

## Women Exploitation in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*

Wirda Syifa'ul Ulya

English Literature, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Surabaya  
[wirdaulya16020154022@mhs.unesa.ac.id](mailto:wirdaulya16020154022@mhs.unesa.ac.id)

Mamik Tri Wedawati, S.S., M.Pd

English Literature, Faculty of Language and Arts, State University of Surabaya  
mamikwedawati@unesa.ac.id

### Abstrak

*A Thousand Acres* karya Jane Smiley merupakan novel fiksi yang mengupas tentang kehidupan keluarga petani, dimana novel tersebut membahas berbagai masalah yang berkaitan dengan keluarga, misalnya dua tokoh utama dalam novel tersebut digambarkan sebagai perempuan yang menerima eksploitasi laki-laki dalam lingkup keluarga mereka yang sangat mendominasi mereka. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji representasi eksploitasi perempuan yang dialami oleh tokoh perempuan dalam novel serta mengidentifikasi perjuangan tokoh perempuan dalam melawan eksploitasi yang digambarkan dalam novel. Penelitian ini menggunakan teori feminisme eksistensial dari Simone de Beauvoir, di mana ia secara jelas menjelaskan teori tersebut melalui bagaimana sejarah dan keyakinan tentang definisi perempuan selama ini. Hasil analisis mengungkapkan bahwa representasi eksploitasi perempuan yang dialami oleh tokoh perempuan digambarkan dalam novel dengan mengalami pelecehan seksual. Selanjutnya, dalam melawan eksploitasi yang dialaminya, tokoh perempuan berusaha membebaskan diri dengan mengungkapkan kemarahan dan juga melarikan diri dari situasi yang menyedihkan. Ini menunjukkan bahwa perempuan juga berhak atas kebebasan hidup.

**Kata Kunci:** eksploitasi, perjuangan, feminisme, eksistensialisme.

### Abstract

*A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley is a fiction novel that explores the life of farmer's family, where the novel discusses various problems related to the family, for example, the two main characters in the novel are portrayed as women in which they have accepted the exploitation of men in the scope of their family that dominates them greatly. This study aims to examine the representation of women exploitation experienced by female characters in the novel and also to identify the struggles of female characters to fight the exploitation described in the novel. The paper employs the theory of existential feminism by Simone de Beauvoir, in which she clearly explains the theory through how history and belief about the definition of women have been. The analysis reveals that the representation of women exploitation experienced by female characters is described in the novel by experiencing sexual abuse. Furthermore, in fighting the exploitation they have experienced, female characters try to free themselves by expressing anger and also escaping from depressing situations. This shows that women also have the right to freedom of life.

**Keywords:** exploitation, struggles, feminism, existentialism.

## INTRODUCTION

The case of exploitation of women is not something new that has been heard by the public. This case event has raised a number of cases for investigation. For example, Indian is a fast developing country but women in Indian still experience discrimination and exploitation (in Nagindrappa and Radhika, 2013). However, this remains something interesting to talk about. The exploitation of women is expressed as an act of fact of treating women unfairly to take the benefit from their work, the fact of using the situation to gain an unfair advantage for women. There

are many bitter stories about the exploitation experienced by women in society. Simone de Beauvoir in her book titled *The Second Sex* discussed the treatment of women throughout history. She mentioned that women at that time did not deserve to be called as human; women are described as other creatures that are not the same as men. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.", Simone de Beauvoir. In her quote, Simone de Beauvoir (1949) claimed that being a woman is not a way in which one is born, but rather something one becomes.

Exploitation can be defined as the use of someone or something unfairly which has no equality

or cruelty (Millet, 2000). In Jagge, A. R (1976) in her journal entitled *Exploitation of Women in Third World Perspective*, she said that for 30 years the UN Status Commission Women have gathered background of surprising facts regarding deprivation and all the types of degradation suffered by women throughout the world because of their gender. In its most extreme manifestations, these deficiencies characterize and make women treated as “property”: instruments of production and pleasure, not only to satisfy sexual desires and produce children, but also as properties that can be inherited or thrown away at will. In some parts of the world widows inherited in the same way as furniture or real estate. Some of the images of women at that time were very low. One of them is that women are described as objects bought by their own husbands, which when they are wives they will always be under the authority of their husband and they do not have any freedom of action. Even at that time, women were always drawn between free men and slave men. It means women do not have any rights and freedoms because they are under the men who dominate them. Bressler (2011: 56) claims that patriarchy means a social structure that places the role of men as the sole ruler. This means that patriarchal culture has been built on the basis of male hierarchy and domination.

