

Amy R. Huseby

Kathy Casto

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A Comparative Examination of Sacred Feminine Symbolism
In *The Poisonwood Bible* and *The Secret Life of Bees*

According to the textbook *Western Civilizations*, a companion feminine deity as an equal compliment to the presently better known concept of a male deity existed worldwide for thousands of years prior to the birth of Christ (Coffin 66). The array of goddesses is innumerable, though one of the first recognized goddesses, Isis, is commonly referred to as the Goddess of 10,000 Names. This description might be approaching accuracy, and, like this description the breadth of symbolism available is similarly massive. By making use of sacred feminine symbolism, at once subtle and blatant, Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* presents an argument against the white, male subjugation of native cultures and Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* posits the importance of finding the divine within the individual.

An examination of the floral symbolism (one of the most familiar goddess images relating to female genitalia and fertility) in *The Secret Life of Bees* is an excellent opening to the discussion of sacred feminine symbols in both novels. In *The Secret Life of Bees*, Sue Monk Kidd specifically selected floral names for her characters that hold weighty symbolic significance. To begin, the reader should examine the flower names, specifically those of Lily and Rosaleen. "The Venerable Bede compared Our Lady to the lily ... the white petals signifying her bodily purity" (Krymow). Lily finds a book in August's bedroom sanctuary that has "pictures

of Mary being presented with a lily by the angel Gabriel” (Kidd 234). In the Bible, we read, “I am the rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys. Like a lily among the thorns is my darling among the maidens” (Song of Songs 2:1-2). The novel presents strong Marian references related to Lily, Rosaleen and Lily’s mother, Deborah. Lily tells us, “My mother was William Blake’s rose” (Kidd 275). Rosaleen’s name also strongly resembles the name Rosslyn, which is a derivative of the term “rose line”, relating to the bloodlines of Mary, or, as readers of Dan Brown’s *DaVinci Code* would claim, to that of Mary Magdalene (434).

Flowers are undeniably a potent goddess image; specific examples can be found in Hinduism as well as the ancient Greek pantheon. According to an article in the Weekend Australian regarding a recent exhibition of Indian goddess art, “All are unmistakable symbols of fertility, as is the remarkable floral headdress, reminiscent of the Greek goddess Flora” (Smee 2006). The lotus blossom, indicative of the feminine genitalia, is a symbol repeatedly seen in Hindu goddess art, “the love bed occupied by Radha and Krishna ... where the lotus flower appears as the product of their love” (Canberra Times 2006). The idea behind this floral naming is clear; Kidd seeks to show the reader that the divinity sought by the characters of her novel lies within their own being. If there was any doubt of this connection, Kidd provides Rosaleen’s last name – Daise – which means literally a raised platform of the type that a throne would rest on. At the same time, it is another clever flower reference, a deliberate misspelling of daisy.

In addition to the floral symbolism, Kidd has peppered her primary character’s name and that of the deceased mother with bee references. “I am Lily Melissa Owens, I will not bow down” (Kidd 288). Melissa means bee: “The ancients gave the name of Melissae (‘bees’) to the priestesses of Demeter” (Gimbutas 182). Demeter was the Greek goddess of the earth and agrarian fertility. She also represented the power of life over death, as it was Demeter who

sought her daughter Persephone from the underworld, and through that act she also represents the ferocity of mother love. Lily explains that if she could have one miracle from the Bible happen to her she would have “settled on getting raised from the dead” (Kidd 271), much like Persephone. In addition, “At Ephesus, Artemis was associated with the bee as her cult animal” (Gimbutas 183). Artemis was the Greek goddess of the hunt and the moon, as well as being a maiden goddess and guardian of animals (discussed in greater depth in relation to Leah in the Poisonwood Bible at a later point). According to Gimbutas, bees were also closely tied with the idea of the Goddesses of Transformation and Regeneration, as it was believed that bees were born from the carcasses of decomposing bulls or oxen (181). As a result, bees and bull imagery were usually closely linked. “The bull is dead and new life begins” (Gimbutas 183). When August recounts the tale of Aristaeus, “the first keeper of bees”, she tells Lily “bees had power over death” (Kidd 206). In this context, Kidd has provided the reader with a protagonist who embodies the idea of rebirth and renewal. In addition, Lily’s mother’s name was Deborah, which also means bee. I would argue that by naming Deborah thus, Kidd has provided an extremely subtle clue to the reader that Lily’s mother is not the Queen Bee mother-figure that Lily is seeking, but merely another bee. So, with this hint, we see that Lily’s search will not end with her mother, but elsewhere. To cement this idea, Kidd has rounded out the naming theme by giving her protagonist the surname of Owens, which means “desire born”. Lily was born into a world where she would always desire what she could not have – her mother.

