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The magical force and its impact on marriage in smith's Oral History

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Abstract

Oral History (1983), the marvelous novel, was written by the talented novelist, Lee Smith, after *Black Mountains Breakdown*. It is the collection and study of historical information about individuals, families, important events, or everyday life. In her novel, *Oral History*, Smith focuses on Appalachian culture, overturning the conventional notions of mountain people. This novel revolves around a young college student whose name is Jennifer, who leaves her city, returning to her childhood home of Hoot Owl Holler, in the mountains. She has brought her tape recorder to hear the stories of her kin and make interviews with her relatives for a college project. She meets family members and learns of a mysterious curse due to the conjugal marriage between the husband, Almarine and the witch wife, Red Emmy. This curse has followed her family members for generations. Her grandfather and her great-aunt actually left their mountain cabin because of ghostly screams, and nocturnal visitations. Jennifer learns about herself as she chronicles the lives of her ancestors. The tales of murder and suicide bring vibrant story of a cursed family that still refuses to give up. The core narrative begins in the early 1900s and traces the family to the 1980s. Throughout the novel, Emmy and her curse are associated with ravens, which links Emmy to Cherokee stories about the Raven Mocker. Emmy has grown up under the Raven Cliffs, in caves, with ravens, and Granny believes that she returns to live there again after Almarine makes her leave his place.

Keywords: Witchcraft, conjugal relationship, conjuror

Introduction

Marriage is an essential social aspect for keeping the offspring and recycling the life. It has been considered as one of the Southern issues that is distinguished in the US Southern States because it is a conservative society. Therefore, conjugal ties are important in the South in particular, and in the world in general.

Oral History embodies the marriage as a social issue and reflects early Appalachian fiction more clearly than any other text of Smith's. The ancestral homeland of the Cherokee is inside the Southern Appalachian Mountains and also that lies at the heart of Smith's fiction. Smith's gives special importance and concerns with recording the changes in Appalachian culture, so the role of Cherokee cultural heritage in her works is noticeable and recognizable. This novel was created as a result of large part from Smith's research into mountain traditions, folklore, and ethnographies. Smith has stated that she had come to the text through research:

I never felt like I wrote that [Oral History] anyway. I had never used research in anything I had written before. I kept asking my editor, who kept reassuring me, 'It's all right.' But I loved the folklore. I loved all the research. I just sat down and tried to find a form that would allow me to put as much of this in as I could. (Hill, p 7)

While Almarine is walking on the wild side of Snowman, he suddenly meets Emmy for the first time and followed her to the rocks. There are big old white rocks at that place where they strewed off down the side of the mountain. They are also funny because they are laying in wonderful forms that ca not be found anywhere of the other three mountains. Emmy kills her ex-husband, Isom, whom she had lived on the wild side of Snowman Mountain for years, because she wants to marry Almarine and be free with him.

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Almarine Cantrell begins a love affair with "Red" Emmy. The first appearance of the witch wife, Emmy, is after flying the redbird right up in front of Almarine's face and everything around him suddenly looks brighter. As soon as the redbird has started singing, Almarine stops and stares all around, noticing the diamond shininess of the rocks scattered on the mountainside. The song and the brightness make Almarine feel light-headed. All the shapes look like snowflakes in front of his eyes though there are no snowflakes but as a reflection of the whiteness of Emmy's white skin and her big and white breasts. He has never heard as pretty as the redbird's song that makes him follow the redbird unwillingly. According to the Cherokee mythology, the sun is considered a female, and her daughter is the redbird. Therefore, the redbird that leads Almarine to Emmy traditionally represents "the daughter of the Sun" (Cohlene 22). In Cherokee formulas, the redbird frequently appears, and its amazing songs are actually used to attract members of the opposite sex.

Granny, his grandmother, is describing Emmy's arrival at Almarine's house, noticing her coming directly to his bed, speaking out his name, letting down her hair, and moving close to him. Interestingly, Granny suspects he was servicing her while she liked to trample him to death. Red Emmy is working all day and rode all night without sleep because the witch doesn't need to sleep. Clearly, neither Granny nor Emmy fits the definition of conventional female behavior in the community. She tries to convince him to throw Emmy out of the house because she believes Emmy is a witch, but he does not take her advice seriously and continue forward with the witch, Red Emmy.

