



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.3., 2017 (July-Sept.)

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

LIFE POWER AND DIVINITY OF FEMALE SPIRIT IN *THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES*

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ABSTRACT

Sue Monk Kidd's first novel *The Secret Life of Bees* belongs to the bildungsroman genre of literature that portrays the journey of its young protagonist, Lily Owens to selfhood in the company of her black caregiver Rosaleen. Kidd through her narrative piece, reveals the power of black women, not only Rosaleen but also a group of beekeeping sisters and a Black Mary to construct a safe haven where Lily can survive amidst her crumbled life, eventually developing psychologically into a self actualized lady. Thus the novel follows Lily Owen's moral, intellectual and psychological growth to maturity. The story follows the description of a motherless fourteen year old Lily Owens who has lost her mother when she was just four years old. Raised by a cruel father, she desperately searches for clues to unbolt her mother's past. During her journey, she faces the challenges of being a young girl: a maturing body, confrontation with the opposite sex, freedom to survive, adjustment to the society especially community. In this article, I take a brief look at the power of inner self and divinity of female spirit in Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*. The divine mythology in the form of Black Mary transcends the inner conflicts and dilemmas of all the women associated. The spiritual and maternal fulfillment of its young protagonist in the household of three African American sisters becomes the crux of the paper. I believe those who come in contact and seek help of supreme power are liable to be strong and powerful.

Key words: Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees*, Bildungsroman, Black Mary, black women, beekeeping sisters, female spirit

Sue Monk Kidd grew up in the small town of Sylvester, Georgia. She graduated from Texas Christian University in 1970 and went on to join creative writing courses at Emory University and Anderson College. She listened to her father's stories enthusiastically. Moreover Kidd was deeply influenced by Thoreau's *Walden* and Chopin's *The Awakening*. Before entering the world of fiction, Kidd has two books to her credit. First, *When the Heart Waits* published in 1990, is a remarkable discourse on contemplative spirituality and secondly, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* in 1996 is a feminist ideology. Kidd took to writing her first novel *The Secret Life of Bees* in 2002, it became a genuine literary phenomenon, spending more than two and half years on the New York Times bestseller list. The novel became so popular worldwide that it has been translated into 36 languages. In 2004, it was named the Book Sense Paperback Book of the year, long listed for the 2002 Orange Prize in England, obtaining numerous awards. In 2008, it was adapted into a movie which won the People's Choice Award for best movie and the NAACP Image award for best picture. Kidd's second and third novel *The*

*Mermaid Chair* (2005) and *The Invention of Wings* (2014) were debuted no 1 on the New York Times bestseller list. Her various spiritual essays, meditations and inspirational stories are collected in a single volume, *Firstlight: The Early Inspiration Writings*. In 2009, Kidd along with her daughter co-authored a memoir, *Travelling with Pomegranates: A Mother-Daughter Story*. She resides in Florida and serves on the Way Council for Poets and Writers, Inc.

“Most people don't have any idea about all the complicated life going on inside a hive. Bees have a secret life we don't know anything about”(Kidd 148).

*The Secret Life of Bees* is structured by Kidd, as an extended flashback from the first person point of view through its protagonist and narrator, Lily Owens. The journey starts, accompanied by Rosaleen, a large African American women having no children of her own, so for the last ten years, Lily had “been her pet guinea pig”( Kidd 2). Set in South Carolina, *The Secret Life of Bees* frame the turbulent time period of 1964. The civil rights movement is in progress. Kidd draws from her memories the emotional and political turmoil of 1964 civil rights in her novel. With the passing of the act, Rosaleen like all other blacks have now a legal right to vote. On her way to register herself for the vote, Rosaleen is taunted by trio of white men. Outrageous, she pours the contents of her snuff jar on their feet. As a result, she is beaten, taken to jail and later to hospital. The protagonist Lily Owens too is fed up of her father's cruelty, so she decides to run away and take Rosaleen with her. They move towards Tiburon, South Carolina, the only town Lily believes will unfold her the past of her mother. Tiburon is thus, an answer to Lily about her mother who died in a horrible gun accident. Lily chooses Tiburon because its name was written on the back of a picture of Black Madonna in Lily's mother's belongings. In Tiburon, she comes in contact with the owner of the Black Madonna honey, the beekeeper August Boatwright and her two sisters, May and June. Lily and Rosaleen thus take refuge in their beautiful pink house. Both learn the ways of living and working staying with the Boatwrights. Lily starts working as August's beekeeping apprentice while Rosaleen took charge of the kitchen. There Lily meets Zach who is August's godson. Both started liking each other. They shared goals of their life while working together in collecting honey.

