughter but when she later returns to the city she leaves everything that belongs to the farm back home, including her role as the solicitous and patient daughter, until she visits again.

Caroline's total escape from her family is evident when Ginny thinks about Caroline's strange manner towards her family members: "it reminded me that she wasn't in the habit of sending birthday cards, or calling to chat, that when she used to come home and take care of Daddy, she didn't bother to walk down the road to say 'Hi' unless she needed something" (Smiley 149) or when Rose talks about Caroline's behaviour during her sickness: "it's been two weeks since my three-month exam, and I haven't heard a word from her. She never called to ask how I was. In fact, I've thought her attitude from the beginning has been pretty casual...there were three or four women outside the family who were more attentive than that" (106). Yes, it is evident that Caroline does not want to have anything to do with the farm or her sisters. Not surprisingly, Caroline is completely satisfied with her life in the city where she can make her own decisions and not be controlled by her father.

Perhaps Ginny and Rose need each other in order to get by, but Caroline does not have the same need for support from her sisters and as long as Ginny and Rose stay on the farm and take care of

their father Caroline does not have to deal with the situation. In other words, Caroline needs her sisters to take care of their father in order for her to continue to live her free and independent life in the city.

In addition, Caroline's attitude towards her old life and her sisters that is depicted in the novel can be seen as a textual representation of the real-life new urban liberated woman of second wave feminism who wants to cut all bonds to her previous position in patriarchal society and the women who remind her of that life.

## 6. Sisterhood

It is evident that the sisters need each other for different reasons and that the obvious thing to do might be to stick together and function as a united front against the men. Yet, that never happens for reasons that will be discussed below. In the end it is the Cook sisters themselves that create their own failure by turning against each other.

In order to understand the failure to promote a sense of sisterhood among the Cook sisters one can use Millett's argument about the influence of patriarchy on the individual woman and its consequences for female fellowship. She argues that patriarchy has "a devastating effect upon" the woman and "her self image" (54) and points out that women are being affected the same way as any other minority groups in society that have been oppressed throughout history. Furthermore, she argues that this damage to the female and her self image can lead to "group self-hatred, a contempt for both herself and for her fellows" (56).

Millet's argument is useful in order for the reader to understand both the abomination the sisters seem to feel about themselves as well as the contempt they have for each other. This abomination is most visible for the reader in the way Ginny describes herself for instance in terms of "ugly" , "undesirable" (282) or as "a freak, like a woman with three legs" (283) or when Rose talks about her real personality: "I'm always jealous...I always have. It's my besetting sin. I'm grabby and jealous and selfish and Mommy said it would drive people away, so I have been good at hiding it"(328).

The contempt for other women that Millett mentions can also be seen between the sisters in *A Thousand Acres* and it is most visible in Rose and her spiteful attitude towards her sisters. This contempt can be linked to Rose's bitterness over her disappointing life. Rose resents Ginny for her blind faithfulness and perfection as the good housewife and daughter:

Sometimes I hate you too...you're such a good daughter, so slow to judge, it's like stupidity. It drives me crazy... every time I've made up my mind to do something—get of this place, leave Pete, go back to teaching just to earn money—you stop me...every time you're



reasonable, every time you pause to wonder about his point of view. Every time you stop and think! I don't want to stop and think! (Smiley 162-163)

Here it becomes clear that Rose is angry at Ginny because of her docility and constant excuses which Rose perceives as attempts to undermine her efforts to escape from the oppression on the farm and to create her own independent future. Moreover, Rose resents Caroline for living the independent life that she wants to live, which can be noticed throughout the novel in some of Rose's jealous comments about Caroline and her life: "well, she's always somewhere, isn't she? She's the one that got away, isn't she?" (106) and "she doesn't have to be careful. She's got an income. Being his daughter is all pretty abstract for her, and I'm sure she wants to keep it that way...She just can't stand to be one of us, that's the key. Haven't you ever noticed? When we go along, she balks. When we resist, she's sweet as pie" (63-64). This conversation between Rose and Ginny does not only show Rose's contempt for Caroline, it also shows Caroline's aversion to her sisters and their lives. Most importantly, this conversation indicates that Rose feels that Caroline does not want to be included in the same group of women as her and Ginny.

