

An Affirmation of Black Culture through Revolution of Signs: A New Historicism Insight into Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*

Dr. Jayanthi Rajendran

Assistant Professor

English Language Centre - University of Jazan
Jazan, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Abstract:

The *Secret Life of Bees* begins with Lily's encounter of bees in her bedroom. Bees and bee-related objects function as a central symbol and motif in the novel. Apparently, they also signify guidance and demonstrate the power of a female community through a bond of relationship. Signs and symbols study the life within the society which is a part of social, cultural and psychological relation to semiology. And, also this is a girl's (Lily's) journey to find the truth about her mother whereby setting the captive nanny Rosaleen free from the bondage and finally out of the cage from the confinement of her father T. Ray. Throughout this novel Lily is in search of truth about her mother and whether her mother loved her or not. Eventually, signs and truth converge at a point in understanding the whole novel in a better perspective. Thus, this paper focuses on applying the signs to the text using semiotic theory and further focus on applying the concept of new historicism to the text in the light of truth which is a matter of interpretation of culture and history through revolution whereby affirming the Black Culture and their identity in white. Reality and courage of the novel is highlighted in the scenario of culture identity.

Key words: Affirmation, culture identity, matter of interpretation, new historicism, signs, symbols.

Introduction:

In the novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*, by Sue Monk Kidd, the bees are a symbol for life. Thus, they represent rebirth, search and personal growth. The world in which the core characters live is compared to like a beehive, with each character having a part. In general connotation the queen bee presides over the hive, when the queen bee dies, the bees become muddled, just like Lily, the main character in the novel, who was lost and unstable with confusions following the death of her mother who is compared to a mother bee. Lily is saved because of the new female mother figures (Rosaleen) in her life, just like bees that would be saved if a new queen bee were introduced. The most palpable symbols in this novel *The Secret Life of Bees* are the bees themselves. Kidd makes it clear from the jerk that she's drawing a likeness between the behavior of bees and the behavior of human beings. Every chapter begins with an epigraph from a book about bees this predominantly reveals the interconnection of bees and the characters in the novel. The novel's central theme signifies guidance and demonstrates power of female community with bee related objects. The signs and symbols signify the study of life within the society namely social, cultural and psychological. This sign and truth converge at a point where truth is the interpretation of culture and history. Truth could be derived from history as culture from signs and symbols.

Bee Symbolism: The Power and Demonstration of Female Community

It is very prominent to realize that each one of the characters has some thematic significance for the events in relation to bee of every chapter. The chapter of the novel begins with a quote from a book about bees: "when a queen bee is taken from a hive, the other bees notice her absence....", "The narrator sees a swarm of bees entering her room, and she runs to wake her father."(49). Explicitly, the bees in the beehives symbolize the women in the novel, sheltered in their small house in Tiburon, South Carolina. Similar to bees, the women develop an extremely

close, nurturing relationship with each other. At the same time, the sheltered nature of their lives is a relentless challenge. Like queen bees in a hive are surrounded by darkness so is Lily Owens and the Boatwright family are surrounded by darkness as well that is to say, the moral ambiguity they face as they try to decide how to move forward in the aspect of tragedy. It is very evident that bees are embodied in literature from the earliest days in a very constructive way. For so many years, bees have been represented in literature. Bees seem to occupy so many forms in literature, from ancient legends to poetry, and from narrative to prose. The honey is another widely used metaphor for wisdom and knowledge. The bee was considered to be creative and in ancient and medieval culture the bee symbolized reading, study and wisdom (Norman, 2014).

Bees in literature symbolize life, wisdom, organization and order living in a civilized community. Early Christian leaders along with many others in the past used the beehive as the supreme model of an integrated, orderly community. The early Christians adopted the bee as a symbol of purity and chastity. Bee symbolism connects us to a focused energy with oneness of mind as in the black community as an example of August family. Bees live complexly organized lives where everything is in order and everything falls into place which also compares the orderly life in the house of August. In life it could be hard to know whether or not to pursue a dream or goal but when the bee appears, it is a sign to take the leap and commit to the dream as Lily does. She (Lily) was not afraid of the time or work. The success of a bee hive requires all of its members to be dedicated to their role. (August and her sisters).

