

Representation of Trauma in Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/jodem.v17i1.99417>**Bimal Kishore Shrivastwa, PhD.**

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Email: bimalkshrivastav@gmail.com**Abstract**

*Drawing upon the basic theoretical insights mainly from the domain of racial and psychological trauma advocated by Dominic La Capra, the present research explores the psychological disorder and trauma of Lily Owens, the central character of Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*. The research displays how Lily has shaped her entire life around the shocking, distorted memory. The research questions raised are though Lily was raised by her abusive father, T. Ray, why is she blamed for the death of her mother, Deborah, who was killed when Lily was only four years old? What forces Lily and Rosaleen Daise, the black servant of the house, to run away from T. Ray? The research finding is that Lily's trauma and voice signifies her resistance against domination. The study seeks to comprehend the critical challenges confronted by the African-American women during the specific historical moment. Badly affected by the partition, Lily endeavors to cope with her mother's abandonment, the haunting guilt she feels for murdering her mother, and her father's verbal and psychological abuse. This research asserts the critical position of the characters' psychological condition due to many traumatic conditions.*

Keywords: Abuse, memory, psychology, trauma, victimization**Introduction**

The Western and the South Asian discourses have been addressing the issues of trauma in literature. Trauma, in a general sense, signifies a person's awful response to a frightening event that destroys his/her previous perception of the persons or events towards his/her society (LaCapra 78). Mostly, the female characters, Lily and Rosaleen Daise, in the novel suffer from internal and external psychological pressure, agonized by the haunting memories of their past life. Set in 1964, the year of the initiation of the Civil Rights Act and

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intensifying racial unrest, the fiction portrays the traumatic tensions caused by the racial segregation practiced in the 60s. Anelementary feature of trauma is the transformation of the self, ignited by an external, often terrifying experience, which illuminates the process of coming to terms with the dynamics of memory that inform the new perceptions of the self and world (Caruth 6). The event may include, for example, the intimately personal experience of female sexual violence, war experience, domestic violence, cultural legacy and family betrayal (Alexander 39). Sue Monk Kidd, an American author has presented the principal characters of *The Secret Life of Bees*, her first novel, suffering from psychological trauma.

The principal objective of this research is to mark the connection between past and present psychological hurdles in Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*. Having witnessed the color discrimination and the traumatic conditions of African Americans during her childhood in South America, Kidd was impelled to write *The Secret Life of Bees*, published in 2002, so that she could raise awareness against apartheid. It records the journey of a motherless fourteen-year-old girl, Lily Owens, who is raised by a cruel father (Mazmanian, 4; Grobman 13). Lily desperately searches for clues to unlock her mother's past, which, she believes, will help create her own identity. Lily escapes with Rosaleen, a black maid in their family, from her ill-mannered father, T. Ray, in quest for her identity (Emanuel 115). Rosaleen was terribly attacked by T. Ray and sent to jail because she had dared to oppose the white men (Grobman 14). Lily and Rosaleen search for the cause of the death of Deborah Fontanel, Lily's mother, in a village in South Carolina, Tiburon (Auerbach 56; Emanuel 116). Staying there, Lily realizes the psychological torture and feelings of guilt experienced by the African American women and ultimately, Lily determines to fight for their identity. *The Secret Life of Bees* is a depiction of the struggle of women's determination to survive against the abuses of men (Mazmanian 6). Kidd rehabilitates the role of black women as independent, strong role models for a traumatized, lonely young white girl. Analyzing from the perspective of the traumatic experience, the issues of anger, forgiveness, racial tension and stereotypical limitations of women have been foregrounded.

Literature Review

Different critics have analyzed the novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*, by Sue Monk Kidd, from varied perspectives after its publication. Evaluating the structure of the novel, the critic, Grobman, begins with a paragraph in which Sue Monk Kidd sets a voice that carries us beautifully through her story and pulls us to dive into its emotional terrain (14). Accordingly, some critics mark the strength of love and tragedy in the novel. It is important to note that

this is not just a coming-of-age story about Lily but a story in which Lily recognises that some of the thoughts she has about black people are racist thoughts, how she deals with those thoughts, and how her perceptions change. Rajendran marked Kidd's novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*, as a powerful story of coming of age that has the potential to transform anxiety into love (99). At the core of Lily Owen's life lies 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. Huntley observes that Lily's journey in the pursuit of her mother's identity is filled with the regretful feeling of killing her real mother accidentally as a small child (197). Though the novel includes some sensitive language, one of the central themes is stepping outside of one's comfort zone in order to really grow (Doshi 39). According to Auerbach, Kidd has narrated personal experiences of living the adolescent life in the Southern region during the 1960s in *The Secret Life of Bees* (56). Sue Monk Kidd reveals the incredible strength of black women in Lily's life. Lily's decision to free Rosaleen from jail and run away from her abusive father is a testament to the strength to escape from destructive environments.

