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MAN AND NATURE IN MELISSA HARRISON'S CLAY AND JANE SMILEY'S A THOUSAND ACRES

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ABSTRACT

Eco criticism lays stress on the relationship between man and nature. As they are interrelated. The effects of human intervention on environment, land and nature has jeopardized our lives. Melissa Harrison and Jane Smiley in their fiction works draw the reader's attention to a world where human actions have put everything at stake. Harrison in *Clay*, demonstrates the importance of nature in human life. The story revolves around three characters. They feel lonesome and are unhappy. Their relationship with people in the city is not enough, they need connectedness to nature. Ultimately, they discover a small park in the midst of the city, and it becomes a source of comfort for them. On the other hand, Jane Smiley's Pulitzer-winning novel, *A Thousand Acres* portrays the lives of farmers in Iowa, where farmers use a host of chemicals, toxins, and fertilizers. The farmers ignore the damaging impacts of these chemical substances on their lives and environment. Ultimately, readers come to know about the fate of the characters in the novel. As they suffer from different kinds of diseases due to the use of chemical substances. And their actions result in the destruction of the natural world. This paper discusses both novels form the angles of eco criticism.

Key Words: Eco criticism, Nature, Land, Power, Human, Environment, Melissa Harrison, Clay, Jane Smiley and A Thousand Acres.

1. INTRODUCTION

Eco criticism has paid a significant attention to nature and the world we live in. the Land, soil, plants and environment are all concerns of Eco criticism. Writers are well-aware of human beings treatment towards nature, land and environment. Through their writings they raise awareness about the importance of nature in our lives. In addition, they use the power of writing to address that our relation with nature isn't symbiotic and our treatment of land and environment is not decent.

Jane Smiley in *A Thousand Acres* portrays the life of a farm family. The novel is based on Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Smiley sets the story in a rural area called Iowa. The story revolves around a farmer and his three daughters. Larry Cook is farmer and he has three daughters. Having decided to retire, he wants to divide his land among his daughters. The division of land poses the problem for the family. Because one of Cook's daughters rejects the offer. As the story progresses, we learn about the lives of the farmers. The land, environment and nature are dominant themes in the novel. The modern farming has caused air pollution and many other environmental issues. Furthermore, Smiley reveals the importance of nature, land and environment in human life. In addition, human beings mistreatment of land causes environmental problems and the death of humans. Even though, we know that we are a part of nature and land however, we do our best to destroy our world, nature, land and environment.

On the other hand, Melissa Harrison in *Clay* follows the lives of three people from three different families, over the span of one year. Each of the characters has a difficult life, they want to change it and start a new life. After losing his farm in Poland Jozef leaves his country and moves to London. As a countryside dweller, Jozef suffers to adjust to the city life. Without land he feels depressed and he is unhappy. And for TC, life is hard too. He has some family issues and he needs something to make him happy. His father has left him and his mother has a new boyfriend and has ignored him. On the other hand, there is Sophia, an elderly woman, she has lost her husband. As a result, she feels lonesome and needs something to make her happy. She has a different perspective about life. She believes that the only thing that can change her life is nature. She lives nearby a small park in a hectic and busy city. She takes comfort in the flora and fauna around the park.

2. NATURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS IN CLAY AND A THOUSAND ACRES

In *A thousand Acres* as its title suggests, the focus of the story is on the land and modern farming. Besides, there are many other issues that the author sheds light upon. The issues of property, male domination over female and family problems constantly appear in the story. Nonetheless, the novel's thematic concentration is on land, modern farming and agriculture. By the same token, In *Clay* as the title suggests the focus of the novel is on land and environmental issues. Harrison focuses on the lifestyle of city dwellers and she also concentrates on the urban nature. The two books explore themes that are closely related to human life. Meanwhile, the novels' thematic concentrations on nature and environment raise awareness that our natural world is in danger. In *A Thousand Acres* the author pays attention to the land, due to the importance of land in human life. A firm evidence for this could be the opening lines of the novel as one of the Cook's daughters describes the land her father owns "you would take in the immensity of the piece of land my father owned, six hundred forty acres, a whole section, paid for, no encumbrances, as flat and fertile, black, friable, and exposed as any piece of land on the face of the earth" (Smiley 3-4). On the other hand, Melissa Harrison in *Clay* starts the novel by describing a small park in the midst of city "The little wedge-shaped city park was beautiful and as unremarkable as a thousand others across the country" (Harrison 1). In the above quotations we can realize the importance of nature in our lives.