Smith uses much of the symbolism to indicate the nature of Emmy's potentially danger. Cherokee witch stories are strongly present and they can be found in traditional Cherokee beliefs concerning witchcrafts as well as in specific, particularly the ones about the Raven Mocker and the Spear Finger. The story proceeds to trace this legacy of violence and disaster through succeeding generations by means of a kind of incremental revelation. There is a great love between Almarine and Red Emmy. He says,

I was intoxicated, I was overcome by her nearness! With trembling fingers I pretended to examine the earrings, and then suddenly I found myself pressing her against me urgently, covering her neck, her hair, her cheek with kisses. I couldn't stop myself! (Smith, 1983, 149) 52

The setting of the Cantrell place has a great role in depicting as a fertile ground for witch stories. The darkness of Hoot Owl Mountain and the Cantrell home place sits alone, high up in the holler, makes it difficult for anybody to reach in. Remembering his walk to see Dory, Richard Burlage admits that he could see, however, that remote place so dramatic and glamorous as fog would cling to its coves, and mists obscure its mountaintops. In addition, the name Hoot Owl Holler is suggestive of witchcraft. Witches leave their bodies at night, and fall into somebody else which they can take on any form of animals such as a cat, a cow, a horse, a rabbit, or an owl. They can also change themselves into various forms, including men or women, and there is no accurate and exact way to know one, but only those people who have the right medicine, can recognize them properly. In the Cherokee language, the word owl is one of the disguised names for a witch. Jack and Anna Kilpatrick

observe that owl stories do not appear in their collection *Friends of Thunder*, even though hoot owl and screech owl "figure largely in affairs Cherokeean" [9].

Interestingly, the symbolism of bathing scene has been occurred from the very beginning to show the plenty of sexuality and spirituality between Almarine and Red Emmy. It is an early morning of the spring and the weather is clear and cold. The beginning of courting sets out over Snowman Mountain. Although there is a specific description for Emmy's identity, but her personality is still mysterious. In fact, she is tall and straight like an Indian girl, but her nose is long and thin like an European girl. The color, red, in Cherokee symbolism, signifies the quintessence of everything that is desirable. Therefore, her red hair, and also her red nipples blood are indicating both her sexual attractiveness and spiritual powers. Almarine has been affected after drinking water from Emmy's spring of the ground. Similar to the effect of the shining rocks, the taste of the water makes Almarine active as if it were liquor that straightly runs to his heart. The redbird and the shining spring lead Almarine to a deep pool located in a circle of rocks. When he has reached the pool, he sees a naked woman, kneeling and washing herself. By noticing this sight, a stamp has been placed on the rest of his life and Emmy's appearance without clothes inside the pool, connects her to the crime world of water.

Referring to the Cherokee creation myth, "[t] here is another world under this. The streams that come down from the mountains are the trails by which we reach this underworld, and the springs at their heads are the doorways by which we enter it" (Mooney, *Myths* 240). After washing her body, Emmy rises and turns toward Almarine, and her hair moves slowly like a red rain of water around her head. Almarine's enchantment is complete when Emmy's hair hangs all down her back like one of them waterfall freshets.

Mr. Joe Johnson thinks Almarine doesn't look good. He looks plumb tuckered out. He orders Granny to go up and see him because he doubts there is something wrong. Almarine Cantrell, who inherited his father's house and property in the late nineteenth century, became infatuated with Red Emmy, whose father, it was believed, had sold her to the devil. Granny thinks that Almarine, has been affected by grief and rage, and let his own revenge behave wrongly by murdering Red Emmy, whose curse then fell upon his descendants. Later, Almarine gets married to Pricey Jane, who has a dark-haired beauty. There is doubt that her hair origins are almost as hazy as those of Red Emmy.