Caroline's dislike of the farm and her sisters can be noticed in different ways throughout the novel. Although Caroline has been raised by her sisters she has never been able to understand their opinions or at least in the mind of Ginny, our narrator, it is clear that Caroline has never understood the sacrifices they have made for her: "sometimes, without thinking, she would marvel at us, saying, Lord! Why didn't either of you ever leave? I can't believe you never had any other plans" (Smiley 68). Caroline's total lack of understanding for her sisters and their sacrifices only increases when she leaves the farm.

Besides showing Caroline's dislike towards the farm and what it represents the quotation also shows the important difference between the Cook sisters: Caroline's independence as a modern self-supporting woman and Ginny and Rose's dependence as housewives. Caroline is an independent woman and therefore cannot understand her sisters and their situation as farmwives. As a result, Caroline turns her back against her sisters and fails the idea of a feminist sisterhood by choosing to support their father in his struggle against his daughters. The complicated relationship between Caroline and her sisters goes beyond normal misunderstandings between sisters. The Cook sisters' troubled relationship illustrates the ongoing friction between the career women and the housewives that existed during second wave feminism, a friction which ultimately results in a failed sense of sisterhood and continued male dominance.

Millett explains the failure to promote a sense of sisterhood as another effect of the ruthless oppression of patriarchy by arguing that "one of the chief effects of class within patriarchy is to set one woman against another, in the past creating a lively antagonism between whore and matron, and in the present [1970] between career woman and housewife. One envies the other her 'security' and prestige, while the envied yearns beyond the confines of respectability for what she takes to be the

other's freedom, adventure, and contact with the great world" (38). Millett's argument is useful for this analysis because it does not only explain the strained relationship between Caroline and her sisters but also illuminates Rose's strange relationship to her sisters where she envies Ginny for her role as the perfect housewife and caring daughter while she at the same time envies Caroline's freedom and independence. Not surprisingly it is this envy between the sisters that gradually produces the painful deception among them.

The failure of including all women in second wave feminism is brought up by Beins in her article "Sisterly Solidarity: Politics and Rhetoric of the Direct Address in US Feminism in the 1970s". Beins argues that though "sisterhood came to be defined through independence from men as well as a relationship of horizontality among women, which was manifest in the efforts of feminists to work collectively and non-hierarchically" (304) the definition is not entirely accurate. Beins supports this argument with her conclusion that the so called sisterhood "in fact was not a category that automatically included all women...because the term 'sister' refers not only to women but specifically to women who engage a particular form of praxis" (293).

Beins' portrayal of the failure to include all women in the idea of a feminist sisterhood further establishes the unsuccessful relationship between women during second wave feminism and how some women were excluded from the sense of sisterhood which feminism was supposed to promote. The friction between real-life women that Beins depicts can be linked to the troubled sisterhood in *A Thousand Acres* where different perspectives cause the Cook sisters to regard each other as opponents instead of allies and thus fail to sustain a sense of sisterhood.

Beins points out that "sisterhood is a relationship that either emerges or does not emerge out of certain actions and activist commitments" (299). Beins' argument is important in order to understand the failure to sustain a sense of sisterhood in *A Thousand Acres* because even though the Cook sisters possess different perspectives it is ultimately Caroline's choice of supporting her father and not her sisters that is the conclusive action regarding their future as sisters. Yet, it is not solely Caroline that turns against her sisters—it is only a matter of time before Ginny and Rose's former sisterly solidarity dissolves and they end up in a malevolent battle for revenge.

The drastic change in Ginny and Rose's relationship can be understood through Beins' explanations of the failure to include all women in the idea of a feminist sisterhood. Although Ginny and Rose look at the notion of sisterhood differently and have not always agreed on everything they have always been there for each other and have tried to encourage each other through bad times. Ginny and Rose may be complete opposites of each other, but still they share the same background and experiences. In other words, Ginny and Rose view each other as "sisters" simply because they engage in the same "form of praxis" (Beins 293) and it is this common interest that makes them stick together and that makes their relationship strong enough to survive through family litigations, cancer and death.