Like the family of August when Lily joins them, they began to be together. Bees are an exceptional creature in the sense that they unnecessarily does not create any trouble or devour other creatures in order to survive. They are capable of living merely off of nectar and honey. For the reason that of this they are very diplomatic insects that are happy to go about their day in congruence with the world around them, this reveals to us the nature of Blacks who are by nature un-harmful and could be happy with the world around them signifying their identity and demonstration of power within the society. Likewise, August and her sisters live a life harmonious and also peacefully though they were surrounded by the creature who could harm them like the white people referred in the novel. A bee represents a being as someone who is determined, when a goal or target is in mind compared to Lily's mind to find the truth about her mother that would not stop until it is reached. Like a bee she focuses to accomplish the goal and do not give up so easily. Just as bees spend their lives working tirelessly for the benefit of the hive, thus understand that this determination is what took Lily to spend her days hard at work in knowing the truth. When it comes down to it, humans and bees are not indifferent. But this novel shows that the bee life is just an interpretation of human beings and their relationships. Finally, Kidd draws a clear analogy between the bees that Lily traps in her jar and Lily herself sets it off to fly early on. When Lily decides to set the bees free, she finds that, "But the bees remained there, like planes on a runway not knowing they'd been cleared for takeoff. They crawled on their stalk legs around the curved perimeters of the glass as if the world had shrunk to that jar. I tapped the glass, even laid the jar on its side, but those crazy bees stayed put." (215)

Historical Approach: Convergence of Sign and Truth

Signs and truth converge at a point where truth is the interpretation of culture and history. Truth could be derived from history as culture from signs and symbols. New Historicism, a literary theory that was developed in 1980s reveal the events and cultural context of time period in relation to religion, spiritual, political and personal values of the particular time period. This theory also states that the truth is a matter of interpretation and understanding. The loser in the story (Lily) have stories worthy of hearing and literature has the capacity of reflecting the views and ideas of a particular culture (Black). It also asserts that the truth of the past can never be known and also admits that only powerful and victorious (one like Lily in this novel) can create history. (Black during the writers' time were powerful as Lily (white) was a loser in school and at home. Only after running away and meeting August and her sisters (Black) she becomes a winner. Thus, constructively, very aptly and clearly portrays that blacks were more powerful than the white.

Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* tells the story of a motherless fourteen-year-old Lily Owens, raised by a cruel father, who desperately searches for clues to crack her mother's past. Kidd's bildungsroman reveals the implausible power of black women, particularly a group of beekeeping sisters and a black Mary, to create a safe haven where Lily can scrutinize her disjointed life and develop psychologically, finally becoming a self-actualized young lady. Kidd's novel also empowers the artistic approaches of first-person narrative point of view, language, dialect, and the motif of place in order to contextualize the social awareness and psychological progress. Thus, the portrayal of a young, naïve protagonist who begins her journey to self-hood in the company of a sympathetic but

also vulnerable black caregiver. What they find on the doorsteps of three black bee-keeping sisters serves as the substance for the white girl's evolution.

The reasons for becoming a loser was that her father (white) knew little about raising up a child. Also, her mother (white) died when Lily was young, so Lily did not know how to be a girl at the first instance thus making her socially uncooperative and a failure again. She lost both to her father and to her peers. The reason for becoming a winner is August (black) the only person who enlightened Lily in all her ways and means though it was initially a tragic for Lily to get adapted but as days went by gradually, she started a new victorious rather a winning life.

Rosaleen is beaten by three racists and for this reason, Rosaleen becomes the girl's companion in running away. Later, Zack the young boy even the hired beehive helper and the godson of the matriarch August is "beaten by white men" (183) and unjustly arrested. It is very obvious that the beekeeper May's condition is caused by her twin's suicide, a frantic act prompted by racial discrimination. Racial conflicts not only cause physical pain but emotional turmoil and psychological stress, and Lily is forced to scrutinize her own ideas about race when she finds herself become captivated toward Zack while she was staying with new rays of hope in the home with four black women.

