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LOOKING FOR IDENTITY IN THE U.S. FEMINIST LITERATURE IN THE 1990s

In multicultural atmosphere of the present U.S. which is so often compared to a «patched quilt», feminist literature constitutes one of the most colorful patches of this quilt. This literature varies greatly in its message and artistic value, but it comprises some very talented women-writers without whom it's impossible to imagine American Literature in the 90-s. Many contemporary American scholars express an opinion that nowadays there are no writers in the U.S. who represent the whole of country. It may be so, but the absence of the leaders compensated by the emergence of such talented authors in the literary life of the country in the decade, as Jane Smiley and Jane Hamilton.

One of the main themes of modern U.S. literature has become the theme of looking for identity. This theme is the main one for the feminist novel as well. It finds very different representation in J.Smiley's novels «A Thousand Acres», «Ordinary Love» and J.Hamilton's «A Map of the World».

Smiley's novels «A Thousand Acres» transplants Shakespeare's tragedy on the American spill rather accurately emphasizing the similarity of the names of the main characters to those of «King Lear» and the analogous turns of the plot. It's King Lear's story, told by his oldest daughter, but her story is opposite to Shakespeare's interpretation of the cause of the tragedy and its Characters. As it often happens in works of art based upon myths, Smiley' novel, preserving the seeming likeness to myth, opposes it, and the message of novel is revealed by this discrepancy with the initial work of art. Modern American King Lear, a wealthy farmer, an owner of one thousand acres of land, a despot and a brute, distorted the lives and personalities of his two elder daughters, beating them cruelly for any trifle, raping them for years, crushing the smallest sign of will and resistance in them.

This novel based upon myth, is an interesting manifestation of the social novel, continuing the tradition of the interpretation of the theme of land by Balzac, Zolya, Steinbeck, Faulkner, Updike, Kolas; and this social message of the novel is stressed by the author in her tale of the land «floating from farmer to farmer», of its expansion through crimes and meanness, of the destruction of nature which brings death into the families of the destructors.

«A Thousand Acres» is also a feminist novel devoted to the woman's painful search for her identity and her true self, a search which leads the heroine to loneliness and what she herself calls «an afterlife which didn't contain a future». This thought is more prominently expressed in Smiley's another novel «Ordinary Love», in which a heroine trying to realize her desire to start a new life, to realize herself loses her husband and brings misery upon her children. J.Smiley stresses the fact that the love-affair which she has had in her young years and which has

broken her life, has resulted in her separation from her husband and her children, has brought her so much misery and frustration and made her children half orphans was born not by her love or passion for the other man, but by her inner striving to start another life more interesting and colorful, to identify herself which her lover who was a traveler and a writer. It's noteworthy that in her reminiscences of her lover a map of the world which used to hand in his study plays such an impotent role constantly coming to mind of now quite mature heroine – a symbol of unrealized but tempting possibilities. A Map of the World becomes one of the main symbols in Jane Hamilton's novel under the same title, but the meaning of this symbol is quite different.

The specific features of J. Smiley's novels as feminist novels demonstrate themselves in psychologically exact recreation of the peculiarities of female psyche, female perception of the world, her reaction on the turns of life; in the negative representation of all the male characters of the novels and the emphasis on the idea of the emphasis on the idea of their alienation from women and even their inner inborn hostility towards them. At the same time Smiley shows the dangers that a woman encounters in her search of freedom trying to realize herself.

Quite another aspect of a woman's looking for identity is elaborated in J. Hamilton's novel «A Map of the World». At first sight, this novel is alike «A Thousand Acres» by the problems it poses and by its interpretation, doesn't differ greatly from Smiley's novel. But this similarity of the two novels has a very superficial character, for J. Hamilton elaborates another aspect of a woman's looking for identity – a psychological, a moral one.

The inner plot of the book which grows out of the heroine's reminiscences of the events of the previous summer represents her passionate spiritual journey during a few months full of moral suffering, pain and self-denial because she blamed herself for the death of her best friend's two-year-old daughter on her firm. Alice stoically accepts her arrest or a false accusation and her stay in prison for 3 months taking them as a just retribution for her sin. The book is about her way to overcoming this self-denial and self-annihilation, the dread of real life, which has accompanied her, to the acceptance of forgiveness as the main law of her future life.

Hamilton's book belongs to the best of literature asserting since the times of Emerson the impotence of the solid moral basis and self-reliance in looking for identity in a complicated world. It's message, this emphasis on love and forgiveness, which alone can bring a person to peace with himself, together with its psychological depth and fine analysis of the inner life of the heroes make us feel Dostoevskiy's influence on American literature.

Looking at U.S. feminist literature from the point of view of the long tradition of its development since the middle of the previous century and distinguishing two opposite lines in this tradition: grim revolt against the world where Man rules and the sentimental domestic novel proclaiming fanuly values we must place Jane Smiley and Jane Hamilton in the second line and at the same time stress the long way that this tradition of the delineation of a woman and her life problems has advanced.