One could ask who is the Queen Bee in this novel? The ready answer seems to be August Boatwright, the sage eldest Boatwright sister in Kidd’s *The Secret Life of Bees*, but on further examination it becomes clear that the Queen Bee is a relative term. For each woman, the Queen Bee is herself. The quote regarding Lily’s name exemplifies this idea. Lily is entirely herself, in

ownership of her self, and will not “bow down” to her father or any other influence. She has owned the divinity inherent in her own being. August tells Lily, “You have to find a mother inside yourself” (Kidd 288). This statement strikes at the heart of women’s mysteries and the sacred feminine. In Georgie Ann Weatherby’s *Daughters of the Goddess*, we read that “hanging upon the empowerment of women [is the concept] if that which you seek, you find not within yourself, you will never find it without” (205).

Turning our attention to the existence of three sisters in each novel, according to Wikipedia:

In ancient ... mythologies, various goddesses ... appear as a triad, either as three separate beings who always appear as a group (the Greek Moirae, Charities, Erinnyes, and the Norse Norns) or as a single deity who is commonly depicted in three aspects (the Greek Hecate) ... In the most ancient descriptions of Triple Goddesses, the separate deities perform different functions, and can appear as any age they desire.

In both *Poisonwood* and *Secret Life*, the authors provide three sisters, and each sorority has a deceased sister. May, June, and August Boatwright are collectively referred to as the “Calendar Sisters.” Lily tells the reader that she spends time trying to decide which month she would choose to be named for, had she been born into the Boatwright family. “I picked October ... my initials would be O.O. for October Owens, which would make for an interesting monogram” (Kidd 137). This is an interesting choice indeed, in two contexts: first, that October is symbolic of the autumnal equinox, another seasonal shift, and second, the letter O resembles the fullness of the moon. May’s explanation for their naming is, ““Our mother loved spring and summer”” (Kidd 73). This seems to be another reference to Demeter, who would have loved spring and summer when she could retrieve Persephone from the clutches of the underworld. By naming

these characters so, Kidd has cleverly cultivated a tightly woven thematic device that works in the concepts of mother love, fertility and the life/death cycle.

June Boatwright positively has some connection with death. Lily tells us, “She played music for dying people ... to serenade them into the next life ... Maybe she was around death too much” (Kidd 86), and when May dies, “June played ... as if May’s spirit getting into heaven depended solely on her. You never heard such music, how it made us believe death was nothing but a doorway” (Kidd 201). June is the sister in *Secret Life* representative of the archetypal Crone aspect of the Triple Goddess. According to Wikipedia, “The Crone represents wisdom, repose, death, and compassion” (2006). Hecate was the Greek goddess representative of these traits and the best representation of the Crone’s nature; she was the dark side of the moon and the goddess of the afterlife and the underworld. Throughout *Secret Life*, June repeatedly rejects the marriage proposals of Neil simply telling him, ““Because I can’t”” (Kidd 123). Why not? Why can’t June marry Neil? One could claim that it has to do with a sense of responsibility toward her sisters, specifically toward the near-autistic and highly empathic May. However, when examined in the context of her role as the Crone, her refusal could be viewed as inability to put down her responsibility as the ferrier of souls into the afterlife and disconnect herself from her triptych relationship with her sisters. According to Barbara Tedlock’s *The Woman in the Shaman’s Body: Reclaiming the Feminine in Religion and Medicine*, “The act of helping souls to transform themselves in order to cross from the other world into this world turns out to be at the heart of feminine shamanic traditions worldwide” (2006). It would be nice if Kidd had tidily rounded out this triumvirate for her readers. These trios serve a function much like the Trinity in Christianity, while they are divisible by individual parts the threesome is at the same time a whole entity

performing a single function or operating toward a common goal. In Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*, the function of the trio is to lead Lily's self-realization and healing process.