A group of critics has given their views on the characterization of the novel. Analyzing Lily's character, Mazmanian asserts, "Lily is a petulant and self-absorbed adolescent" (3) who never thinks of surrendering to the challenges. Lily's relationships with her nanny, Rosaleen, and her black mentor, August, make her learn the significance of forgiveness, maternal love, spirituality, and creativity (Grobman 15; Setriand Setiawan 29). Another critic, Reiner, mostly focuses on the role of Rosaleen, who makes Lily's way to Tiburon (14). The talk between Rosaleen and Lily helps Lily to challenge her abusive father.

Moreover, some critics have observed apartheid in *The Secret Life of Bees*. Menon analyzed how the black characters in the novel suffer the turmoil of racial injustice and minorities (61). The female and black characters stand independently to resist the societal stereotypes (Setri and Setiawan 29). Mazmanian criticized Kidd for using the African American characters as objects to prioritize her white protagonist (3). Lily carries around a wooden picture of the black Mary, which she found among some objects that once belonged to her mother (Mazmanian 3). The black Mary, as in the picture, symbolizes mothers and mother surrogates. Grobman, interpreting the symbolic value of the black Mary in the novel, argues that the black culture shown in the image of the black Madonna heals Lily emotionally

and spiritually (15). This picture literally symbolises Debra to Lily, and eventually the picture leads Lily to August, a black woman who will become a surrogate mother (Menon 62; Rajendran 99). Through August, Lily learns about Mary, whom August considers to be the mother of all of humanity. The richness of African American culture serves to heal Lily's pain, suffering, and disrespect (Grobman 10). The black Madonna is the sorrowful mother, the mother who weeps tears for the suffering, the brokenness of their vulnerable hearts. Emanuel notes that *The Secret Life of Bees* portrays the life of a native protagonist who begins her journey from innocence to selfhood in the company of a black caregiver and faces racial injustices and discrimination (115). There are issues of culture, gender, and ego that make the novel a tragic tale. Kidd's fiction invites us to enter into our grief and to learn what suffering has to teach us.

Most critics have attempted to analyze *The Secret Life of Bees* through the lens of injustice. But they have failed to observe the novel from the traumatic viewpoint. Therefore, the research explores the psychological damage and trauma caused by the women's exclusion from representation in society's power positions, their sufferings, pains, and agony caused by the oppression of the Whites.

Methodology

The present exploration embraces a qualitative approach to analyze the issues of psychological trauma in Kidd's novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*. The text, *The Secret Life of Bees*, stands as the primary source and offers a useful contextual background. Additionally, the study comprises relevant literature, critics' viewpoints rendered in books, journals, and websites as the secondary sources. To analyze the traumatic experiences and unbearable pain experienced by the characters, the research involves the analysis of trauma theory in specific.

Theoretical framework

The concept of trauma was first used in the psychological discourse in the early 1980s to refer to the illness of war victims. The leading figure of trauma theory, Dominick LaCapra, focuses on three psychoanalytical topics: the return of the repressed, acting out versus working through, and the dynamics of transference (713). LaCapra principally makes a distinction between acting out the trauma and working through it. Whereas working through is aimed at achieving sentiments of the trauma, acting out means that trauma can only be managed through a constant playing out of the traumatic event, even a recurrent playing out, which relieves the burden of trauma (LaCapra 713). By taking into consideration the memory

work, especially the socially engaged memory work involved in working through one can distinguish between past and present and to recognize something as the victims but denied by their victimizers. Trauma has sometimes been defined in reference to agonizing circumstances outside the normal human experience (Alexander 39; LaCapra 79). Traumatic events are those which are thought to involve victimization or the threat of victimization (Caruth 7; Vickroy 56). Events such as witnessing violence, unprovoked physical attack, rape, physical, mental, emotional, and sexual abuse, and war accidents are those generally considered to be traumatic.

