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**Black Madonna and the Daughters of Mary: A study of The Secret Life of Bees by Sue Monk  
Kidd**

Abstract: Religion plays an important role in the society as well as in literature. It sometimes falls upon us from birth or sticks into our mind in such a way that it becomes a soothing companion to us. The novel *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd is the story of a young white girl named Lily, who lost her mother when she was a small child. She runaway with her African American maid Rosaleen from her abusive father to find the mystery behind her mother's death and finds solace from three African American sisters called the Boatwright sisters. She witnesses a new way of life while living with these sisters. She encounters their Mother Mary, the Black Madonna where she experience a new way of worship. Lily tries to find peace and security from that Black Madonna which later becomes an archetypal mother for her. She practices these sisters' ways of worshipping and becomes one among them. The Black Madonna, for these sisters, Lily and other African American women are a tool to appease their miseries and thus they create their own way of religion or custom.

Religion plays an important role in the society as well as in literature. Sometimes it falls upon us from birth or sticks into our mind in such a way that it becomes a soothing companion to us. Religion is a collection of beliefs based on a culture which is related to human being

alone. Each religion will have a story based on its origin and some symbols to commemorate it. They have their own way of rituals and sermons.

Sue Monk Kidd born on August 12, 1948 is a writer from Sylvester, Georgia, the Southern United States. In her teenage she was influenced by Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Kidd liked to listen to the honeybees in the wall of her home. She is well renowned for her novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*. The novel *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd is the story of a fourteen year old heroine, named Lily Melissa Owens whose life went upside down after her mother's death. All she has is a blurred memory of the afternoon her mother's murder. The novel is set in the 1960s of South Carolina. Lily is insecure and lonely, which is a result of lack of attention and the abuse she received by her father.

Lily, a white girl lives in a house with her abusive father whom she calls T. Ray. He punishes her for silly things. This leads her to long for the love of a mother. They have an African American maid, Rosaleen, who acts as a substitute mother for Lily. After Rosaleen is arrested for pouring "snuff juice" (40) on three white men, she was witnessed to injustice by the sheriff as well as the three white men. So, Lily breaks her out of the hospital and decide to leave the town. They hitch hike and reach Tiburon, South Carolina, which is a place written on the back of an image of the Virgin Mary as a black woman, which her mother, Deborah owned. Later she meets with the Boatwright Sisters named, August, May and June who are also African Americans. She finds solace and spirituality from these African American women. She even tries to find out the mystery behind her mother's death. There she witnesses a new way of life and gets care from these four African American women.

Sue Monk Kidd has departed herself from Baptism to produce the story of Lily. The Boatwright Sisters have their own Black Madonna whom they call "blessed... among women"

(110). They call their Black Madonna statue as “Our Lady of Chains” (110). Lily describes the statue of Black Madonna as

She was black as she could be, twisted like driftwood from being out in the weather, her face a map of all the storms and journeys she’d been through. Her right arm was raised, as if she was pointing the way, except her fingers were closed in a fist. It gave her a serious look, like she could straighten you if necessary. (87)

From Lily’s first interaction with the black Mary, she feels like she knows her “down to the core” (88) and that she can make Lily feel her “glory”(88) and her “shame at the same time” (88).

Soul of Lily is so tormented that she longs for the love of her mother. She desperately wants to know more about her mother who died of a gunshot when Lily was just four. She even has heard about the rumour that, she was responsible for her mother’s death. Her always treats her too harsh that finally she has to run away from him. This tormented soul tries to find solace from the statue of Black Madonna. Even from the first sight itself Lily feels something soothing inside her from the statue. She feels like the lips of the statue with a half smile, tells her “Lily Owens, I know you down to the core” (88). She feels to cry and laugh in front of the statue that the black Mary made her feel her glory and her shame at the same time.

While staying with these sisters, Lily comes to know that they have their own way of spirituality that these Boatwright Sisters meet regularly at their house for prayers around the “the Lady of Chains” (110). Lily at first thinks that on Sundays these sisters would go church. But they do not. They hold a special service in the pink house and they call themselves “Daughters of Mary” (131). These Daughters are a group of six women and a man. The services they hold focuses on the Black Madonna involves singing, dancing and praying loud. It was a form of a spiritual community which is different from Catholicism. They sit for prayer by

arranging the chairs in a semicircle facing the wooden statue of Mary. They even read Bible in the beginning of their prayer. Frequently they narrate the story behind the origin of “the Lady of Chains” (110) like other religions. August narrates the story of the Black Madonna. The story describes how the statute was found in a river and brought into a community of black slaves. The slaves started to worship it, until their owner snatched it from them. The owner chained up the statue, to keep it away from the slaves, but it miraculously, and continually, escaped. The statue provided the slaves a spiritual unity and power which began to be passed down through generations.