While August is clearly the mother aspect of the trio, we cannot easily associate May with the Maiden. Typically, the Maiden "represents enchantment, inception, expansion, the female principle, the promise of new beginnings, birth, youth, excitement, and a carefree erotic aura" (Wikipedia 2006). Few, if any, of these traits apply to May. In fact, there is also an interesting relationship with May when we examine her empathic abilities and the death of her twin sister, April. Perhaps it is the duality of twinship one should regard and which drew Kidd to use a twin relationship for May, as well. August explains to Lily, "When April died, something in May died, too ... It seemed like the world itself became May's twin sister" (Kidd 97). Here, from death, we have a metamorphosis resulting in May aligning herself to the pain and heartache of the world. There is, too, the inherent plurality of twinning, the idea of two halves of a whole. Despite the lack of an overt reference to these concepts, the sense that these principles are right in the lap of sacred feminine values is intense. According to Jack Holland's *Misogyny: The World's Oldest Prejudice*, dualism has long been at the heart of both women's struggles and prevalent in goddess worship. One example of this is the Virgin Mary, who was both expected to be a virgin but also a woman capable of giving birth. Holland states, "The old dualism of body and spirit, threatened by the belief in Incarnation, reasserted itself with the cult of the Virgin Mary" (Holland 103). May's twinning plays on this dualism, while she is also a member of the threesome. As an additional aspect of dualism, her twinning could be compared to the Taoist belief of yin and yang. According to Holland, "Taoism holds that the world is kept in balance between the interaction of two forces yin (female) and yang (male). This interaction

gives rise to change ...” (Holland 171). So, the character May straddles both the concept of a Triple Goddess and the nature of duality, both heavily indicative of sacred feminine principles.

Leah, Adah and Rachel Price in Kingsolver’s *Poisonwood* fit the concept of the Triple Goddess neatly: Leah as Mother to Anatole’s sons, Rachel as the eternal Maiden seeking excitement and relying on her erotic charm, and Adah as the Crone, wise beyond her years and handicapped at birth. Leah is the most satisfying to investigate in this context. While she clearly embodies the Mother in the latter portion of the novel, of all the Price women, it is Leah who most fully exemplifies the complete goddess. She literally becomes Artemis, the virgin huntress goddess, during the fire hunt, skinning her kill, while in the same instant embodying the Crone at the scene of the impala’s death and her subsequent savagery. “My own sister Leah got down on her knees and eagerly skinned a poor little antelope, starting out by slitting its belly and peeling back the skin over its back with horrible ripping sounds. She and Nelson hunkered down side by side, using a knife and even their teeth to do it” (Kingsolver 352). Adah refers to Leah as “my hunt-goddess twin” (Kingsolver 278), and Leah tells us as she sighted the impala on her bow, “I prayed to Jesus to help me, then to any other god who would listen ... I was chasing the impala down the path of his hopes ...” (Kingsolver 349). Not only is this scene indicative of Artemisian mythology, but the death of the impala also points to the frequent use of deer imagery in relation to the Goddess of Regeneration. Gimbutas explains, “The prestige of the deer in symbolism is not simply connected with its appearance – beauty, grace, agility – but also with the phenomenon of the cycle of regeneration and growth of its antlers” (171). Most sacred feminine symbolism revolves around the ideas of rebirth, renewal, regrowth, and resurrection. Kingsolver’s use of the impala, which Leah literally takes into herself by ingesting it, as well as her use of the okapi in

the novel's opening scene, play on this theme. Likewise, the concept of regeneration occurs in the use of the moon in both Kingsolver's and Kidd's work.