Though the civil rights were signed and discrimination was at distance the main reason or the problem shoots up in the novel is suicide and racism when Rosaleen after being insulted by a white man when going to register for vote, Rosaleen spits tobacco juice in his shoes and refuses to clean it off and the man proceeded to hit her on the face and get her arrested. "You're under arrest... Assault, theft, and disturbing the peace." (33). Another instance of racism occurs when a boy Zach who works for August, being arrested for the crime he did not commit. His friends had hit a white man with bottle and now all the four boys were arrested including Zach who was innocent of the crime. Their lawyer later tells them that, "judge Munroe is out of town on vacation. So, nobody is getting out before next Wednesday. It looks like..." (181). The reason of suicide which is provoked by racism is even more predominant as it could. After spending few days with August and her sisters, Lily is told about her 4th sister April's death. April has been depressed for a while after realizing for the first time how bad racism could really was. "And then took her father's shoot gun and killed herself....." (97). Another instance is when May learned that Zac was arrested, she went to the wall cried out and wrote all her problems. She didn't come back for a long time. So, August, June, Rosaleen and Lily went to look for her. August eventually found her under the river with the rock on her chest. "We've lost her, said August...it's just like April" said June...." (193).

Amazingly, Lily apprehends that she herself is sticking around in the "jar" of her unhappy home life, even though she is actually free to fly the cage, "You could say I'd never had a true religious moment, the kind where you know yourself spoken to by a voice that seems other than yourself, spoken to so genuinely you see the words shining on trees and clouds. But I had such a moment right then, standing in my own ordinary room. I heard a voice say, Lily Melissa Owens, your jar is open..." (272). She never explicitly makes the connection, but it's clear that she already feels a kind of affinity with the bees, and that only strengthens and deepens as the novel goes on. August broadens the similarity when she's educating Lily about how to treat the bees, likening her honey producing friends to the entire human race. As Lily recalls, "She reminded me that the world was really one big bee yard, and the same rules worked fine in both places. Don't be afraid, as no life-loving bee wants to sting you. Still, don't be an idiot; wear long sleeves and long pants. Don't swat. Don't even think about swatting. If you feel angry, whistle. Anger agitates, while whistling melts a bee's temper. Act like you know what you're doing, even if you don't. Above all, send the bees love. Every little thing wants to be loved...." (572). Bee life also mirrors the matriarchal structure of August's own household and spiritual life or maybe August and the Daughters of Mary exhibited these aspects of their life around bees.

A predominant Affirmation of the Black Culture:

Sue Monk Kidd reveals the incredible strength of black women on Lily's coming of age. Kidd's decision for Lily to narrate the story permits readers to feel more profoundly the depth of loss, the great uncertainty, and the enormous confusion her main character battles daily in her perplexing, desolate circumstance. However, more extensive exploration of the role of males in the novel, particularly Zachary Taylor and Attorney Clayton Forrest and their influence on Lily's development would reveal even further insight. Zach's arrest seems to jolt Lily out of her ego-centric shell when she realizes that black people must deal with social barriers she will never face. Zach also seems to soften the hardcore of Lily's exterior first through his friendship and then through his quest of Lily as a girlfriend, preparing her for her big reveal to August. Here, Kidd identifies the parallel struggles through her main character Lily Owens and her associate and traveling companion Rosaleen. Yet, Kidd moves beyond the patriarchal world to reveal that what Lily Owens requires to be self-actualized, accepting a community of strong black women typified

by Rosaleen and August, the oldest and wisest bee-keeping sister, both surrogate mothers. These women create an environment of cherish and safety that frees Lily to study her disjointed life and begin to achieve self-hood. Clayton Forrest is the only respected white male in Kidd's novel. He encourages Zach to pursue his dream of becoming a lawyer, and he fights for justice in Zach's and Rosaleen's unjust arrests and Rosaleen's brutal beating. Feminist Naomi Wolf addresses men like Clayton Forrest when she writes that "the world of men is dividing into egalitarians and patriarchists - those men who are trying to learn the language and customs of the newly emerging world, and those who are determined to keep that new order from taking root" (qtd. in Kidd, *Dance* 101). He treats everyone black and white with dignity and respect. The degree to which Forrest's relationship with both Zach and Lily promote their respective emotional development also deserves more exploration.