This situation is the same as what is told in *A Thousand Acres*. *A Thousand Acres* is a 1991 novel written by Jane Smiley as a writer and also this novel was adapted into a film in 1997 of the same name. this novel is a novel designed as a modernization of the drama by William Shakespear King Lear. Almost every main character in the novel has a direct connection with King Lear, where Shakespear told the story of an old king who divided his kingdom with three of his children and one of them refused the gift. However, this study is more focus on discussing *A Thousand Acres*.

*A Thousand Acres* is a novel that tells about the patriarchal drama of family life of farmers . The author did this through portrayals conveyed to the characters in the novel; developing men as very strong and dominating characters, also developing female characters as victims of physical violence, sexual coercion, and lack of affection. As depicted in the character Ginny, she is the most pathetic figure in the novel. She is the farmer’s daughter that frustrated, living with depressed desires and frustrated ambitions. She lives under pressure from her father and her husband where she has no right to speak and has a low position.

During this time, women are seen as weak figures. There is an assumption that the figure of women is irrational and emotional so that women cannot appear to lead. As a result, attitudes have emerged that place women in positions that are not important.

The other example of form of exploitation contained in the novel is the violence that experienced by Rose; the second daughter of a rich farmer named

Larry Cook, which Rose is the little sister of Ginny. Rose was abused or tortured by her husband. Rose and Ginny also experienced a sexual abuse from their father when they were young. Biologically, women are different from men. Women are weaker, on the contrary, men are stronger. However, biological differences should not be the main focus, not naturally differentiate their position and condition in society. Basically, strong evidence has not yet been found to show a correlation between biological conditions and behavioral differences. In contrast, it is certain that behavior is influenced even determined by certain cultural characteristic. In patriarchal societies, for example where boys are hope, it will directly condition the superiority of men.

The novel is very clear can show that the position of women has been underestimated. Men treat women unfairly and they take advantage of women who actually feel disadvantaged. Yet, they are a few female leaders trying to fight their rights. In the case of the struggle of women to gain equality with these men, feminism is the main weapon for them. Humm (2004) states that feminism is a theory of equality between men and women in the political, economic, and social fields. Women struggle to claim their human rights as a whole is a struggle against the division of a labor which sets men as the ruling party in the public sphere. Therefore, according to Fakhri (1999: 79) the emergence of feminism as a social movement that initially departs from the assumption that basically women are oppressed and exploited, through which also (feminism) women try to end the oppression and exploitation. Feminism highlights politics sexuality and domestic both at the personal level and the public level. Tong (2013: 7) claims that the essence of feminism is the condition of women they are free from all oppression, hegemony, injustice, and also violence.

In this case, this study is interested in examining the work of Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* as the object to be studied, where the novel is based on the exploitation of women by three female characters in the novel, that are Ginny, Rose, and Caroline. Based on the story, the exploitation of women is represented by sexual abuse that experienced from father to his daughters. In this case, the patriarchal culture is depicted in the novel where men are dominant in women’s lives.

There are previous studies that have the same topic with this study. First, (in Sudarni, Eka Serli, 2017) in her study entitled *Struggle of Women in The Novel Sing Me to Sleep* by Angela Morrison. The study aims to analyze the kinds of struggles of women and also the struggle for love. In the study, Eka Serli Sudarni focused on the Virginia Woolf theory, which she considered Virginia to be one of the most important 20th-century modernist writers and she was also a pioneer in the use of streams of consciousness as narrative tools. Finally, the author concluded that there

are three struggles depicted in the novel, namely the struggle to accept the reality of life, the struggle to achieve dreams, and the struggle for affection. The main struggle is to achieve a dream full of obstacles, but she is able to survive with the people she loves. Eka Serli Wardani explains the analysis of women's struggle in general which is different from the topic in this thesis which focuses on the struggle of women in fighting the oppression they have experienced.