The moon has long been regarded as a totem of shifting phases. It controls the tides, is rumored to affect menstrual cycles, dies and is reborn each month. While it is the moon specifically that Kidd presents to the reader, Kingsolver is less direct, using concepts of resurrection and cyclical nature to build on this theme. According to Wikipedia, the Triple Goddess symbol, which consists of a circle flanked by opposing crescent moons, likely originated "from Classical Greek lunar symbolism, representing the three aspects of the moon, waxing crescent, full moon, waning crescent, and womankind, mother, maiden, crone" (2006). Additionally, according to Murray Hope in his book *Practical Egyptian Magic*, Isis (the Egyptian goddess widely regarded as the archetypal goddess) was crowned with a "horned disk," a crescent moon, also viewed as bull horns (2006). Gimbutas states, "There is a morphological relationship between the bull, on account of its fast-growing horns, and the waxing aspect of the moon ..." (91). According to the Illuminations' website article *Isis, the Black Virgin*, "The kernel of Isis archetype is the consciousness of being the seat of life; a woman's awareness of her own function of beginner, nurturer and medium for life to accomplish its means" (2006). Once again, the tripartite sense of division is demonstrated both in terms of moon symbolism and the idea that the power of the goddess is within each individual woman.

This latter concept is at the heart of Kidd's *Secret Life*. Kidd refers to the moon countless times throughout *Secret Life*. During Lily and Rosaleen's escape, Lily falls asleep and dreams: "I could see a huge, round moon in the sky ... I saw the moon crack apart and start to fall. I had to run for my life" (Kidd 54). The destruction of the moon in Lily's dream could signify for the reader the impossibility of her subconscious longing for her mother. The moon appears when

Lily, Rosaleen, August and June are searching for May, as well. “A night bird was singing from a tree branch, just singing its heart out, urgent and feverish, like it was put there to sing the moon up to the top of sky” (Kidd 189). Also, August Boatwright tells Lily that the Virgin Mary favors seashells as her “favorite items, next to the moon” (Kidd 262). Finally, Kidd chose to conclude the entire work with a reference to this symbol. Lily tells us, “All these mothers ... They were the moon shining over me” (Kidd 302).

Kingsolver tackles the concept of resurrection and life phases, symbolized by the moon for Kidd, but does so in her descriptions of the jungle and the natural world. In the opening pages, Orleanna explains, “This forest eats itself and lives forever” (Kingsolver 1). Adah describes the Congo for the reader saying, “Everything comes of morning undoes itself before nightfall: rooster walks back into forest, fires die down, birds coo-coo-coo, sun sinks away, sky bleeds, passes out, goes dark, nothing exists. Ashes to ashes” (Kingsolver 30). It is not sufficient for her characters to merely observe their surroundings; they must consume them. Orleanna literally eats earth, several times, throughout the novel. She tells us, “my body can never be free of the small parts of Africa it consumed” (Kingsolver 87). During her pregnancy with the twins, Orleanna “ate dirt from the garden” (Kingsolver 199). When Kingsolver describes for us the grieving Kilangan mothers, she says they also “Crawled on their hands and knees, tried to eat the dirt from the graves” (Kingsolver 296). The idea that life comes from death, each revolving about the other, repeating infinitely, is one of the primary thrusts of Kingsolver’s work. Essentially spelling out this point, during the fire hunt, Adah tell us, “On account of these deaths, Kilanga’s gleeful children would live...life and death indistinguishable from one another” (Kingsolver 347). So, while the moon does not appear in these passages, the concept of life from

death and resurrection, which the moon exemplifies, and the transmutable power of nature are evident in *The Poisonwood Bible*.

Like the tidal swell manipulated by lunar cycles, rivers, water and rain feature prominently in both novels. Symbolically, rivers generally convey the sense of a journey and of constant change. In fact, Kidd acknowledges this idea in her blog about the book, saying,

Rivers typically suggest the stream or current of life that one follows on a winding passage that will eventually flow into the sea (or symbolically, into an even larger eternal life). In college I took a humanities course in which I read this line by Plato: "You cannot step twice into the same stream.." He was speaking of life. He was saying that the stream is always changing and flowing, that it is never the same moment to moment, and that life is this way (Hunterdone HS blog).