Trauma is used to describe experiences or situations that are emotionally painful and distressing and that overwhelm people's ability to cope, leaving them powerless (Alexander 39; Caruth 7). Psychological trauma is a type of damage to the psyche that occurs because of a severely distressing event and memorization (Balaev 171; Eyerman 45). Psychological trauma is mostly connected to nostalgia. The most important subject of debate concerns the relation of trauma to memory. LaCapra argued that trauma is mainly caused by the separation of a person from his family and society (78). The more horrific and prolonged the trauma, the more the subject tends to dissociate and therefore has no conscious memory of the traumatic event. The leading theorist of Trauma, Balaev explores how remembrance of traumatic events such as wars, famines, genocides, and terrorism, and questions the assumed role of commemorations as simply reinforcing state and nationhood (171). Some forms of remembering do not ignore the horror of what happened but rather use memory to promote change and challenge the political systems that produced the violence of wars and genocides in the first place. Triggers and cues act as reminders of the trauma, and can cause anxiety and other associated emotions (Eyerman 45). Avoiding trauma reminders or triggers can be uncomfortable, changeable and even painful.

The various facets of trauma advocated by these theorists are taken as the tool to analyze the traumatic experiences of the characters in *The Secret Life of Bees*.

Discussion

Kidd's novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*, is the narrativization of psychological, gender, and racial trauma because most of its characters are victimized and haunted by painful memories and wounded experiences. Trauma is caused by a vague memory that haunts a victim and leads him/her to panic (LaCapra 78). The novel's protagonist, as well as the fourteen-year-old narrator, Lily Owens, suffers from the guilt perception of her act. Lily's mind is preoccupied with the guilt of the matricide that she committed without her

knowledge. A person having psychological trauma suffers mental torture and pain caused by past events deposited in one's memory (Caruth 9). Lily is haunted by a vague memory of that day when her parents were arguing, and she had picked up the gun that her mother had dropped and shot her.

Kidd brilliantly dramatizes the trauma of Lily caused by the memories, family betrayal, and racial tension using the motif of the bees. Lily, at the outset, is found lying on her bed and waiting for the bees to arrive. The bees live in the walls, and at night they fly around her room. She iterates, "The skill displayed by the bees in their flight, not even thinking of the flower, but feeling the wind, split my heart" (22). Lily does not feel herself as free as the bees. She even finds the "Secret Life of Bees" (57) similar to her own life. Their industrious care for their mother, their continuous ability to keep going in work, and their ability to survive inspire Lily (Doshi 39). Finally, their dependence on the female community is identical to her own reliance. The bees' community assists Lily in comprehending the potentiality of the human community.

It is the society of Lily that heightens her trauma. She resides in a society where women are deprived of their right and cannot have much control over their own lives or bodies. A person suffers from trauma due to various sources, and gender violence is one of them. Lily has been the victim of gender violence due to the patriarchal environment. In a patriarchal society, women have no choice but to endure the atrocities committed against them (Setri and Setiawan 28). Her father's patriarchal mentality restricts her freedom in her own house. The horrendous practice of patriarchy and the gender roles at her house increase trauma in poor Lily. She is abused by her cruel father time and again. Though Lily murdered her own mother unconsciously, T. Ray regularly rebukes her, trying to prove that she is a betrayer. Thus, 'T. Ray' is what Lily calls her father, "because 'Daddy' never fits him" (2). T. Ray detests his daughter so much that he refuses to buy her "rollers to fix her hair; to take her to any social functions" (3). He also refuses to allow her to wear more fashionable clothes. He responds to questions about her mother with anger and violence, sometimes "smashing a jar of blackberry preserves into the cabinet, disregarding blue stains" (13). All these activities intensify Lily's trauma.

The way Lily narrates her relations and events of her past life growing up in Sylvan, South Carolina intensifies her traumatic situation. Memory becomes the repository bin to make one psychologically ill and traumatized (Alexander 39; La Capra 79). Lily's mother died when Lily was only four. Lily remembers how T. Ray began arguing badly with

Deborah, who reached up on the closet shelf for a gun. T. Ray knocked it out of her hand, and Lily picked it up, and then she accidentally killed her mother (Doshi 39). Lily utters, “She was all I wanted. And I took her away” (14). Lily looks pessimistic because of the sense of guilt for killing her mother and, living a motherless life. Determined to know her mother’s identity and find justice for her mother’s death, Lily leaves the harsh treatment of her father at home in pursuit of her mission.

One of the causes of Lily’s trauma is the maltreatment of her cruel father towards her. Living in alienation with emotionally painful and distressing experiences makes one powerless (Caruth 8; Eyerman 45). Lily’s loneliness is heightened when she is excluded from events like charm school because she is motherless. Lily’s trauma is mounted by the restriction of her authoritative father. When T. Ray finds Lily in the middle of the night buttoning up her shirt before her fourteenth birthday, he doubts her having some affair with a boy, and shouts at her saying “you act no better than a slut” (24). Though she had been accustomed to this brutality since she was six, Lily never really grew accustomed to the “powdered-glass under her skin” (24). The victim of trauma becomes panicked when the oppression is targeted against the victim repeatedly (Caruth 10; Eyerman 45). Kidd shows the pathetic situation of women in psychological torture in a patriarchal society.