The second previous studies is from Rima, Maulida Ayu (2017) with her study entitled *Oppression and Female Bonding in Alice Walker's The Color Purple*. In her study, she aims to show the oppression portrayed in the novel and also reveal the function of the power of women's unity so that it can change the character that was initially passive to become, not oppressed by men, and become bolder. The author uses a theory from Irish Marion Young which states that there are five types of oppression in an oppression that support to reveal several types of oppression found in the novel *The Color Purple*. Furthermore, she also used the theory of female bonding in underpinning her second research question. Female bonding theory turns out to be useful for expressing the superiority or strength of conversation from the women's union when women unite in solving a problem, supporting each other and inspiring one character to another so that Celie's life at the end of the novel's story becomes a tough and independent figure who is not afraid again on the oppression of men around her. This has similarities with this study which aims to show the exploitation of women depicted in the novel. The two novels of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* are novels that share the story of female oppression that occurs because of male domination. However, the theory used to analyze each study is different.

Because a very few studies of Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* that used theory of Simone de Beauvoir, so this study will uses Simone de Beauvoir's theory as a weapon to conduct this analysis, in which she sees the position of women and their experiences are different from men. Simone de Beauvoir theory is conclude of existentialism feminism. Existentialism itself is looking at all phenomena of human existence; the way humans are in this world. Ruede et al (2007, 121) said while liberal feminists are more focused on small groups that concentrate on government lobbying for pro-women's reforms and try to influence policy makers. One of the mistiest feminist theories is the marginalization of women as others in the culture created by men and assuming men as subjects, while women are their subjects. This existential feminism is a struggle of women through individual movements in the domestic sphere and tends to be different from

other feminist movements that struggle in the public sphere.

The typical thinking of Simone de Beauvoir is very interesting. She explained clearly how history and belief about the definition of women so far. According to her thoughts, there has been an existentialist disability to the situation of women. The history has shown how men have always been a party grasps concrete forces in various fields, so that it is seen as the desire of men themselves to dominate. Therefore, this study believes that Simone de Beauvoir theory is the most suitable theory for studying and analyzing *A Thousand Acres* in the case of women exploitation and women struggle by the female characters depicted in the novel.

The purpose of this study are to find out and explain the representation of women exploitation experienced in the novel and also to identify the female characters struggles to fight against exploitation depicted in the novel. This article can bring contributions not only in the field of literature but also the students, who want to analyze Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* or to get a deep analysis of women exploitation, women struggle in opposing exploitation experienced by women and also understanding of existentialism feminism by Simone de Beauvoir. In addition, this study is also important for academic understanding so that they know that women are also entitled to equality rather than being exploited by men who dominate them. This study has two related study questions: 1) How is the representation of women exploitation experienced in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* 2) How the female characters do struggles to fight against exploitation in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*?

## METHOD

In analyzing the representation of women exploitation and women struggles against exploitation in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, the author applies the theory of feminism in the analysis. More specifically, this study uses the existentialist feminism perspective of Simone de Beauvoir to explain the research questions contained in this study. Several theories will be used to further support the representation of women exploitation and women struggle in the novel.

Furthermore, the required data will be obtained in the form of direct or indirect text from the characters and narrators, dialogues, epilogues, phrases, and statements in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* which present representation of women exploitation and women struggles in the novel. Obtain the data needed to perform the analysis. If the data has been obtained in the form of texts relating to the exploitation of women and women struggles, the data will be marked and recorded. After the data has been collected, relevant

sources are sought to strengthen the arguments to be given. After that, the data that has been collected will be analyzed using the theory that has been selected and equipped with relevant data sources for the smooth running of this study.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

### The Representation of Women Exploitation

To make this point understandable, this study will depict the representation of women exploitation in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*. Based on Simone de Beauvoir in her book titled *The Second Sex* (1949), the reason why oppressed women occur is where the existence of women whose condition is ignored and not an absolute subject like men.

According to Beauvoir (1949), the identity of women in patriarchal culture seems to be blurred. In a patriarchal culture, women must give up their identity as free individuals so as to lead to exploitation of women. Therefore, women in all patriarchal cultures always become the second sex dominated by men. Yet as a human being, she is subject; a consciousness. But as a woman she is an absolute other, she is an object. Beauvoir (1949) says that men see women as sex. In *A Thousand Acres*, two female characters: Ginny and Rose, experienced the representation of women's exploitation in terms of sexual abuse committed by their own fathers when they were teenagers.