The divinity of female power and spirit is premised in *The Secret Life of Bees*. Through the narration of Lily, Kidd herself embarks upon the journey to find who she was, how valuable she was and what is her desires in life. What Lily and Kidd demand in the course of their journey is, utmost love and human existence. Residing in Boatwrights house, both Lily and Rosaleen look at their form of worshipping and praying. They pray together before a statue of “Black Mary”, which was a figurehead from the bow of an ancient ship. The Black Mary however stands for the guiding support and strength that provides solace to all women. It was a ritual to pray in Boatwrights house and Lily desperately wanted to indulge in it. One night, all alone she touched Mary's heart and prayed:

“Fix me... Forgive me. Is my mother all right up there with God? Don't let them find us. If they find us, don't let them take me back. If they find us, keep Rosaleen from being killed. Let June love me... Make the world better”( Kidd 164).

The Black Mary is the spiritual guidepost that Lily desperately needs and craves. It helped Lily to overcome the hatred of T. Ray and possess value, love and worth. After Lily touches the Black Mary, she gathers strength to finally tell August who she was and why she is here in their house. She struggles hard to inquire about her mother and August tells her: “you have to find a mother inside yourself. We all do. Even if we already have a mother, we still have to find this part of ourselves inside”( Kidd 288). August assures Lily not to find strength by putting her hand on Mary's heart. Rather she has it already inside her. Henceforth, the feminine spirit of the novel comes in the form of rescue to give Lily power and strength. The Black Mary, the sacred mother is an epitome of therapeutic comfort and solace in Lily and other ladies lives. Critic Catherine B. Emmanuel believes the image of Black Madonna is one of the leading force in Lily's Bildungsroman story. It offers “solace and spirituality”. At the same time, Lily's search of her mother is her “quest for psychological identity”as well as “ her quest to search for religion”. And this religion is framed through the Black Madonna, symbol of an archetypal mother which enables Lily to find her mother in the form of God within her. The

symbol of Black Madonna is a relief to the “psychological indomitable spirit” that is not defeated by racism and prejudice.

Kidd builds on the hive and bees as a metaphor of life. Bees stands for the unity, people working together in a society. The Queen, a mother figure presides over the hive. Bees are tend to get confused if their mother queen bee dies. This reminiscences Lily of her mother's death. Due to death of her queen bee (mother), she like bee children is confused in this dream world. Critic Judith Hebb addresses the metaphors of Bee and Honey as the hopes for spiritual healing. Hebb believes honey stands as a symbol of “the elixir of physical, emotional and spiritual healing”. Lily under the influence of Black Madonna is able to “shed her old life and begin anew”. Lily in becoming August's apprentice in process of learning to extract honey, understands the power and divinity of bee's matriarchal structure. In the way, she also understands the power of matriarchal refugee house. Both offer liberation and redemption from the troubled world of which Lily and Rosaleen were a part. The daily honey song sung by Boatwright sisters shows the world of secret and productive life of bees:

Place a beehive on my grave  
And let the honey soak through  
When I'm dead and gone  
That's what I want from You  
The streets of heaven are gold and sunny  
But I'll stick with my plot and a pot of honey  
Place a beehive on my grave  
And let the honey soak through ( Kidd 83).

Lily's primary concern in staying with the Boatwrights is finding out the truth of her mother. Finally getting all answers unlock, August tells her that she has been a housekeeper in her mother's childhood home and was her nanny. When her mother's marriage became complicated, she had came to the sister's house to escape. Obtaining refugee in the house of Boatwright sisters, Lily obtains strength and power of goodness from the Black Mary that perhaps her mother did not.

### **Conclusion**

The Secret Life is undoubtedly a beautiful narration of the power of life to live, power of love to heal, to intertwine together and look into the inner divine self. It is a compelling story of an abused and lonely little girl who is in search of the answers that will unlock her mother's past and is fortunate enough to find them in a lovely pink house of the Boatwright beekeepers. An encouraging story showing the importance of love and home, finding strength and courage, learning about the historical era of civil rights movement and power of feminine divine spirit.

Kidd shows the triumph of love amidst the pain and tragedy. While showing the suicide of May, the accidental killing of Lily's mother and the racial threatenings and beatings of Rosaleen and Zach, Kidd deals with the violence faced by her characters. Despite of facing all the violence, the emotional content of the novel focuses on the quest for love and a place of belongingness. Lily finds this love and belongingness from the three adoring mothers who tell her the meaning of parental love, sisterly love and belief in oneself. Lily sees how women can support, comfort, heal and love one another through the power developed inside by Black Mary. Kidd's coming of age story therefore, helps in building an intricate emotional panorama that explores the unity and love between its young protagonist and the matriarchs of the novel. They deliver the message to inculcate strength, wisdom, determination, power, courage and unity among themselves.

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