
Racial Discrimination in Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this paper, *Racial Discrimination in Sue Monk Kidd's The Secret Life of Bees* is to find the racial sufferings of Blacks. African American writers write for the equality of the blacks in America. The sufferings, pains and agony of the Africans constitute the major themes of Afro American literature. The Africans in America are considered as suppressed and oppressed by the whites. Their subjugated life and sufferings are reflected in Afro American writings. Racism refers to the inequality of people based on colour. The white people naturally have the tendency to dominate the black people showing their superiority. The identity of blacks is injured by calling them 'nigger', 'black ass' and 'negroes' by whites. Many black people are destroyed by the White men and their culture. Education and employment are prevented for the Blacks by the White society. They were doubly marginalized in every means. The solution of all these racial problems must be essential and important. With the achievement of Civil Rights Act (1964) the blacks have erased the ill-effects of racism. This paper tries to explore how Sue Monk Kidd has presented the grotesque system of racism in her novel *The Secret Life of Bees*.

KEYWORDS: Race, Black women, Racial attitude, White, Identity, Black people, freedom, African American.

Racism is the belief that some races are inherently superior (physically, intellectually, or culturally) to others and therefore have a right to dominate them. It motivates prejudice and discrimination with laws, customs, and practices which reflect and produce racial inequalities. According to Blauner, The term *racism* has many meanings.

For some people, the term is synonymous with "White people." For others, the term *racism* stands for personal prejudice and discrimination. For still others, it stands for any race consciousness or the color blindness. For yet another group, racism stands for institutional practices that maintain racial inequalities (qtd. in Bowser 10).

In the United States, racism has created profound racial tension and conflict in virtually all aspects of American society. The African Americans and other people of colour continue to experience racial prejudice and discrimination in more subtle and indirect ways. Until the breakthroughs achieved by the 1950s and 1960s, white domination over blacks was institutionalized and supported in all branches and levels of government, by denying their civil rights and opportunities to participate in political, economic and social communities.

Martin Luther King has led the 'Civil Rights' movement during the decade 1954-1964 on the growing conviction that 'non-violence' is the way whereby freedom became possible. On July 2, 1964, Johnson has signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which has banned discrimination based on 'race, colour, religion, sex or national origin' in employment practices and public accommodations. It is understood that America is devoid of freedom to blacks and the struggles and sufferings of people of colour in 1964, even after the Civil Rights Act is passed, through the novel *The Secret Life of Bees*.

Race is a point of group identity. The colour of the skin gives the people the identity such as blacks, whites etc. Kidd expresses the identity of blacks is harmed by calling them 'nigger', 'black ass' and 'negroes' by whites. The racist consider the white race to be superior and black to be inferior. Many black people are destroyed by the Whiteman's culture, by the Whiteman's churches and by the Whiteman's Civil Rights Law.

Lily, a white girl who is the protagonist of *The Secret Life of Bees* has experienced the racial attitudes of the whites towards Blacks. Lily's mother died when she is fourteen years old. She lives with her cruel father T. Ray. In order to search the truth about her mother's death she escapes from her father and goes to Tiburon with her black nanny Rosaleen. On the way she encounters certain racial issues where she questions whether the real meaning of Civil Rights Act is, letting the blacks inside the motels and the restaurants of whites. Rosaleen replies, "That's what it means, but you gonna have to drag people kicking and screaming to do it" (75). Lily believes that racism is simply a flaw in social organization and practices.

Both law and attitudes separate the races in the South of America which is represented by Kidd. Politics and attitudes of whites discriminate the blacks and exclude them from full participation in the life of the community. There is a distinction of race, caste and color in the public. The blacks are resisted to enter inside a restaurant or an ice-cream parlour which are owned by whites. Rosaleen explains this situation as, "... there ain't gonna be any place that will take a colored woman, I don't care if she's the Virgin Mary, nobody letting her stay if she's colored" (75). Kidd brings out the pathetic situation of blacks through Rosaleen. Rosaleen also explains that the blacks are pushed away from the restaurant or the hotel, even though they have money in their pockets and they are ready to pay for. Lot of white folks won't buy the products manufactured by the blacks, which in this novel they have identified by the black Mary picture labelled on the bottles of honey.

April Boatwright once goes to an ice cream parlour where, she is not allowed to enter into the parlour because of the colour. The white owner makes her to stand outside the parlour. She wants to go inside the restaurant and eat the ice creams like the white children. The white owner doesnot allow her inside the parlour. It makes her upset and finally she commits suicide. The white have no humanity towards the blacks. Lot of blacks lost their life due to discrimination. The whites consider themselves to be superior and other to be inferior to them.