However, these symbols can be interpreted with specific attention to the sacred feminine aspects of their nature. Water is life giving: it nourishes crops, it cleanses, and it renews. Without water, humans expire in a relatively short period of time. The idea of moisture also correlates with that of lactation and nursing young. An example of this concept can be found in a Yoruba prayer from Nigeria in Dr. Andrew Wilson's *World Scripture: A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts*. It reads, "O Mother who arrives majestic and offers water to all!" (1991). When Rosaleen and Lily are making their getaway, they stop for the night to rest beside a stream and go skinny dipping. Their nocturnal dip takes on great significance as Lily says, "Water beaded across her shoulders, shining like drops of milk, and her breasts swayed in the currents ... I wanted to go and lick the milk beads from her shoulders ... I wanted something. Something, I didn't know" (Kidd 55). It is the sustenance of love that only a mother can give which Lily craves in this

moment, as Rosaleen takes on an Earth Mother aspect offering nourishment of an emotional sort, though Lily is unaware that this thirst is the seat of her desire.

Similarly, in *The Poisonwood Bible*, at the “funeral” of Ruth May, the sky finally chooses that moment to open, ending months of drought, and to cry down its pain on the Price women and the women of Kilanga. Leah conveys that, “The sky groaned and cracked, and suddenly the shrill, cold needles of rain pierced our hands and the backs of our necks. A thunderstorm broke open ... the rain poured down on our heads. It lashed us hard, answering months of prayers” (Kingsolver 373). Too, at the moment in *The Secret Life of Bees* that Lily learns she was an unwanted pregnancy and eventually abandoned by her mother, there is a rain storm. As she attempts to come to terms with the fact that her mother left her, she tells us, “I listened to the hiss of rain. The spray floated over and misted my cheeks while I counted on my fingers ... The rain spattered my sandals, dripped between my toes ... The rain picked up, coming down in large, silver-black sheets” (Kidd 249 & 253). The concept of rain and rivers as lactation is not a new one. According to Gimbutas, “The presence throughout Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods in Europe ... of V’s, chevrons, or cross signs on female breasts or immediately below them, or on arms supporting breasts, suggests an identification of rain with milk, an old and widespread belief which induced people to see women’s breasts or cow udders in clouds” (116).

In both novels, rain and rivers are intimately associated with the concept of baptism, as well. As a result, one could extrapolate the thought that the characters are being born again by baptism of mother’s milk. It is worth noting that the only actual baptisms Nathan Price accomplishes in *Poisonwood* occur during the funerary storm. Leah tells us, “Father moved around the circle baptizing each child in turn, imploring the living progeny of Kilanga to walk forward into the light” (Kingsolver 375). While he is a male figure and Kingsolver uses the male

aspect of light in this quote, it was the keening of the women that brought down the rain from the skies. Crying infants cause lactating mothers to experience the biological function called “let down”, the spontaneous, uncontrollable release of milk. In a sense, the crying out of the women in Kilanga has produced a let down of rain from the skies. Again, we turn to Gimbutas who tells us, “There appears to have been an association between female divinity and divine moisture from the skies” (116). This water symbolism is intricately linked with the ideas of Bird and Snake Goddesses, as well, to which we now turn.

Of Snake and Bird Goddesses, Gimbutas explains: “The Snake and Bird Goddess was a predominant image in the pantheon of Old Europe. As a combined snake and water bird ... she was inherited from the Magdalenian culture ... She is the feminine principle ... the universal water divinity in the shape of a snake or bird” (145). The green mamba is arguably Kingsolver’s primary symbol in *Poisonwood*. The obvious allusion here is to the serpent that convinced Eve to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden: the fall of man. According to *Cultural Anthropology: The Human Challenge*, “In Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, a masculine-authoritarian godhead along with a creation story that portrays a woman as responsible for a fall from grace serve to justify a social order in which men exercise control over women” (Haviland 359). However, viewed from the sacred feminine belief, Eve was wise enough to see that eating the forbidden fruit would open her eyes and provide her with greater knowledge. According to Alejandro Arturo Gonzalez Terriza’s “Isis, Lilith: Gello: Three Ladies of Darkness”, Lilith was Adam’s first wife, formed from “pure dust” (2006). Lilith refused to lay beneath Adam during sexual intercourse and left him. Terriza tells us, “While Eve admits that she’s inferior to man and submits her fate to him, Lilith considers herself superior and distances herself from his authority, fleeing from Paradise, and getting so free also of the terrible curse of

the Fall” (2006). Various sources suggest that Lilith was, in actuality, the serpent that appeared to Eve, attempting to convince her of the rightness of the knowledge offered, essentially providing Eve one last chance to see the error of allowing herself to be oppressed. Terriza also provides us with a tale of Isis creating a snake from dust and the spittle of Ra, which then bites the God who is forced to seek healing assistance from Isis, providing her an opportunity to manipulate him through her knowledge (2006). Both of these myths support Kingsolver’s commentary on feminine knowledge and education, as well as her primary point regarding male domination of women.