All the Daughters kiss the heart of Mary so deliberately and Lily too feels to do so. Lily imagines that a touch on the heart of Mary can wash away her guilt, pain and sufferings. The Daughters even tell the reason for calling the Lady of Chains as it is, “...Our Lady of Chains because she broke them” (137). So Lily too believes that Mary can break her chains of guilt and pain.

August helps Lily to link a relationship with the black Mary, saying “if you ask Mary’s help, she’ll give it” (111). After August tells Lily the story of Beatrix the Nun, and how black Mary had been standing in for Beatrix when she ran away, Lily figures that August must mean, “Mary would be standing in for me back in Sylvan “(113). Not until much later does August explain that she intended for Lily to understand that black Mary could stand in for Lily’s mother.

After the death of May all the women go into deep sorrow. But finally they manage to celebrate the Assumption of Mary. They celebrate it in their own way. They demonstrate the story of “Our Lady of Chains” (110) by standing in a circle and feeding one another with cake, wrapping the Our Lady of Chains’ sculpture in actual chain and bringing it into the honey house. There they pray to Mary and celebrate her love for the whole world.

One night Lily comes to realise the truth that her mother left her when she was a baby. Her mother is not the perfect person Lily imagined her to be. This makes her violent and painful. That night she seeks the help of Mary and reaches the room where the Black Madonna is, hoping to pray to Mary. But she fails. While celebrating the next day of the Assumption of Mary, Lily sees the Daughters of Mary coating honey all over the statue of Mary. It was like a ritual for these Daughters to celebrate the Mary's Day. Honey is a preservative and they do so to preserve the statue. This ritual can be also noticed in Catholic churches where the priests wash their special statues in Holy water. Along with the Daughters of Mary, Lily rubs honey over the statue in order to polish and preserve it. She rubs the honey right on top of the Lady's heart. She feels appease when she touches the heart. She remembers how often she has touched the heart of the Mary's statue to get rid of her pain. Lily wonders what it would be like to cover her with honey, in a healing, restorative way. Lily imagines Our Lady of Chains as her mother. She says, "You are my mother... You are the mother of thousands" (334).

By the end of the novel, Lily has found friends, a lover, community, and a way to forgive her mother. With August's help, she is able to accept another kind of maternal support, that of the Our Lady of Chains statue. August explains to Lily that Mary is present in each and every part of the world and she hopes to replace Our Lady in the place of Lily's mother Deborah. August says, "That may be Our Lady could act for Deborah and be like a stand-in mother for you" (356). Initially, Lily has been praying to the black Mary, while taking part in the rituals along with the Daughters and sometimes on her own. Only now Lily able to see that what she thought was a prayer to an outward manifestation of a god or being was actually a prayer to herself, to something deep within her. August helps Lily realize that everything she has been looking for all along has been inside herself, like a bud ready to bloom once she gave it enough water. She finds her solace in the hands of the Our Lady of Chains.

Black Mary has always been Lily's feminine wisdom and strength which enables her to deal with her abusive father and guilt over her mother's death. August tells Lily that "you have to find a mother inside yourself" (357) whether you have a mother or not. 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" (357) because Lily possesses these qualities within her own heart. 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]" (357). Finally, August reminds Lily that black Mary "sits in [her] heart all day"(358) 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" (358). 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.

The characters in the novel come to Madonna in the Boatwright living room with the feeling of pain, guilt and sufferings. For all the African Americans, during the 1960, were not allowed to visit churches or to take part in the church ceremonies. They are also the tormented souls in the novel in some other way. They expect someone to heal their wound and thus they find solace in the arms of the statue of Our Lady of Chains to liberate themselves from their chain of sufferings. Thus they started a way of prayer to share their pain and sorrows of their life. Our Lady of Chains is a symbol of power for the matriarchal society.

Finally, Lily practices these sisters' ways of worshipping and becomes one among them. The Black Madonna, for these sisters, Lily and other African American women are a tool to appease their miseries and thus they create their own way of religion or custom which give act as a tool for appeasing their tormented souls. They try to find peace by giving themselves to the hands of black Mary.

Black Madonna acts as an archetypal mother figure in the novel that all the hearts seek the help of Mary. The Daughters of Mary are a group of strong African American women who practice a religion made up by August Boatwright. The novel emphasizes the importance of having spirituality in one's life, regardless of whether that spirituality comes from organized religion, from one's past, or from one's own imagination.

**Works Cited**

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