Conclusion:

The *Secret Life of Bees* is one the best description as to how a real and true mind of a girl wavers to find the past history about her mother and in turn associating herself with the signs and symbols of bees functioning as a central symbol and motif in the novel. Apparently, they also signify guidance and demonstrate the power of a female community through a bond of relationship as encountered at the place of August. Signs and symbols study the life within the society which is a part of social, cultural and psychological relation to semiology enrooting it into historicism of finding the truth of the past. And, also this a girls (Lily's) journey to find the truth about her mother whereby setting the captive nanny Rosaleen free from the bondage and finally out of the cage from the confinement of her father T. Ray. Throughout this novel Lily is in search of truth about her mother and whether her mother loved her or not. Eventually, signs and truth converge at a point in understanding the whole novel in a better perspective with a back stand on affirmation of black culture and their identity. Thus, focusing on applying the signs to the text using semiotic theory and further focusing on applying the concept of new historicism to the text in the light of truth which is a matter of interpretation of culture and history through revolution whereby affirming the Black Culture and their identity in white. Reality and courage of the novel is highlighted in the scenario of culture identity.

References:

- [1]. *The Secret Life of Bees*. New York: Penguin, 2002. Print.
- [2]. "August." Merriam-Webster.com. An Encyclopedia Britannica Company. N. D. Web. 19 June 2011.
- [3]. Baron-Cohen, Simon. *The Essential Difference*. Basic Books: New York, 2003. Print.
- [4]. Bloxam, Laura J. "The Secret Life of Bees." Rev. of *The Secret Life of Bees*. *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*. Summer 2005: 197-98. Web.
- [5]. Brown, Rosellen. "Honey Child." Rev. of *The Secret Life of Bees*. *Women's Review of Books*. April 2002: 11-14. Web.
- [6]. Biography of Sue Monk Kidd. www.suemonkkidd.com. April 25, 2011. Web.
- [7]. Carkeet, David. "The Dialects in *Huckleberry Finn*." *American Literature*. 1979: 31532.
- [8]. "Civil Rights Movement Timeline." *African American World*. Public Broadcasting Service. Web. 28 June 2011.
- [9]. Emmanuel, Catherine B. "The Archetypal Mother: The Black Madonna in Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*." *Philological Papers*. 2005: 115-22. Print.
- [10]. Feldman, Robert S. ed. *Understanding Psychology*. 4th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1996. Print.
- [11]. Greene, Beverly. "African American Women." *Women of Color*. Lillian Comas-Diaz and Beverly Greene, ed. New York: Guilford P, 1994. 10-29. Print.
- [12]. Greene, Lorenzo J., Gary R. Kremer, and Antonio F. Holland. "From Sunup to Sundown: The Life of the Slave." *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.
- [13]. *Text with Introduction, Historical Contexts, and Critical Essays*. Ed. Susan K. Harris and Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. 19-29. Print.
- [14]. Grobman, Laurie. "Teaching Cross-Racial Texts: Cultural Theft in *The Secret Life of Bees*." *College English*. 2008: 9-26. Print.
- [15]. Hebb, Judith. "Conflict and Closure: Bees and Honey as Metaphors for Healing in *The Secret Life of Bees*." *Conflict in Southern Writing*. Ed. Ben P. Robertson. Troy, AL: Association for Textual Study with Troy U, 2006: 179-87. Print.
- [16]. "Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia." Ferris State University. Web. 7 July 2011.
- [17]. Kidd, Sue Monk. *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*. New York: Harper San Francisco, 1996. Print.
- [18]. Mailloux, Steven. "The Bad-Boy Boom." *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: CompleteText with Introduction, Historical Contexts, and Critical Essays*. Ed. Susan K.
- [19]. Harris and Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon. Boston: Houghton Mifflin: 2000. 43-50. Print.
- [20]. Monteith, Sharon. *Advancing Sisterhood? Interracial Friendships in Contemporary Southern Fiction*. Athens, Ga: U of Georgia P, 2000. Print.