The characters like August in the fiction stimulate Lily to confront challenges against the complicated life. Life for the traumatic people is mostly complicated by the hurdles of living conditions (Vickroy 56). As in August’s community, female bees rule over the beehive, and the queen rules over everything (Huntley 197). August reminds Lily that the Virgin Mary is the mother of all the women whom she calls the daughters of Mary. He states, “Most people don’t have any idea about all the complicated life going on inside a hive. Bees live in a secret life” (57). Lily has learned the importance of the female power structure in the bee community. After a traumatic experience, a person may suffer from the mental and physical trauma repeatedly (Alexander 39; Eyerman 45). Lily relates it almost immediately to stories from the Bible. The lives of industrious bees look identical to human lives. When Lily is excited by the bees swarming in her room one night, August angrily says, “Goddamn it, Lily, this isn’t funny” (4). Unfortunately, she had grown accustomed to this sort of verbal abuse.

The issues of gender and racial trauma are also noticed in Kidd’s novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*. Lily Owens suffers from gender trauma. T. Ray instructs Lily to remain submissive in front of her social norms because they are maintained by males. When men rule the family, the female members feel lacking in social privilege and moral freedom

in the family (Setri and Setiawan 30). Lily apprehends losing her identity and freedom in her own family and society. This heightens her psychological trauma. T. Ray discourages Lily's educational advancement. Though Lily had scored "the highest number a human being can get on their verbal aptitude test" (15), T. Ray thinks educating women is a waste of money. He treats his dog with much greater affection than his own daughter. When she wakes him one night to show him the bees flying in her bedroom, and when they disappear by the time he arrives, he curses her vigorously. Mostly, T. Ray remains absent-minded emotionally, and orders the same four things for Lily every year for Christmas: "Pajamas, sweater, socks, and a sack of oranges" (274). Whenever Lily decides to leave home with Rosaleen, she fears T. Ray will severely lash her.

Lily's trauma is not only caused by her patriarchal society but also by the prevailing racial injustice in her society. The issue of racism restricts new opportunities for the growth of an individual, and damages his freedom (Richeson and Nussbaum 417). T. Ray slaps Rosaleen because he can't tolerate the sight of colored people, and finally sends Rosaleen to jail. Lily also grows weary of T. Ray's verbal and psychological abuse. Lily Owens is subjected to the harsh demeanor of her father, T. Ray (Grobman 11). Frustrated by the alienated life, Lily strongly intends to make a bond with her father, but she receives only maltreatment and brutal responses from him. He also refuses to take her anywhere that she may interact socially with kids of her own age.

The way three town racists insult, attack, and beat Rosaleen for pouring her snuff juice on their shoes reveals the superiority and outright hatred some white Southerners felt for blacks during this time. Mr Avery Gaston, the policeman, unjustly arrests Rosaleen for "assault, theft, and disturbing the peace" (33). He chooses to let the white racists go free with no punishment. He also allows them to enter the jail and "beat Rosaleen in the cell, gashing her head wide open" (34). This violent racial injustice and discrimination also exists in Tiburon, South Carolina, outside of the matriarchal pink house. Innocent Zach is unjustly punished when one of his working-class friends flings a bottle at a white man. Eddie Hazelwurst, the policeman who interviews Lily after May's suicide, tells her, "it's not natural" to be living in a house with black women, and Lily should not be lowering herself" (198). From this patriarchal structure, Lily learns that religious hypocrisy is acceptable to someone of another race, and that racial discrimination and violence are acceptable and encouraged social standards in the South.

The strong prejudice also appears when Lily is anxious about Rosaleen's condition. It shows that the African Americans suffer from the bad actions, violence, and hostilities of the Whites in America (Reece 304). The African Americans' physical characteristics make the Whites always think that they are only a minority and slaves (Richeson and Nussbaum 417). The whites feel free to exploit them and judge them as stupid, poor, the lowest group, and criminals (Reece 305). The fact that Lily is a white girl living with black women means her life must remain a secret identical to the secret life of the bees. Lily learns about the bees' secrets from August, while we learn about Lily's secrets from her first-person narration (Rajendran 100). Just as the bees produce the sweet honey that August is so attached to, Lily creates a bitter coming-of-age story about a young girl who finds strength, love, and family in unlikely circumstances. August states, "I decided against marrying altogether. Not that I deny marrying Lily. I'm only against the way it's set up" (57). Racism had manipulated society badly. The structure of the society is based on racial ancestry that prioritizes one race over another (Menon 62). According to Reece, racism supports segregation, discrimination, or unequal treatment of the races, often accompanied by strong prejudices and intense hostilities (305). Prejudice is a negative attitude toward a group of people who have some characteristic in common that is not shared by all people.