It is the snake that causes Ruth May’s death in *Poisonwood*. With that death, we witness various metamorphoses, similar to the one that May in *Secret Life* experiences following the death of her twin. Primarily, Ruth May “becomes” the green mamba. When she falls ill with malaria earlier in the novel, Nelson tells her, “You have to think of your safe place every day” (Kingsolver 239). Later, Ruth May tells us, “If I die I will disappear and I know where I’ll come back. I’ll be right up there in the tree...” (Kingsolver 273), meaning she will become a mamba. Ultimately, it is Ruth May who speaks to us last. She is, “The glide of belly on branch. The mouth thrown open wide, sky blue” (Kingsolver 538). There is also another slick Isis reference here. According to Murray, Isis’s “color is clear sky blue” (Illuminations 2006). Gimbutas confirms that, “The snake, like the bird, was a form in which the goddess became manifest” (146). In a sense, through her death, Ruth May has ascended beyond her father’s reach, beyond even the fate of mankind, and attained eternal life through her resurrection as the mamba. This accomplishes Kingsolver’s aim to demonstrate life arising from death and the power of the feminine to rise above the dominion of the male. Ruth May does not die and go the heaven of Nathan Price, she becomes a manifestation of the goddess. To, this reference points to the

symbol of birds as an embodiment of the sacred feminine, and both Kidd and Kingsolver make use of owls to illustrate this aspect of the divine feminine principle.

The episode of Ruth May's death is the climax of Orleanna's journey in *The Poisonwood Bible*. Thereafter, the sum of her experiences are all the denouement of her life. Once Ruth May is buried, Orleanna literally walks away from her life with Nathan Price. Her metamorphosis touches on the symbols of a Bird Goddess. Explaining her reason for staying with Nathan, Orleanna says, "I'd lost my wings. Don't ask me how I gained them back – the story is too unbearable" (Kingsolver 201). The story of gaining back her freedom, and thematically her wings, is that of losing her child. In order for Orleanna to free herself from Nathan Price, Ruth May's death was necessary. This concept is paralleled in the story of the parrot Methuselah, who is set "free" by Nathan Price, but has only known a cage and so fails to regain his wildness. The bird is eventually killed by a civet cat. Adah tells us, "Following the trail I found first the red and then the gray: clusters of long wing feathers still attached to gristle and skin ... O Lord of the feathers, deliver me this day" (Kingsolver 185-186). Similarly, once Orleanna leaves Nathan she never regains her wild, pagan side that existed prior to her marriage. She says, "If there was still some part of a beautiful heathen girl in me ... I encountered my own spirit less and less" (Kingsolver 200).

Birds also serve as conductors of the dead, which is another representation of the sacred feminine concept of the life/death cycle. In *Poisonwood*, the birds with this role are owls. Again, it is Leah at center stage in the anecdote of the pet owl. Despite Anatole's warning that "the Congo people don't like owls because an owl flies at night and eats up the souls of dead people ... Leah went and fetched the owl back and sashayed around the house ..." (Kingsolver 156). The imagery here is a conspicuous reference to the goddess Athena, who was constantly

attended by an owl and for whom owls were sacred. When Ruth May dies and Lumumba is assassinated, the owl represents both the Price family's loss and that of the Congo: "On the wings of an owl the fallen Congo came to haunt even our little family, we messengers of goodwill adrift on a sea of mistaken intentions" (Kingsolver 323). Here Kingsolver artfully tools the symbolism of the owl to act with her wider thrust of the destruction of the Congo.