### Sexual Abuse

In community life, exploitation is not only related to economic life, but also very closely related to sexual problems. Sex is biologically based and stable characteristic identified with two categories; male and female. Kempe et al (1962) have considered sexual abuse to be an element of child abuse. In contrast, Gil (1970) and Steele (1970) have separated sexual abuse on the assumption that it is etiologically and dynamically different from child physical abuse. Sexual abuse and acts of rape against women are basically two forms of sexual violence and violations of decency that are condemned by all parties, but ironically these incidents continue to occur from time to time, also can happen to anyone without exception. As said by Simone de Beauvoir, women are considered as objects in which women are seen as sex. She said in her book titled *The Second Sex*:

*"He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other."* (Simone de Beauvoir, 1949, p.26)

Simone de Beauvoir (1949) revealed that humanity is men and men define women not in themselves, but in relationship with himself. She also said that women are not considered autonomous creatures. According to Simone de Beauvoir (1949), men see women as creatures that have sex: for him she is sex. So, she is absolute. Women are determined and distinguished in relation to men, while men have nothing to do with her; she is disregard in front of interests.

From Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) explanation above, it can be concluded that sexual abuse is a form of the representation of exploitation experienced by women. In Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* told that two female characters in the novel; Ginny and Rose, were sexually abused by their own father when they were young. Gil (1970) includes sexual abuse where it is accompanied by physical abuse. The following is a statement from Ginny to her sister when she recounts the memory of the sexual abuse she has experienced:

*"Lying here, I knew that he had been in there to me, that my father had lain with me on that bed, that I had looked at the top of his head, at his balding spot in the brown grizzled hair, while feeling him suck my breasts. That was the only memory I could endure before I jumped out of the bed with a cry."* (Smiley, 1991, p.228)

The statement shows that Ginny did not attack when her father sexually abused her. According to Simone de Beauvoir (1949), the process by which men become subjects and women become objects is one of them by making women the object of sexual abuse starting from biological facts, such as reproductive roles, hormonal imbalances, weakness in female organs, and so on which are combined with history of patriarchy and finally women cornered in reproductive and domestic roles. Without realizing it, women have actually been led to the definition of subconscious beings. This is what makes women's domination throughout history. So far, women are seen as weak and always under the rules of men. They also have weaker power than men. There is an assumption that female figures are irrational and emotional so that women cannot appear in the lead. As a result, attitudes have emerged that place women in insignificant positions. The differences between men and women stem from these biological factors, it is proved that it has been found in Durkheim's work on murder where he illustrates how important the biological differences that occur between men and women. He noted that women have smaller brains, smaller overall size, lower and more primitive powers, and are less sociable than men. Furthermore, Durkheim argues that this distinction between men and women grows as society develops (DiCristina, 2006).

In Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, the representation of women exploitation that occurs in the novel is that women are considered as property, where

men can despise and dominate women as they pleased. Not only is it considered lowly and dominated in family life, but the character of women is also considered as property in terms of sexual abuse.

*"I remembered, over and over again, what the top of his head looked like. But I never remembered penetration or pain, or even his hands on my body, and I never sorted out how many times there were."* (Smiley, 1991, p.280)

Ginny was sexually abused until she felt pain but she was unable to do anything about it. Until now, all that remains is the memory of the evil act by the father, but Ginny never remembers the pain she felt at that time. Rose said there was nothing they could do at that time, they were just there to do everything their father asked them to.

*"We were just his, to do with as he was pleased, like the pond or the houses or the hogs or the crops."* (Smiley, 1991, p.191)

According to Simone de Beauvoir (1949), married women are only prisoners who can be beaten in married life. In the life of the bourgeois family, Simone de Beauvoir agrees with Engels statement that states in bourgeois family women are treated like private property, that is, women want to be sacrificed for private ownership. Based on the work of Wilson and Daly (1992, p. 85), male proprietariness is defined as "the tendency [of men] to think of women as sexual and reproductive 'property' they can own and exchange."

### **Women Struggle**

Every human being has the right to freedom, as do women. Women actually can do any work according to their own choice. According to Simone de Beauvoir (1949), women in this case had experienced negligence. Beauvoir in existential feminism invites women to be able to live freely to determine their future autonomously without any encouragement or direction from others. In other words, Beauvoir invites women to be themselves. Women have to be free to express themselves in all aspects because women have the same rights as men. It is also expresses their existence as a human being. In her book titled *The Second Sex*, she said:

*"From the moment the women is free, her only destiny is one she freely creates for herself. So the relation between the two sexes is a relation of struggle."* (Simone de Beauvoir, 1949, p.245)

From the statement above, Simone de Beauvoir said that when women are free, they have the right to create freedom for themselves. They have the right to refuse

what oppresses them, opposes what harms them, runs away from what makes them depressed, and so on.