Smiley in *A Thousand Acres* introduces the readers to the modern farming. She demonstrates the live of farmers in Iowa, where farmers use chemicals and toxins. As a result, these chemicals have damaging effect on human life, land, nature and environment. The farmers' reckless treatment of land causes environmental problems, and death of the farmers. On the contrary, in the past this was different, as Joan Nassauer in his book claims that:

During early human history, caring for the land was unnecessary; as a part of the natural world it took care of itself. Later, with the development of agriculture, caring for the land meant the maintenance of soil fertility by farmers. Later still we added the prevention or mitigation of local water and air pollution to our evolving concept of care. Now it is becoming increasingly clear that human societies, if they are to survive and prosper, must care, and care deeply for the planetary ecosystem as an integrated whole. (Nassauer 17)

In the past, agriculture was a natural process; farmers did not even use heavy machines. But in this modern era, farmers use chemicals and machines and they cause many environmental issues. Smiley's thematic focus on the land, nature and environment demonstrates the importance of them in our lives. *A Thousand Acres* presents realities about some environmental issues as she states that *A Thousand Acres* presents a "complex argument against a certain kind of farming and land use that is leading us towards an environmental disaster, the destruction of the lives of people and of the moral life of our country" (Farrell 38). Our world is in danger due to the modern farming "A farm abounds with poisons, though not many of them are fast acting. Every farmer knows a chemical dealer's representative who has taken a demonstration drink of some insecticides – safe as mother's milk, etc." (Smiley 310). Using insecticides and pesticides and other chemicals by farmers cause environmental problems such as air pollution and it also causes the contamination of underground water as the only source of water for the rural areas. The author also showcases the reckless treatment of farmers towards land, nature and human beings.

Meanwhile, in *Clay* Harrison demonstrates the same theme but differently. She draws our attention to a park in the city center. She indicates the human beings treatment towards a small park as she describes it:

"[...] had been eaten into and built upon over the years, as is the way with land not seen to earn its keep. Now it was more like a very wide verge which followed the long, unlovely high road for much its length, interrupted here and there by side streets and a few grander

buildings which had fenced off their own to make a private garden in defiance of planning laws nobody seemed willing to enforce. (Harrison 1)

In both novels, the authors lay a great deal of stress on the land and nature. The novels demonstrate the importance of land, nature and environment in our lives. Smiley's focus is on farmers as they use chemicals and toxins. The use of these chemicals by farmers cause many damages to our ecosystem. Meanwhile, Harrison's focus on a small park raises awareness about the urban nature. She denounces the reckless treatment of people and government towards it. Nonetheless, there is a need to have more green spaces in the cities. Because lack of green spaces cause many environmental issues and they can have damaging influence on our lives.

As the stories progress, we get familiar with the effects of human intervention on earth, land and environment. In *Clay*, Melissa Harrison describes the damages human has done to earth and nature "The soil beneath was black and startling, like a wound immodestly revealed [...] how the smell of disturbed earth was an irresistible challenge to them" (Harrison 17). Every action of human leaves an impact on nature and earth. The above quotation shows the harsh reality of the human impact. Using "black soil" and "disturbed earth" by the author is a clear-cut illustration of human's negative impact on earth. As Store claims "The sober fact is that we are the cruelest and most ruthless species that has ever walked the earth" (Commoner 4). On the other hand, Smiley in *A Thousand Acres* presents another reality which is the use of chemicals by the farmers:

it was clear that the fields abounded with plenty of poisons, too, and not only jimsonweed and bittersweet and common nightshade, deadly amanita and greed death caps and common locoweed [...] Lilies of the valley were poisonous, and daffodils, and horse nettles and ground-cherries, rhubarb leaves, off course, garden fox gloves, English ivy. Lamb's lettuce berries and roots, what the pamphlet called pokeweed. Mistletoe berries. The most poisonous, mentioned in passing but not pictured, was water hemlock. (Smiley 311)