However, there is one action that will change their formerly strong sense of sisterhood forever. As I stated earlier, Beins argues in her article that the idea of a feminist sisterhood "either emerges or does not emerge out of certain actions" (299). I have used this theory to explain why Ginny and Rose's sisterhood fails with regard to Caroline but it can also be used to describe the termination of Ginny and Rose's sisterhood, because it is not until Rose reveals that she has had an affair with Ginny's lover that their relationship falls apart. It is at this point that Ginny turns her former feelings of solidarity towards her sister into hatred. Ginny has been betrayed by her sister and as a result Ginny turns her back on Rose and leaves her alone back at the farm to search for an independent life in the city as a waitress.

Although Ginny and Rose sometimes find it difficult to understand each other they have continued to work together as a team and after Caroline turns her back on them Ginny and Rose remain true to each other. Therefore, it is ultimately Rose's decision to start a relationship with Ginny's lover that is the conclusive action regarding their future as sisters. If Rose had not done this they would have continued to view each other as true "sisters".

Ginny and Rose's failure of maintaining a strong sense of sisterhood can be noticed at the end of the novel with Ginny's sudden decreased loyalty towards her sister. Ginny's sudden transformed attitude is described by Rozga in her reading of *A Thousand Acres*. In her analysis Rozga points to Ginny and Rose's troubled relationship and argues that Ginny "at this point in the novel...might like to escape sisterhood" (n.p.). Rozga supports her argument by referring to a passage in the text where Ginny thinks about the unavoidable link between her and Rose: "there was, in addition, no escaping being sisters" (Smiley 373). By showing us Ginny's resignation in her relation to her unavoidable relationship to Rose, Rozga displays Ginny's desire to escape the notion of a strong sisterhood. More precisely, after Ginny has heard the news about Rose and her lover, Ginny does want to flee from the idea of a feminist sisterhood and the responsibilities that come with it simply because she does not feel any responsibilities for Rose any longer. Ginny knows that no matter what she does she unfortunately cannot erase her history with Rose. Yet Ginny's acceptance of her unavoidable bond to Rose does not mean that Ginny feels any solidarity to her sister anymore. Ginny's complete indifference to Rose can be noticed when she thinks back at Rose and her life on the farm: "although Ty would have sworn that my loyalty to Rose was unshaken, and probably pathological, he would have been wrong" (373).

Ginny's sudden lack of loyalty to her sister might seem strange since Ginny has always cherished the value of family more than the others. But one must remember that Ginny's interest in the notion of sisterhood is based on purely selfish reasons. Before Rose's betrayal, Ginny needed to remain a close relationship with her sisters in order to keep the peace in the family. This may not seem important at first. However, even though Ginny is the one who talks about the importance of maintaining a united front, this does not mean that she sees the idea of a strong sisterhood as a way

to defeat patriarchy, rather the opposite: Ginny sees it as a way to uphold it. So, when Rose finally tells the truth about her relationship with Ginny's former lover, the Cook family has already been dissolved to the point where there is no chance of any sort of resolution which in turn means that Ginny has failed to keep the family together. For that reason, Ginny has no reason anymore to stand up for the sake of sisterhood.

Moi also discusses the problem with women turning against each other in her article "Ambiguity and Alienation in *The Second Sex*" and points out the importance of understanding that although "the oppression of women is in some ways similar to the oppression of other social groups" (99) there is one important distinction: women do not possess a united identity. Moi supports her statement by referring to the fact that unlike other oppressed groups in society women have no common foundation to identify as their own: "women are scattered across *all* social groups and thus have been unable to form a society of their own" (99). Moi continues by explaining that this lack of society ultimately leads to the fact that "women tend to feel solidarity with men in their own social group rather than with women in general" (99).

Moi's statement can be linked to *A Thousand Acres* and Caroline's decision to support her father and not her sisters. This lack of solidarity with one's sister is ultimately the reason for the failed sense of sisterhood among the Cook sisters. Caroline does not feel any solidarity with her sisters because she, as a modern working woman, does not feel that she belongs to the same social group as they do. The lack of solidarity between the women—just as Moi points out—causes Caroline to feel solidarity with her father. Moi further claims that this lack of solidarity between women is the reason why women have not succeeded to unite: "unlike every other oppressed group women have been unable to cast themselves as historical subjects opposing their oppressors" (99).