As Simone de Beauvoir (1949) said, for married women, to get their freedom is that women have to understand first that they are in a truly oppressed situation, be different in the community or in their families, and also do not have the presence to themselves. Based on this, it will be the first step for them to try to free themselves from the oppressed position.

Furthermore, the representation of women's struggles in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* is to show anger at the exploitation she experienced and also to escape from a situation that made her depressed. She chose to show her anger because at least she did not just give up but had a sense of anger at the exploitation she was experiencing. This is illustrated by one of the female characters in the novel, namely Rose. Rose is described as the female character who dares to speak out for the exploitation she has experienced. In this regard, Rose feels resentful and jealous of Ginny for showing a lot of patience when dealing with their father who, according to Rose, is dangerous, impulsive, and also incomparable because their father had sexually abused them. Rose wanted Ginny to oppose their father's actions. At that time, Rose asked Ginny the following:

*"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!"* (Smiley, 1991, p.150)

The Rose statement above shows that Rose wants Ginny to show her anxiety and anger towards their father, Larry. However, Rose realized that being hostile would not end and also bring a solution to a problem. Rose does not like the nature of her father's impulsivity, but on several occasions she also showed impulsivity. Likewise, in a feminist crackdown is not considered as sane. Women are expected to overcome their problems without losing their temperament. In fact, loud screams might get them in trouble. Even though Rose realized all of that and chose to avoid enmity with her father, Rose's anger towards Larry continued to grow. She still did not accept the exploitation that her father had done to her and also her sister, that is sexually abused.

*"Weakened is not enough. Destroyed isn't enough. He's got to repent and feel humiliation and regret. I won't be satisfied until he knows what he is."* (Smiley, 1991, p.216)

Rose's statement illustrates that she wants someone who oppresses her to repent, feel insulted, and also feel sorry for his immoral acts of sexual abuse. She did not accept if people who oppress her during life feel happiness. She wanted to prove that women are not arbitrary can be oppressed and underestimated by men, including her father.

And the final description of the women struggle in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* is that one of the female characters chose to run away from life which made her so depressed and full of sadness. She was Ginny. She is described as Larry Cook's frustrated daughter in her life. Ginny was depressed from being deeply traumatized by her father's sexual abuse during her teenage years. As written in the novel:

*"I need a thousand dollars."*

*"In St. Paul, I found a room at the YWCA. They didn't ask any questions when I didn't write down a home address on the registration slip." (Smiley, 1991, p.330)*

Those statement tells when Ginny and Ty had a dispute over dinner and finally they divorced. After that, Ginny asked Ty for a thousand dollars and she decided to go to St. Paul to start a new life leaving all the problems that have happened in her life. Ginny's action is consistent with what Simone de Beauvoir said that women should be able to be free themselves from the oppression they have experienced even though the way is by running away.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis on this, it can be concluded that there has been an imbalance of rights expressed by Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*. Inequality of rights results in women being exploited by men. According to Simone de Beauvoir, the representation of women exploitation in the novel is explained by the sexual abuse experienced by the two female characters, Ginny and Rose. In this case, Simone de Beauvoir explains that women are the other, and men are the subjects. It is very appropriate with the story in the novel where men dominate more women in many ways, so that women have been considered weak because they are considered as property. However, in *A Thousand Acres*, Jane Smiley also provides insight into women's struggles to the readers by presenting Ginny and Rose who showed that women have courage and freedom in life. Simone de Beauvoir also revealed that women actually have freedom and also have the right to create themselves without pressure from the men who dominate them. Although the efforts of women they do differ but their intentions are the same, that is

wanting to fight and free themselves from male domination.

Simone de Beauvoir implicitly wants women to have the right to fight for their existence in this world against all prejudice, especially from male domination, and also to fight for unequal rights. It's the same thing Jane Smiley said in *A Thousand Acres*. Although women in the novel experience exploitation by dominating men, they are also portrayed as women fighting for their freedom because they are oppressed by male domination. We can see that Jane Smiley seems to give the female characters in the novel the ability to decide what they want to do and determine their own lives, even though the ending of the novel does not indicate a happy ending.

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