From the above quotation it's become clear that using poisons and other chemical substances by the farmers is a real threat. As Smiley demonstrates, the farmers recklessly use these toxins and chemical substances regardless of their side effects on humans' lives, plants and environment. Smiley goes on and states "the rows of corn marched straight across black soil as uniform as asphalt" (Smiley 205). Similarly, we witnessed the same theme in *Clay*.

Melissa Harrison in *Clay* demonstrates the importance of land and farming. She indicates them as source of life. Jozef is a teenage boy, he lives with his family:

Its eighteen acres had been enough to support a small dairy herd and grow a little barely using the old ways. They milked the cows in the shed – by hand when Jozef was a boy – and his mother made butter, and they sold what they produced to the government, although like everyone else his father kept some back up and sold it quietly to their neighbors or traded it for seeds or flowers [...] and they usually had enough to eat. (Harrison 58-59)

Jozef and his family relied on land and agriculture for their livelihood. The small land they owned was the source of their life. Jozef loved his farm as it was the source of their livelihoods. As Melissa States "For him, the farm was everything: it was his future" (Harrison 59). As the story progresses, we come to know that Jozef loses his farm. McNeill declares "there was a steady concentration of land ownership into the hands of wealthy because over time the small farmers had gone into debt to the large landowners" (John Robert McNeill 29). As a result, Jozef leaves his country and moves to London. He is lost without land and he is unhappy. He always thinks about his farm:

Jozef tried not to let himself think about the farm any more, but it was always with him, every ditch, every stump, every field drain, every hollow. Nearly three years on, the sense of having been torn away from it still had the power to make him gasp, while the thought of it being farmed by other hands than his was like watching another man lay hands on his lover. (Harrison 58)

Similarly, Smiley portrays the same theme. In *A Thousand Acres* we realize that the characters in the novel rely on farming for their livelihood. The more land they have, the better life they live, "Acreage and financing were facts as basic as name and gender in Zebulon County" (Smiley 4). Furthermore, the following catechism illustrates the importance of farming and the greediness of farmers:

What is a farmer?

A farmer is a man who feeds the world.

What is a farmer's first duty?

To grow more food.

What is a farmer's second duty?

To buy more land. (Smiley 45)

As Smiley states "A farmer is a man who feeds the world", this sentence indicates the significant role of farmers. Nonetheless, the novel's thematic emphasis on what is called the industrialization of agriculture raises great consciousness about our ecosystem. In this era, farming causes problems "farming has grown less visibly brutal, at least to the outside eye, but it remains deeply problematic" (Nakadate 159). For the farmers, the environment did not matter at all, what mattered was having more production regardless of the nature and land. Another quotation that shows greediness and recklessness treatment of farmers could be "There is not any room for the old methods any more. Farmers who embrace new methods will prosper, but those that don't are already stumbling around" (Smiley 45). Using "old methods" and "new methods" could be interpreted as non-chemical fertilizer and chemical fertilizer, farmers who use non-chemical fertilizer or old methods could bring less production and less damage to nature. On the contrary, employing chemicals and new methods could bring more production and more damage to nature and environment. Moreover, Goudie comments on this and remarks that "farmer sees the rook pecking a little of his grain, or digging at the roots of the spring corn, and poisons all his neighborhood. A few years after he is surprised to find his crop destroyed by grubs. The works of the Creator are nicely balanced, and man cannot infringe his Laws with impunity" (Goudie 493).

