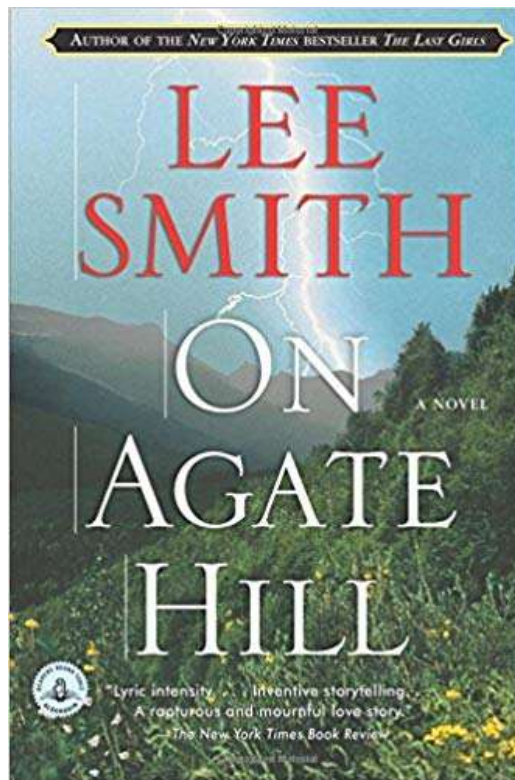


**Alienation and Identity Crisis in Lee Smith's
*On Agate Hill***

Dr. T. Sathyakala
Assistant Professor
Department of English
A.P.A College of Arts & Culture
Palani, Tamilnadu
ktsathyamathi@gmail.com



Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Agate-Hill-Novel-Lee-Smith/dp/1565125770>

Lee Smith is one of the famous modern writers in American literature. She is one of the popular Appalachian women writers. The Appalachian Mountains, often called the Appalachians, are a system of mountains in eastern North America. The Appalachians first formed roughly 480 million years ago during the Ordovician period. They once reached elevations similar to those of the Alps and the Rocky Mountains before experiencing natural erosion. Smith is a southern native; she was born in Grundy, Virginia, in 1944. She is the

daughter of Virginia Marshall Smith and Ernest Lee Smith. She pursued her Bachelor's degree in Hollins College in Roanoke, Virginia. In 1967 Smith married poet James Seay. Later they moved to Tuscaloosa, Alabama where she worked as a journalist in Tuscaloosa News.

Lee Smith started her writing career at her young age. *Cakewalk* the short stories collection was published in 1981. She published *Oral History* in 1983, for which she gained national fame. Most of the novels were set in Appalachian areas. She focused on their folklore and issues of women's rights, spirituality, religion, and their history, beliefs of super-natural elements, etc. Most of her novels had an autobiographic touch. She focused primarily on the mountains and the towns of Virginia, in the coal mining country where she spent her childhood.

While Smith also concentrated on the other Appalachian sub-regions, such as North Carolina and North Alabama, she consistently chose the setting that reflects the peculiarity of the mountain region. The cultural practices and perspectives of the Appalachians often provide narrative consistency to the characters of Smith's novels.

On Agate Hill (2006) is one of her recent novels. The setup of the novel is in North Carolina period during the end of the civil war. This story focuses on many characters. Smith picturizes the hopelessness of war time situations and the plight of many women's life like the protagonist Molly.

Molly's life is focused on several perspectives. Each new character brings a new chapter in Molly's life. Molly, the protagonist of this novel, lost her parents in her childhood and became an orphan and lived along with her uncle Junius, her mother's first cousins' big family. After her uncle's death, she was transplanted from Agate Hill to Gatewood Academy in her father's friend Simon Black's place. This was the first time she felt alienated in her life and she was affected psychologically and faced gender conflicts also. Her childhood orphanage separated her from others, and this made her feel more stressed. The lack of parental care created a bad impression about family life, her only companion was her diary which was given to her by Nora Gwyn, a preacher's wife.

Her happiness or sorrow, everything was shared in the diary. Molly says "And it is true that often I feel so lonesome for all of them that are gone. I live in a house of ghosts" (OAH 7). She lost her parents and her brother in the civil war. In her uncle's family she was always isolated from others, so she imagined herself as a ghost girl, but in her inner mind she always had a quest for her identity. She felt later that she would get a good and lovable husband. Through her words she had expressed in her diary, "I want to be a real girl and live as hard as I can in this world, I don't want to lie in the bed like Mama or be sick like Mary White. Or be a lady. I would rather work my fingers to the bone and die like Fannie. I want to; live so hard and love so much I

will use myself all the way up like a candle, it seems to me like this is the point of it all, not heaven. I want to have a demon lover and also a real boy who will be my husband and love me more than life itself". After the death of her uncle she felt sad and said in her diary, "I did not know what will happen." In her inner heart she started to be afraid of her father's friend Simon Black. He adopted her and took her to Gate Wood.

Once again, she felt alienated in the Gate Wood Academy. Molly from a rural background became a wayward and sullen girl to the Headmistress Mariah Rutherford Snow. She treated her as ruination of all her hard work. In the beginning Molly felt alienated and was searching for her identity; slowly she mingled with them and she became a friend of all other girls in the Gate Wood Academy. Mariah says, "indeed, our orphan Molly has become the pet and darling of them all" (OAH 160). The alienation and separation in her early age led her to be a victim of sexual abuse. She was misused by Nicky Eck. Later in her Gate Wood Academy also she faced the same problem from Dr. Snow, husband of Mariah Rutherford Snow. In all the ways in and around she had suffered from alienation and was searching for her identity.

One day Molly attended a party at Red Hill. There she met Jacky Jarvis. She fell in love with him because of his character and she developed her intimacy with Jacky. She treated him as demon lover, so their life was happy. Her happiness came to an end within a short period. Molly lost her two children one by one. Suddenly one day she lost her husband also. After the death of her husband she returned back to Gate Hill.

The last part of the novel reveals the mysterious death of Jacky Jarvis. At the time of writing her diary, Molly recollected the last day of Jacky Jarvis. When Molly saw her husband, he was in a pool of blood. He asked Molly to help him to get the gun, Molly on his request shot him. "I took the gun in both hands and shot him in the neck so that his head fell over to the side with his eyes wide open and the smile still on his face and then I lay down there beside him, I would have done anything for my Jacky" (OAH 358).

Throughout the novel, Molly's life was shuttled between all the persons and places in and around her. She faced so many struggles in her life, many of her days she was alone with the company of her diary. Her alienation forced her to search for her identity. The novel ends where it started.

Reference

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