Oral History focuses basically on the mystery surrounding Red Emmy. At the beginning of the novel, Emmy is identified as a witch by Granny Younger. However, after forcing the witch, Emmy, to leave, the curse descends on Hoot Owl Holler and still continues to haunt the younger generations of the Cantrell family. Smith says that Red Emmy "was really based very closely on a witch tale that [she] had heard in the mountains" (interview with Loewenstein 494).

Oral History is a compelling illustration of Smith's depiction of the beauty, culture, and significance of people in Appalachia. She reintroduces the character, Richard, many times at the end of the novel, to show that there are permanent and influential mountain stereotypes which affect on people who have settled within and experienced their culture. Being disguised as a photographer, Richard has come back to Black Rock, and people believe he has

become a new man, a confident man, so different from the boy who had left Black Rock ten years back. Smith uses these aspects to provide an alternate perspective of mountain life. Examples of common stock characters is Granny, smoking a corn cob pipe, and the ever-present mountain man:

The lanky, gun-toting, grizzle-bearded man with a jug of moonshine in one hand and a coon dog at his feet, the archetypal patriarch of the mountains. Other familiar characters coon dog at his feet, the archetypal patriarch of the mountains. Other familiar characters gangling youth, physically powerful but intellectually naive; and a buxom and almost equally dim female counterpart. (Algeo, 2003, p 30) 53

By publishing *Oral History* novel, Lee Smith has made a giant leap into the mainstream. With the novel mentioned, she became the titular queen of the new Southern regional movement. She portrays the disconnection between Appalachia and the outside world, and continues to reoccur throughout history. Commenting on the South concept of the harmony ethic, Michael T. Garrett says:

“All things are connected and exist in a continuing cycle of harmony and balance. However, it is important that we nurture this sacred flow of life energy, that we enhance it, that, at a minimum, we do not disrupt it” (Garrett, 1996, p 179) 58

Granny Younger identifies the relationship between Almarine and the land, saying that it is truly that Almarine considers this holler as part of his body. Granny Younger has worked as a conjuror and she considers herself as a traditional healer who knows well what her mountain environment has to offer. She is fond of her career and thinks that Hoot Owl Mountain looks like how it sounds, laurel so thick it is impossible for anyone to climb it at all. Such destroying of the boundaries between the physical and the spiritual is what has been existed as factual and mysterious, that permeates Granny Younger's narrative in *Oral History*. Due to her age, Granny Younger's voice is the oldest one in the novel, rising, invisibly, out of the mountains. Smith's works, especially her mountain novels, are “infused [...] with a deeply spiritual appreciation of the natural world” (Ketchin 4).

Like Susan, Sally finds renewal by letting herself be embraced by the natural world around her. She gets bath in the creek and that helps her deal with the loss of her mother and find her own self. For the traditional Cherokee, “going to water” for spiritual purification, regeneration, and preparation for important events as well as the future “remains a vital part” of their culture today. It is believed that “[w]ater can speak and give answers to people who are fasting and praying” (Duncan, “Going to Water”, 1993, p 94) 65.

Because of the activity of their barking, dogs are traditionally associated with witchcraft. They have great ability to detect witches and sorceress, providing a warning signal to indicate that there is actually a witch in the place. When Almarine's dog, Duck, first notices the red bird in the path on Snowman Mountain, it started whining, and the hair has risen up all along its back. The dog starts growling, and then barking. At the time of Emmy's arrival to Almarine's

cabin, the dog, Duck, is standing up again in the yard, howling and barking. The final disappearance of the dog, Duck, is also linked with Emmy's witchcraft. As soon as Pricey Jane and her son, Eli, have died, Almarine runs through the night toward Snowman Mountain screaming out like a crazy man, or like a man bewitched. Rose remembers that he comes back all tore up covered in blood, saying that his dog had been killed in a fight with the witch.

The symptoms of Almarine's illness closely correspond with the most common effects of Cherokee witchcraft. After their meeting at the pool, Almarine forgets everything he ever knew near about except for that redheaded Emmy. When Granny sees him by the creek, she notices that Almarine's eyes that used to be so blue had turned pale and runny. His collarbone showed through his shirt. His hair, that used to be so beautiful, looked just like old dry straw and that's a fact. When Almarine meets Emmy, he describes the sexual intercourse with her, saying that she has reached for his penis then and he succumbed eagerly to her ministrations. She dressed and left, leaving me here exhausted yet too emotionally tense for sleep.

