

The Journey of Self-Discovery in Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*

Rajapushpa P.

PG and Research Department of English, St. Mary's College (Autonomous), Thoothukudi

Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamilnadu, India.

Abstract

Sue Monk Kidd is an American author known for her novels exploring themes of feminism, spirituality, and self-discovery. This paper explores the journey of self-discovery in *The Secret Life of Bees*, focusing on the protagonist, Lily Owens. Haunted by the traumatic memory of her mother's accidental death and subjected to the emotional and physical abuse of her father, Lily embarks on a journey to uncover the truth about her past. This paper examines how Lily's struggle for safety, love, and self-actualization shapes her transformation from an insecure, guilt-ridden girl to a confident young woman.

Keywords: Coming of age, Identity, Parental abuse, Self-discovery

Self-discovery refers to the process where a character comes to understand more about their true nature, desires, beliefs, or values. This journey often involves challenges, introspection, and growth, leading the character to recognize their inner strengths or confront aspects of themselves they may have been avoiding. It can be portrayed through the character's actions, thoughts, and interactions with others, revealing how they change or evolve throughout the story.

The Secret Life of Bees by Sue Monk Kidd explores themes of love, identity, and resilience through the journey of a young girl seeking truth and belonging. A review from *Buried Under Books* describes it as a "tender coming of age story, full of wish fulfilment," emphasizing Lily's longing for maternal connection and the novel's emotional depth. At the core of Lily Owen's fourteen-year-old life is the haunting memory of the day she accidentally took the life of her mother while attempting to protect her in a fight with her abusive father. From the early age of four, Lily not only struggles with this entrenched guilt, but she also attempts to cope with a motherless life and a cruel father.

T. Ray's harsh treatment of Lily only fuels her desire to understand her mother better. She wants answers about why her mother left her, answers to her mother's identity, justice for her mother's death, and the love from a mother figure. But in order to find these answers, she must leave the abusive environment of her father's home in search of a safe haven. With the aid of her black nanny, Rosaleen, Lily embarks on a journey to Tiburon,

South Carolina, landing finally at the same safe haven her mother had visited ten years earlier, the home of the beekeeping Boatwright sisters. August, the eldest and wisest of these calendar sisters, and a host of other spectacular black women help create an atmosphere that promotes Lily's psychological development. Lily's coming of age is a slow and often painful process, replete with teenage angst and regression, but by the novel's end, she progresses from an abused, emotionally confused teen to a self-actualized young lady.

By fourteen, Lily's motherless existence led to several unpleasant ramifications in the matter of her appearance. She is so consumed with how she looks and whether she is behaving appropriately that she often feels like she is "impersonating a girl" instead of being one (7). The final insult to Lily's motherless status is that she is denied entrance into charm school—a move she was certain would improve her appearance and manners—because she did not have a "mother, a grandmother, or even a measly aunt" to present her a "white rose at the closing ceremony" (7). Lily is insecure and lonely, states which are only protracted by the lack of attention and abuse received by her father.

T. Ray's attempt at kindness in telling Lily the real story of what happened to her mother the day before first grade quickly turns from kind awkwardness to anger when she tells him she remembers that they were arguing. "Goddamn it, you were four years old," he yells, complaining that she cannot possibly remember the details of that day (14). Later, he softens when he tells her that she "didn't mean to do it," but this is as much kindness as Lily can expect

(15). Despite Lily's overwhelming need for love and affirmation in the years following her mother's death. T. Ray is an emotionally absent father but consistently verbally abusive in all their interactions.

When Lily, excited by the bees swarming in her room one night, wakes him to show him this phenomenon, he angrily says "Goddamn it, Lily, this ain't funny" when he sees no bees and threatens physical punishment (3). Unfortunately, she had grown accustomed to this sort of verbal abuse. Two nights before her fourteenth birthday, she is in the peach orchard—holding close to her chest some precious keepsakes of her mother's in order to feel closer to her—when T. Ray finds her in the middle of the night buttoning up her shirt. Believing her to have been with a boy, his menacing anger erupts as he tells her "you act no better than a slut"

(18). This time, he follows through with physical punishment by making Lily kneel on Martha White grits. Though she had been accustomed to this brutality since she was six, Lily never really grows used to the "powdered-glass feeling" beneath her skin or the

“swollen red welts” and “pinprick bruises that would grow into a blue stubble” caused by the grit torture (18) (19). The next morning, waking up a bit late, Lily is finally convinced that any love T. Ray has for her is gone when he takes her slice of buttered bread, throws it in the dog’s bowl, and insults her about starting work late.