Another interesting point in both novels is the representation of nature. In *Clay* and in *A Thousand Acres* the authors put a great deal of stress on the need to have a symbiotic relationship with nature. But human beings always ignore the natural world. In spite of the fact that we are part of nature "the relationship between human beings and natural world is an innate relationship" (Wilson 5). Nonetheless, in *Clay*, the characters are innocuous and cause no damage to the natural world. But in *A Thousand Acres*, the characters cause a great damage to nature, land and environment but ultimately, nature comes out on top.

In *Clay*, Harrison demonstrates a need for connectedness with the natural world. Unlike *A Thousand Acres*, The characters in *Clay* feel lonesome without nature. In addition, none of the main characters damage nature, land and environment. Therefore, nature rewards them and gives them comfort and solace as Melissa writes "A place for the enjoyment of all" (Harrison 1). A small park in the midst of a busy city gathers the characters together and brings them joy and happiness. For TC, who is just ten, the park became a place "where he felt less alone" (Harrison 7). Moreover, for Sophia, who is an elderly widowed woman the park becomes a place that she is attached to. The characters take comfort in the park and other small green spaces in the city.

In *A Thousand Acres*, the recklessness of human beings and farmers result in their death. At the end of the novel we come to know that nature comes out on top. Using chemical substances caused a disaster and destroyed the lives of the farmers. Smiley uncovers the fate of the characters as we approach the end of the story "My sister Rose had been diagnosed with breast cancer. She was thirty-four. Her mastectomy and ensuing chemotherapy had left her weak and anxious" (Smiley). Using toxins and other chemical substances threatened the lives of the farmers. Rose is not the only character that suffered from breast cancer. As the story progress, we learn that most of the characters die of breast cancer including Rose and her mother, Verna and Jess's mother (Hero). Smiley reveals the fate of the other characters, Ginny suffers miscarriages "Linda was just born when I had my first miscarriage, and for a while, six months maybe, the sight of those two babies, whom I had loved and cared for with real interest and satisfaction, affected me like a poison" (Smiley 8). The use of chemicals caused the contamination of well waters. The farmers ignored the side effects of these chemical substances. But the result of using the substances costed their lives. Witnessing these brutal actions by human beings, Smiley declares that "Men against nature" (Smiley 317).

In *A Thousand Acres*, the characters or the farmers who damage the environment and ignore the natural world lose their lives. The only character who survives is Jess Clark. He was different from all other characters. Clark was disagree with the modern farming and the use chemical fertilizers by farmers. As a result, he leaves his own county and moves to Canada. The result of using chemical substances by the

farmers came at a great cost as they lost their lives and cause the destruction of nature and environment. In contrast, the characters in *Clay* are harmless and cause no damage to the natural world. And they find comfort in nature.

3. CONCLUSION

Melissa Harrison and Jane Smiley demonstrate the destructive impacts of human being on the environment. In addition, they portray the power of nature in human life. *Clay*, follows the lives of three characters in a busy city. One of the characters loses his farm, he cannot stand it, therefore, he moves to a city. He finds it hard to adjust to the city life. The other two characters have troubles, and they need to connect with nature. A small park in the midst of the city becomes their source of joy and happiness. In addition to this, Harrison reveals the reckless treatment of people in the city towards nature. As they ignore the park and other small green spaces in the city. On the other hand, Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* is a portrait of the lives of farmers in Iowa in the 1970s. The author demonstrates the brutality of human beings towards nature, land, and environment. The farmers in Iowa use a host of chemical substances to increase the productions. They ignore the destructive impacts of these chemicals substances on their lives and nature. In addition, they use the land excessively and it harms the soil. The consequences of all these actions result in the death of the farmers. The chemical substances affect the lives of the farmers as most of them suffer from different diseases caused by these toxins and chemical fertilizers. The only farmer who survives did not use chemical substance. *Clay* and *A Thousand acres* present the consequences of human's ignorance and arrogance. The idea of being the ruler of this universe is rejected by the power of nature. In both novels, nature comes out on top. And they both reveal the need for connectedness to nature.

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