Emmy and Almarine have started to work in the field. In a planting scene, they sow corn together. By working in the field, Emmy has been connected to the cycle of natural regeneration. When Emmy leaves her cave on Snowman Mountain, it is at planting time. Emmy has started to behave as a human being and as a wife also when Granny watches her walking behind Almarine as he leads the plow and she holds her apron full of corn, dropping down the seeds to the freshly fertile earth. By creating new life together, the scene has reached its climax with the union of their natural and spiritual forces. As soon as the heavy rain has begun, indicating the beginning of the agricultural season, every one moves toward another and they go to kissing, right there in the half-plowed field in the wind and the rain.

By tracing the joint relationship between the roles of the Almarine's grandmother, Granny and his wife, Emmy, it has been found there is a sharing bond with the land that provides them with abnormal assertive power and freedom in expressing their sexuality. For example, both are brave and neither Granny nor Emmy is afraid to walk alone at night in the mountains. Granny is jealous, and tells openly about her sexual arousal as she watched Emmy and Almarine are kissing each other in the cornfield. She is not shy to say about her sexual arousal though she has become too old. Among the traditional Cherokee, witchcraft plays an important role both in their myths and in the everyday life of the community.

Suspicion of witchery is usually associated with anti-social behavior, and it is the conjuror's role to name and to protect the community from a witch. (Hudson 174).

In Smith's beliefs, there are still a number of ghost towns around those mountains. The vital beauty and strength related to Emmy could certainly be an important motif for the community's rage and hatred. Though Emmy accepts, when she comes to live with Almarine, to perform all the works that any natural wife can do, such as cooking, washing, and also working hard in the field, all that is not sufficient to be accepted and treated as a member of the mountain community.

According to the belief of Emmy's curse on the following generations Cantrell's family, Honey states his father's

meeting and his witch wife, Dark Catherine. The story starts when his father goes to the mountains and sees her only one time. He directly falls in love so bad that his life has been turned into miserableness. One night, when Honey's father is climbing up in the mountains for hunting, the witch, Dark Catherine has changed into a little old chicken, and then comes to him in his cabin. As soon as she has reached there, she changes one more time into an old woman in front of the fire. Again, the dogs' barking performs its usual role, warning him from her bewitching abilities. A hair right out of her head was given to Honey's father to tie the dogs up, but he is aware of her trick and secretly changes it immediately for one of his own. She thinks the dogs are tied strongly and she becomes safe, the first thing to do is kissing him, but she gets surprised when the dogs started attacking her and then she runs away. For the next four days, Honey's father has bad luck and has never hunted any animal. After coming back home, he learns that Catherine is sick and he should go to visit her and realizes what happened up in the cabin. At last, Catherine dies, and Honey's father has never been the same man again, which echoes the effects of Emmy's curse on Almarine family. His blue eyes are stern and flat and finally died.

Conclusion

Lee Smith is one of the best US novelists who takes care of current social issues. One of the present issues is marriage. American Obviously, it is an unhappy marriage for Almarine because his first wife, Emmy is a witch and ran away. Granny soon becomes concerned about her favorite Almarine because everybody has turned their back on him now. She doesn't provide him any truck with a witch. New stories about Emmy continue to spring up. When Peter Paul Ramey's baby falls ill, people vaguely connect it with Emmy's workings. Even though Granny knows that folks can say anything, she also knows that she cannot ignore public opinion if she is to preserve her position and communal harmony. Correspondingly, one of curse incident of Emmy is the death of Almarine's son Eli and his wife Pricey due to dew poison in their cow's milk. The neighbors are crowded, standing outside the Hoot Owl cabin to see this tragedy. Unexpectedly, Almarine's life has been ended dramatically and tragically, murdering by the hand of his grandmother, Granny.

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