The blacks are racially discriminated in the hospital also. The idea in the minds of the white race is that the Negro is mentally and morally inferior is the basis for racial discrimination. When Lily, a white girl aged fourteen, enters into the hospital, she is astonished to find the two wings, one is for whites and the another one is for blacks. The wing which is meant for black people has lacked all the essential facilities that the white wing has. The blacks' wing is blocked up with the smells of garden, sick people, alcohol, and bathroom deodorizer. The whites never want to step

inside the blacks' wing and the blacks are not allowed to enter into the wing which is meant for whites. When Lily tries to get inside the hall where Rosaleen is, the policeman says, "You weren't supposed to be in there!" (59). "You need to go to the other side of the building. You're in the colored section" (60). The basic needs are not provided to the black community.

In the South America, the white people pour out streams of hatred and distrust towards those who differ from them in belief or national origin or color. Lily is portrayed in *The Secret Life of Bees*, as a racist as not the same as the group of men who harass Rosaleen are racists. T. Ray, Lily's father witnesses the cruel behavior of those men, "She dumped snuff juice on three white men! What the hell was she thinking? And on Franklin Posey, for Christ's sake. She couldn't pick somebody normal? He's the meanest nigger hater in Sylvan. He'd as soon kill her as look at her" (47).

Lily evidences some racial prejudice and stereotypes at the start of *The Secret Life of Bees*. She has a thought that coloured people are smart in some way but not smart as her being white. The smartness and intelligence of coloured people are never understood by Lily's father. T. Ray never allows Lily to learn because he thinks that education for female is unnecessary. He also has a notion that blacks and female lack in intelligence. He never ever accepts them equal to whites, though he finds progress and success in them.

The constitutional right to vote for all citizens are denied for blacks even after a law is passed is explicated by Kidd in *The Secret Life of Bees*. The blacks have gone through many struggles in order to have rights to vote and right to be freeman and woman. Rosaleen is eager to register her name to vote and she learns to write her name though she is uneducated. She always thinks about it and the day to register her right. The day came and she happily goes to the town to register her vote. On hearing it the racist attacks her and forcibly she is arrested and put in jail for her only fault of wishing to vote. She bears the sufferings made by the white men. The whites have the right to kill the blacks and wound them terribly.

The defective role of churches, to play in the field of race relations is revealed in *The Secret Life of Bees*. The Negro who is integrated into a white church is the lamb inside the lion's stomach. On Lily's birthday, Rosaleen and Lily go to the church but the Brother Gerald does not allow Rosaleen to get inside the church and he shows a look of disapproval towards Lily for accompanying a black woman. Brother Gerald becomes a failure when he avoids his special responsibility and the opportunity of inviting Rosaleen inside the church, rather he says, "It's funny how you forget the rules. She was not supposed to be inside here. Every time a rumor got going of Negroes coming to worship with us on Sunday morning, the deacons stood locked-arms across the church steps to turn them away" (37). The whites consider the blacks would steal the things from the churches. They never allow the blacks inside the church. Frederick Douglass has examined the Christianity's role in the abuse of blacks in south of America and he express it as,

The religion of South is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes- a justifier of the most appalling barbarity- a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds- and a dark shelter under which the darkest, foulest, grossest and most infernal deeds of slaveholder find the strongest protection. (qtd. in Emanuel 119)

The American citizen's right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is an acknowledgement of the fact that persons and groups differ. This difference results with the fear on future. Kidd

clearly distinguishes the future aim and fear of both blacks and whites in *The Secret Life of Bees*. Lily faces some instant situations that set her advance in motion. In order to start her journey, she has to overcome these situations and prosper. Lily wants to be a writer or English Professor but she fears about her future because her father does not encourage her to achieve her dream. She hopes to reach her goal whenever chance gets. She uses to read poetry, write poems, etc. She lacks confidence to attain her goal. She fears about it and portrays herself as an orphan to Zach. It is pointed out by Zaleski as, "Lily is a budding writer, desperate to connect yet fiercely protective of her secret interior life" (33). Zach, the black boy had his schooling in a Negro school. He describes the condition of blacks as sympathetic and poor because they never have a wonderful future because of their skin colour. The blacks lived at the margins of American life the reality was they had to get beyond racism and he has that hope. Even though he knows the fact that he cannot continue his studies because of his race, he is adamant in continuing his studies. He wishes to become a lawyer but he knows that there is lack of freedom and opportunity for the blacks to acquire a wonderful future. He longs for a school where the teacher educates both black and white equally as members of the same great commonwealth.

Today race is the most determinative factor for the vast majority of men and women alive in the world. The most cancerous to the life-fabric of America is the unredeemed history of the forceful subjugation of the coloured people by the white people. The predominant view in U.S. historiography presents racism as being accepted among white people. Racism is the world problem and needs to be attacked on the world level. Many of them committed themselves to contribute to this world attack, on the sin of racism, both in words and deeds. What is needed now is a concerted attack on racism on its various institutionalized forms of church, governmental and inter-governmental business, trade, union politics and programs. Obviously, this requires a new order, priorities and a variety of methods of work in different parts of the world. Racism must be erased from this world. Racism is the cruelest thing which is followed in the world. There should be a counter attack against racism in world level.

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