- [21]. Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University P, 1992. Print.
- [22]. Parks, Sheri. *Fierce Angels: The Strong Black Woman in American Life and Culture*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2010. Print.
- [23]. "A Penguin Readers Guide to The Secret Life of Bees." *The Secret Life of Bees*. New York: Penguin, 2002. [1]-15. Print.
- [24]. Pinderhughes, Elaine. "Foreword." *Women of Color*. Lillian Comas-Diaz and Beverly Greene, ed. New York: Guilford P, 1994. xi-xiii. Print.
- [25]. "Praise for The Secret Life of Bees." *The Secret Life of Bees*. New York: Penguin, 2002. [i-iv]. Print.
- [26]. Smith, David L. "Huck, Jim, and American Racial Discourse." *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: Complete Text with Introduction, Historical Contexts, and Critical Essays*. Ed. Susan K. Harris and Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. 356-69. Print.
- [27]. Southard, Bruce and Al Muller. "Blame it on Twain: Reading American Dialects in the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." *Journal of Reading*. May 1993: 630-34. Web.
- [28]. Twain, Mark. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: Complete Text with Introduction, Historical Contexts, and Critical Essays*. Ed. Susan K. Harris and Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon. Boston: Houghton Mifflin: 2000. Print.
- [29]. Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. Pocket Books: New York, 1982. Print.
- [30]. Wolfram, Walt and Natalie Schilling-Estes. *American English*. 2nd Ed. Blackwell: Malden, 2006
- [31]. Abel, Elizabeth. *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Berkeley, California: U of California P, 1997. Print.
- [32]. Abel, Elizabeth, Marianne Hirsche, and Elizabeth Langland, ed. *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*. Hanover: U P of New England, 1983. Print.
- [33]. Alexander, Bryant Keith. "Black Skin/White Masks: The Performative Sustainability of Whiteness." *Qualitative Inquiry*. 2004: 653. Print.
- [34]. Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- [35]. Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd Ed. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- [36]. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- [37]. Curti, Lidia. *Female Stories, Female Bodies*. New York: NYU P, 1998. Print.
- [38]. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Ed. Sue Eleen Case. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1990: 270-82. Print.
- [39]. Feng, Pin-chia. *The Female Bildungsroman by Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston*. New York: Peter Lang, 1997. Print.
- [40]. Hebb, Judith. "Religious Imagery in The Secret Life of Bees and The Mermaid Chair." PCA/ACA Conference. Atlanta, GA. 14 April 2006. 1-4. Web.
- [41]. Jackson, Leslie C. and Beverly Greene, ed. *Psychotherapy with African American Women*. New York: The Guilford P, 2000. Print.
- [42]. Kidd, Sue Monk. "The Secret Life of Bees." *Nimrod International Journal*. 1993: 21-30. Print.
- [43]. McWilliams, Ellen. *Margaret Atwood and the Female Bildungsroman*. Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2009. Print.
- [44]. Morrison, Toni. "Re-Marking Twain." *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: Complete Text with Introduction, Historical Contexts, and Critical Essays*. Ed. Susan K. Harris and Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 374-82. Print.
- [45]. Shaffer, Tracy Stephenson, and Joshua Gunn. "„A Change is Gonna Come“: On the Haunting of Music and Whiteness in Performance Studies." *Theatre Annual*. 2006: 39Print.
- [46]. Town, Caren J. *The New Southern Girl*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2004. Print.
- [47]. Zak, Michele Wender, and Patricia A. Moots. *Women and the Politics of Culture*. New York: Longman, 1983. Print.
- [48]. Shmoop Editorial Team. "Bees in The Secret Life of Bees." Shmoop.Shmoop University, Inc., 11 Nov. 2008. Web. 8 Nov. 2018.
- [49]. Alican, NecipFikri. (2012) *Rethinking Plato: A Cartesian Quest for the Real Plato*, Rodophi: Netherlands
- [50]. Kidd, Sue Monk. (2008) *The Secret Life of Bees*. Penguin: London King and the Hermit. https://archive.org/stream/kingandhermitac00meyegoog/kingandhermitac00meyegoog_djvu.txt
- [51]. Norman, Cecil (2014). *Bees in Folklore and Mythology*. <https://bumblebeeconservation.org/news/anthonys-blog/bees-in-folklore>
- [52]. Plath, Sylvia. *The Arrival of the Bee Box*. https://www.internal.org/Sylvia_Plath/The_Arrival_of_the_Bee_Box