In addition to T. Ray’s verbal and physical abuse, he also relishes in subjecting Lily to psychological abuse when he refuses to let her read while she works alone all day in the peach stand. Afraid it would “stir up ideas of college... a waste of money” for females, even though she had scored “the highest number a human being can get on their verbal aptitude test,” T. Ray makes sure Lily has a healthy fear of him (11). He “half kill(s)” her once when she sneaks a copy of *Lost Horizon* to the peach stand under her shirt, and a neighbour bragged on her at church for reading, exposing her guilt (11). Ironically, T. Ray’s “only kindness was for Snout, his bird dog, who slept in his bed and got her stomach scratched anytime she rolled onto her wiry back,” claims Lily, who had also seen T. Ray not even bat an eye when the dog had peed on his boots (2). Treating his dog with much greater affection than his own daughter, T. Ray continually devalues Lily, making her feel unloved.

According to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, Lily’s physiological needs are being met for the most part. She is getting food, water, and sleep sometimes, but she does not always feel safe. Maslow believes that in order for someone to function effectively and move on to the next level of development, she must be in a safe, secure environment. Broken, abused, and desperately seeking the affections and safety of a sympathetic adult, Lily turns to her black nanny, Rosaleen. Rosaleen, whom her father had pulled from the peach orchard to cook and clean and be a “stand-in mother” after Lily’s mother died, was a large woman with a “big round face” and was “so black that night seemed to seep from her skin” (2). She had no children of her own, so for the past ten years, Lily had “been her pet guinea pig” (2). Though Rosaleen pretends not to care whether or not Lily gets stung by one of the bees in her room, Lily has figured out that Rosaleen’s heart is “more tender than a flower skin” when she buys Lily an Easter chick dyed purple. When T. Ray gives Lily a hard time about bird droppings on the floor, Lily realizes Rosaleen must love her “beyond reason” when she stands up to T. Ray and defends Lily’s pet (8).

At the beginning of the novel, Lily perceives Rosaleen as a protector someone who is willing to create a safer environment—something Lily needs desperately for her emotional growth. When Rosaleen comes to the house the day before Lily’s birthday and finds Lily’s knees red and swollen from kneeling on grits, she is visibly upset and consoles Lily, “Look what he’s done to you” (19). Having someone recognize T. Ray’s physical

abuse as inappropriate begins to validate Lily's feelings of self-worth and her anger and resentment with

T. Ray. This is the first step towards Lily's freedom.

Rosaleen pushes Lily to recognize the mistreatment of her father so that she is willing to stand up for herself. Ultimately, Rosaleen is the reason Lily is willing to forego all that is familiar, albeit cruel and neglectful, to search for her mother's identity. The confidence she gains from helping to protect Rosaleen fuels her desire for a healthier environment for both of them. Yet, Lily is still largely dependent on Rosaleen as a surrogate mother. We see her desperately searching for Rosaleen after their fight at the creek, praying to God that she not be gone, telling herself "Mother, forgive," much like she did when she thought of a reunion with own mother (44).

Rosaleen and Lily's reunion in the creek takes Lily a step further in her coming of age. Without artifice and in the dark water of the creek, naked, they are the same: two people, hurting, desperately needing the love and forgiveness of the other. Rosaleen's willingness to forgive Lily's hurtful comment reminds Lily that forgiveness is an important part of a growing relationship. Rosaleen's love for Lily creates a deep, abiding loyalty in Lily; she wants to protect and honour her.

May Boatright, June and August's younger sister, also teaches Lily some important lessons about life. Described as "not an altogether normal person" with an "odd grin" when Lily first meets her, May shows Lily how to find pleasure in the smallest of things like singing the honey song and how to mourn loss at her wailing wall (55). Lily loves to sing the honey song with May because of its silliness and because it makes Lily "feel like a regular person again" (67). May is clearly not a regular person because of the way she handles loss and dissension; anytime someone brings up an unpleasant topic like an argument between June and Neil or Rosaleen's awful head injury, May begins humming "Oh! Susanna." If this does not work, she heads out to her makeshift wailing wall, writes the source of the problem on a sheet of paper, and places it in the wall.