In *Secret Life*, the Boatwright sisters have a special fondness for birds. Lily tells us, "The sisters loved birds, I could see" (Kidd 80). Kidd transforms August Boatwright's character into the Bird Goddess by assigning her figurative wings, as well. In that same pivotal scene in the rain when Lily learns of her mother's abandonment, August embraces the girl. Lily tells us, "It was like being swept under a bird's wing" (Kidd 253). The concept of mother love is apparent in this image. What could be more indicative of protective maternal instinct than the wings of a bird sheltering her young from all the evils of this world?

Motherhood, in keeping with the concept of the Great Goddess Mother, is a primary issue in both novels, and arguably the central theme of Kidd's work. Lily's entire journey is a search for a maternal figure, for information about her deceased mother. As noted previously, however, she learns, "Even if we already have a mother, we still have to find this part of ourselves inside ... not only the power inside you but the love ... to persist in love" (Kidd 288-289). The Black Madonna Marian revitalization movement demonstrated by the Daughters of Mary assists Lily in her realization of self-sacredness, in addition to emphasizing Kidd's commentary about racial injustices. Revitalization movements, or cults, are "movements for radical cultural reform in response to widespread social disruption and collective feelings of anxiety and despair" (Haviland 361). As noted previously, both August's and June's shamanic behavior supports anthropological studies pointing to a "primacy of women in shamanic traditions" (Tedlock

2006). Lily describes her first worship service with the Daughters of Mary, telling us, “When [August] began, it didn’t sound like August talking at all but like somebody talking through her, someone from another time and place” (Kidd 107). Shamans throughout the world, multi-culturally use the mechanism of trance to “assist in healing” (Haviland 348). August Boatwright’s assistance with Lily’s healing and growth is profound. As a representation of the Lilithian ideal of knowledge as power, August is perfection.

The motherhood represented in *Poisonwood* takes several forms. Orleanna begins life as a pagan, who “worshipped and adored ... miracles of a passionate nature” (Kingsolver 193). Adah tells us, “Our mother used to have mystery under her skin” (Kingsolver 220). We discussed Orleanna’s taking the wing motif for herself, suggests her identification with the Bird and Snake Goddess. There is a Marian reference related to Orleanna, as well. “One night we simply chose Bethlehem, Georgia, off a map” (Kingsolver 197). Mary gave birth to Jesus in Bethlehem, so in essence Kingsolver is drawing a parallel between Orleanna and Mary, as the mothers of their respective families. Kingsolver has created a feminine scripture, complete with a Christ-child sacrifice, in the form of Ruth May, apostles, in the form of the sisters, and a Mother Mary, in the form of Orleanna. However, Orleanna reverts back to her fertility goddess role in the end, taking up gardening with gusto: “She was an entire botanical garden waiting to happen” (Kingsolver 410).

Kingsolver’s point about motherhood is very different from that of Kidd, however. Kingsolver’s version is less saccharine, certainly, more pragmatic. During the ant invasion of Kilanga, Orleanna rescues Ruth May and leaves disabled Adah to fend for her own safety. When Orleanna eventually explains her reason to Adah, she says, “When push comes to shove, a mother takes care of her children from the bottom up” (Kingsolver 444). Adah tells us that her

mother's choice was solely related to position and need, Orleanna's need. This is at once more realistic and selfish mothering than Kidd would present her readers with. Ultimately, both novels and writers manipulate the role of motherhood in the greater context of the Great Mother Goddess.

The overlapping conceptual imagery of flowers, bees, the moon, water, snakes, birds, pantheism and mother love abound in *The Poisonwood Bible* and *The Secret Life of Bees*. Both Kingsolver and Kidd successfully relay their divergent themes through their skillful manipulation of these symbols. Ultimately, the reader learns that Kingsolver intends to illuminate the injustice of white male oppression over women, nature and other cultures. She does so effectively by holding up for the reader a variety of sacred feminine symbols as examples of the power of the oppressed to overcome the oppressor. At the same time, Kidd's intention is to convince the reader of the power inherent in the self and the ability of individual to find nurturing and strength within. Her use of sacred feminine symbolism accomplishes this end, and the reader is left with a sense of completion and truth. A balance in all things lies at the core of sacred feminine ideology. Kingsolver and Kidd achieve this balance splendidly and readers of their work are blessed with the burgeoning results.

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