Sue Monk Kidd is one of the white writers who has tried to criticize the racism in America in the 1960s through such novels as *The Secret Life of Bees*. The struggles of African-American in Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* reveal the real society of South Carolina in 1964. Responding to the genesis of the fiction, Kidd remarks, "I do think race is the wound of my geography" (32). Many incidents of attitudes or feelings show the Whites' prejudice exactly at Blacks people. When Rosaleen goes to the Sylvan with Lily, and they meet three men in the Esso station, they hate the Afro-Americans. The following lines demonstrate how another White man in Tiburon gets astonished when a white actor, Jack Palance, brings an African-American woman to the theatre: "He looked up and saw us, Rosaleen fanning and shuffling swaying side to side. He called out, 'Where're you heading, Nigger?'" (38). White men think that a Negro is a strange and foolish person who cannot walk and work together with the whites. Jack Palance is criticized by the Whites for bringing an African American woman into a theatre in Tiburon and sitting together on the white's chair.

The Whites still have a strong prejudice against the African-Americans whom they take as inferior. This kind of apartheid increases the traumatic experiences of Lily and Rosaleen. Lily Owens is forbidden to live together with the Afro-American women by a White

policeman, Eddie Hazelwurst, because he thinks that they are dangerous. He also opines that Lily would feel safe if she went out of the August community of the community of African American women to live with her aunt in Virginia or with other Whites. T. Ray also becomes angry when he notices Lily living together with the African Americans. He says, “Well, what I don’t get is, if you’re going to reside with your aunt in Virginia, what the hell are you doing here living in black people’s house” (245)? In South Carolina, a place of seething racial divides in the 1960s, violence explodes one summer afternoon, and Rosaleen is arrested and beaten (Eyerman 45). Lily makes a daring effort to save Rosaleen, and to run away from the home of her horrible father.

Utilizing wits and youthful daring, Lily breaks Rosaleen out of jail. T. Ray not only calls Lily a “little bitch” (39) for her behavior, but also tells her that her “sorry mother ran off and left her” (39). Although adults like T. Ray and Rosaleen know how dangerous racism is, Lily doesn’t know that her trauma will be caused by it. Lily realizes that the white world would certainly frown if she had any relation with Zach. Nevertheless, Zach makes her believe that she can live in a color-free world one day. When Rosaleen attempts to exercise her newly won right to vote, she is attacked by the three white racists in town and is thrown into jail. Lily reports Rosaleen that she can “find her own path from now on” (54). Lily is determined to save Rosaleen and finally escape her own father as well.

In this way, Sue Monk Kidd emphasizes the traumatic situation of characters due to their unfavorable circumstances. Unforgettable accidents of the past intensify Lily’s trauma. Though most characters of the novel look frustrated in their life, some of them are endeavoring to get rid of psychological tortures. Taking advantage of the moment, Lily sets Rosaleen free from jail, and the two make a journey towards South Carolina in search of a new life. In the end, though she cannot find the mother she lost, Lily discovers and comes to terms with her mother’s past, she finds a hive of new mothers, and falls in love with the great universal mother. Lily overcomes her trauma by interacting with the people around her, understanding the prejudice, and living an independent life.

Conclusion

This novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*, portrays realistic pictures of traumatic life. The protagonist of the novel, Lily, does not find mental solace from her family, so she decides to create her own identity as a powerful woman. It focuses on the fragile who embark upon journeys of self-discovery after dissociating themselves from problematic situations. During the course of Sue Monk’s narratives, her characters learn about themselves and uncover

secrets from the pasts of their loved ones while developing a newfound sense of psychological torture. Lily is distressed by external and internal trauma. Though Lily has been mostly abused by her merciless father, she gets encouragement from witnessing Rosaleen's fight against domination. Lily's narrative allows the readers to apprehend the depth of loss and the great insecurity undergone by the main character, Lily. She battles against the perplexing and desolate circumstances every day. Kidd's potential to combine the pathetic story of a motherless and abused teenager searching for her identity with the healing power of a community of black women, amidst an atmosphere of racial intolerance, makes this a powerful, moving story that empowers women and provides respect for the black women in literature. The novel displays individual and collective trauma, the struggle for shaping identities, narratives of silent suffering, and historical wounds. At the same time, the struggle of Lily signifies that awareness and resistance in the community can open rooms for healing, even within a system built on social stratification of racism.

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