May teaches Lily that the way one handles negative emotion is to combat it with positive thinking and singing. She also teaches her that physically writing down a problem to physically process it is a healthy way to cope with negative experiences. Lily follows suit one night, writing down her mother's name, "Deborah Owens," and placing it in May's wall (81). When Lily discovers May trying to lead roaches out of the house with graham crackers and marshmallows, May reveals that Lily's mother had lived in the honey house, too, and had shown May this strategy. This affirms Lily's motives for remaining there and

trying to cope with her mother's loss.

Affirming Lily's secret that she is still unwilling to share, August tells Lily that "bees have a secret life we don't know anything about" (119). This is a confirmation for Lily that keeping secrets is a natural behaviour; even bees do it. August also explains to Lily that the black Mary is really just the "figurehead off an old ship" but that her spirit, a spirit of "comfort and rescue," is ubiquitous (114). Lily finally touches black Mary's heart one evening and prays for her to "Fix me, please fix me" (132). She concludes her prayer to black Mary that "(she lives) in a hive of darkness, and you are my mother" in an attempt to come to terms with her dark past and fill the motherless void (132).

Lily to finally be ready to speak with August about her mother. She is surrounded by people who love her and respect her, so she feels that sense of belongingness. And with August's help, she starts to believe herself quite valuable; her self-esteem is quite high. As Lily tells August about accidentally killing her mother, she is so relieved to hear August list all the people who love her, including June. August finishes with, "I love you. Just like I loved your mother" (196). Despite Lily's relief about being loved by so many people after her confession of such a horrible act, Lily does not discover the idealized Deborah Owens she had so long embraced. She finds out that her mother had left both her and her father because she was unable to cope with T. Ray anymore. This knowledge angers Lily to the point that she quite literally has a meltdown in the honey house later, smashing jars of honey against the walls and injuring her arm.

Though Lily has made so much progression in her development, this one detail that her mother had abandoned her, levels her. The knowledge means that T. Ray was right. This means both of her parents ultimately rejected her. This means Lily can no longer entertain the smug delusion that her life would have been much better if her mother were still alive. This means that she will have to forgive her mother if she wants to continue moving forward. After talking with Rosaleen about her mother's leaving, Lily feels a little release when she realizes that Rosaleen knew this but never told Lily in order to protect her. When August discovers a hat box filled with Lily's mother's things, she heads to the honey house and goes through the contents with a very hesitant Lily. When August takes out Deborah's hairbrush, Lily sees a piece of her mother's hair, "a genuine part of her body" (221). Despite her former disappointment with her mother, Lily realizes that "no matter how many jars of honey you threw, no matter how much you thought you could leave your mother behind, she would never disappear from the tender places in you" (221).

The hair is a good reminder that her mother was human and thus fallible; this is the

first step towards Lily's forgiveness of her mother. August then retrieves a book of English poetry she had given Deborah during her final stay. As Lily goes through the book, she finds doodling and pencil marks in the margins, her "mother's private miseries," when she comes to the William Blake poem "O Rose, thou art sick!" (222). After reading the poem, Lily realizes that she was one of the reasons her mother had not been well. Her mother had not planned to marry

T. Ray, but when she became pregnant with Lily, she decided to marry him. Lily desperately wants to apologize to her mother for being one of the "invisible worms that flew in the night," making her mother ill (222). The final item from the hat box eases Lily's feeling of abandonment; her mother had framed a picture of herself feeding Lily in a high chair. Lily explains that now she "didn't care about anything on this earth except the way her face was tipped toward mine, our noses just touching, how wide and gorgeous her smile was, like sparklers going off" (222). The picture is actual proof that Deborah Owens had loved her daughter, and finally, Lily feels loved by her mother.

Now that she had all the facts, Lily has only to forgive her mother for leaving her. That is all. But at the start of the final chapter of the novel, Lily, under the scorching August sun, feels her heart "like an ice sculpture" in the centre of her chest (224). Lily realizes she is being stubborn by not forgiving her mother, but thinks that, in general, most people would "rather die than forgive. It's that hard" (224). While she tucks her mother's things away back into the hat box and pushes it under her cot, she finds a "tiny pile of mouse bones" under it and begins carrying them with her every day, associating them with Deborah (224). This physical representation of her mother in her pocket seems to protract the amount of emotional energy Lily spends replaying all the details of her mother's life in her head.