The difference between the Cook sisters is not only that they want different things for different reasons but more importantly that they have different views of the idea of a feminist sisterhood and its importance. It is important to note that only Rose understands that if they ever are going to be able to change their situation they need to unite in the certain idea of sisterhood promoted by second wave feminism where they together revolt against the men. Without a strong sense of sisterhood and a common goal, Rose realises, they will never fully achieve freedom from patriarchal rule. However, Ginny and Caroline do not want to revolt against the men. Caroline is happy with her role as an independent woman and has no desire to compromise her planned future. For Caroline it would only cause more trouble to revolt against the men. Ginny, on the other hand, does not want to see the reality of her situation and as a result she chooses to continue to live her old submissive life.

## 7. Conclusion

As long as the sisters follow Ginny's advice or, in other words as long as they follow the rules which benefit the men, everything seems to go according to plan and there is a semblance of harmony. However, when their father decides to hand over the land to his daughters everything changes. It is only at this point that the sisters start to think about what they want and finally get their chance to speak their own mind and an opportunity to stand up against the men. However, the sisters turn their frustration against each other instead of against the men. In other words, one might say that the Cook sisters create their own failure in terms of unity and sisterhood. This struggle only pushes the sisters further away from each other and creates even bigger misunderstandings which ultimately lead to actions that will terminate their relationship forever.

It is important to bear in mind when one reads *A Thousand Acres* that even if the Cook sisters would have wanted the same thing, they would have been certain to fail to object to the men's ruthless behaviour. This failure corresponds to the situation in the real world where, after years of oppression by patriarchal society women have been left defenseless as both Millett, Moi and Beins have presented in their analyses. Just as Millett, Moi and Beins point out happened in real life, the women in Smiley's novel find themselves completely alone without any support from their fellow sisters. In other words, women have no feeling of belonging among each other and the only thing they possess is a feeling of contempt for themselves and bitterness towards each other. However the Cook sisters might not actually be aware of the fact that they continue to follow the rules of patriarchal society even when Rose tries to revolt against the men. This is obvious when they make the fatal mistake of turning against each other instead of uniting in the idea of a feminist sisterhood that was promoted by second wave feminism; when they do this they follow the men's wishes by effectively demolishing their own revolt from within and thus reestablishing the men's superior position. Indeed, by doing this, the Cook sisters undermine their only chance to stand up for themselves, and thus follow the rules of patriarchal society by continuing to be defenseless. This might seem strange since both Caroline and Ginny have escaped the farm, a stronghold of patriarchal oppression, and started new independent lives in the city but one should keep in mind that this outcome still represents a failure of sisterhood rather than freedom from patriarchal structures, because in *A Thousand Acres* there is no happy ending even in a feminist perspective. The Cook sisters fail to revolt against patriarchal society which is represented by the men on the farm, since they turned against each other and thus destroyed their only chance of questioning the men and their way of treating them. In the end, the Cook sisters failed. This can be motivated by the fact that neither of the sisters succeeds to neither achieve their goals with this revolt nor do the Cook sisters want this battle to end the way it does. After a lifetime of searching for independence, Rose tragically dies before she has the opportunity to enjoy it. Caroline has not only been excluded

from her family but also lost her legal right to the farm and returns back to the city determined never to forgive her sisters. Ginny, who never wanted any of this, has lost her family and lives a solitary life in a small town as a waitress, nostalgically looking back at their life on the farm. In the end, the fatal mistake of the Cook sisters leads to the failure of sisterhood and continued male dominance.

By telling us the story about women's living situation in a farming community at a time that coincides with the end of second wave feminism, *A Thousand Acres* depicts another version of women's history of this period. By telling the story of the Cook sisters the novel demonstrates that not all women were liberated by second wave feminism. Indeed, by drawing attention to the fact that the farming community remained unchanged by the progress of second wave feminism that can be noticed in the urban parts of America *A Thousand Acres* shows that the farming community has been disregarded as a place for women's emancipation and has thus been excluded from the idea of sisterhood promoted by feminism. By doing this, *A Thousand Acres* criticises not only patriarchal society but also second wave feminism and its failure to include all women in its notion of sisterhood.

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