Lily is grateful that everyone lets her grieve, but even she is starting to get frustrated with her inability to forgive her mother. In a cleaning frenzy one day, Lily is able to tie up the mouse bones with a red ribbon and put them with the rest of her mother's things, symbolically letting her go. Drifting off to sleep that afternoon, she kept thinking how "nobody is perfect" and that you just have to "let the puzzle of the human heart be what it is" (230). So, when she completely understands her mother's decision to leave, she is ready to forgive her.

One day while tending to the bees, August and Lily find a queenless colony. This parallel to Lily's motherless life reminds August to tell Lily of her real intention when she told the story of Beatrix the Nun. August tells Lily that black Mary was serving as a stand-

in mom during the three months that Deborah ran away from her and T. Ray. August explains that black Mary is not “some magical being out there,” but she is “something inside of you” (233). Black Mary is divine feminine wisdom and strength that already enables Lily to deal with her father’s abusive treatment and guilt over her mother’s death. August tells Lily that “you have to find a mother inside yourself” whether you have a mother or not (233). Ultimately, August wants Lily to understand that she does not have to physically touch black Mary’s heart to get “strength and consolation and rescue” because Lily possesses these qualities within her own heart (233). August tells Lily that when she starts to feel small and doubtful, she must listen to black Mary’s voice commanding her to “get up from there and live like the glorious girl (she) is” (233). Finally, August reminds Lily that black Mary “sits in (her) heart all day” and that Lily never needs to feel afraid or alone because she is enough to satisfy any of her fears, saying “I am enough. We are enough” (234). Lily finally realizes that Mary’s spirit within her is enough to help her overcome any fear or dread, especially the seemingly insurmountable task of forgiving her mother’s abandonment.

August’s discussion of black Mary living within is quickly put to the test as Lily opens the door to a triumphant-looking T. Ray in the final dramatic scene of the novel. T. Ray, who had searched for his daughter all summer long, is none too pleased to pretend all is well and accept Lily’s invitation to come into the pink house and have a civil discussion. Despite the raging emotions charging through her chest, Lily quietly asks T. Ray how he finally located her and is surprised when she realizes that her collect phone call home to him was the missing piece. As T. Ray’s chin quivers when he sees Deborah’s whale pin on Lily’s shirt, Lily sees for the first time how much her father must have loved her mother, “how it had split him open when she left” (237). Lily had spent so much time considering the devastating effects of her own motherlessness that she had never considered “what he’d lost or how it might’ve changed him” (237). The months of nurturing at the pink house allows her to see beyond her own suffering.

But seeing the pin confuses T. Ray. He thinks his daughter is Deborah, his wife, so he slaps Lily’s face hard and calls her a “goddamn bitch” (239). As T. Ray waves a knife in front of her face, Lily remembers August’s advice about Mary’s spirit within; “I am enough. We are enough” (234). The encouragement strengthens her to yell “Daddy!” and T. Ray snaps out of his fog. And the damn breaks; T. Ray’s weakness is exposed. He is no longer the bitter, abusive father who makes Lily kneel on grits. He is a broken man trying to face the fact that he had caused both his wife and his daughter to run away from him.

By the time the fight finishes between T. Ray and Lily, over half the daughters of

Mary have joined August and Rosaleen in the parlour with T. Ray and Lily. With an army of loving black women behind her, August promises Mr. Owens that he would be doing them a favour by leaving Lily at the pink house. August tells him that Lily is her “apprentice beekeeper,” and she has learned the business quite well (241). Furthermore, August says that “we love Lily,” promising that “we’ll take care of her,” enrolling her in school the very next term (241). Once

T. Ray relinquishes custody and walks out, Lily turns back to the porch to see Rosaleen, August, and the daughters waiting. “All these women, all this love, waiting” makes her feel like she has ten thousand mothers (243). These powerful, talented, nurturing, protective, intelligent, entertaining black women have brought Lily from a point of running away from her problems to dealing with them directly.

The secret life of bees is multifaceted and nuanced. It is portrayed as both a biological connection and an emotional, spiritual bond that transcends familial ties. Though Lily’s journey, the novel explores the importance of relationship between father and daughter, the concept of motherhood and the Boatwright sisters’ love.

Works Cited

Kidd, Sue Monk. *The Secret Life of Bees*. Penguin Books, 2002.

Hebert, Joy A. Ms., "A Critical Study of Sue Monk Kidd's Secret Life of Bees." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2011.

“Review: *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd.” *Buried Under Books*, 22 Nov.

2017, buriedunderbooks.co.uk/review-the-secret-life-of-bees-by-sue-monk-kidd/.

Accessed 1 Mar. 2025.