

## Interracial Relationship and Friendship: A Feministic Reading on Sue Monk Kidd's *The Invention of Wings*

R. Anitha Bai<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Stephen Foster Davis<sup>2</sup>

1. Ph.D. Research Scholar, Reg.No: 21213164012042, Department of English & Centre for Research, Scott Christian College (Autonomous), Nagercoil – 629003, (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli -627012, Tamil Nadu, India)
2. Assistant Professor, Research Supervisor, Department of English & Centre for Research Scott Christian College (Autonomous), Nagercoil – 629003, (Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli -627012, Tamil Nadu, India)

**Abstract:** Sue Monk Kidd one of the most acclaimed writers from America and stands out from her contemporary fellow writers because of her works that reflects her real life. This paper is the perusal of Sue Monk Kidd's historical novel *The Invention of Wings*. This novel talks about the friendship between two women characters Sarah Grimke and Hetty Handful. Sarah Grimke and Hetty Handful use their friendship as evidence that peace and equality between white people and black people is both possible and necessary. This paper is an attempt to investigate the problems faces by the women characters and how they overcome the problems by their friendship. Their unconventional relationship and their regard form one another create a substantial, life changing support for each woman. Sarah and Hetty come to comprehend and regard humankind in each other. The aim of this paper is to depict how the friendship and attachment of women characters Sarah and Hetty makes them to fly with their own wings.

**Key Words:** Friendship, Attachment, support, Peace and Equality.

-----

### Introduction

The term Feminism can be used to describe a political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing equal rights and legal protection for woman. Feminism involves political and sociological theories and philosophies concerned with issues of gender difference. The first feminism wave was in the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries, the second was in the 1960s and 1970s and the third extends from the 1990s to the present feminist theory emerged from these feminist movements. Sue Monk Kidd's novel depicts the suffering and position of women in American society. Simone de Beauvoir wrote that "the first time we see a woman take up her pen in defence of her sex" feminism mainly focused on women's issues.

Sue Monk Kidd's *The Invention of Wings* portrays the friendship between the main characters Sarah Grimke, a white girl, and Hetty Handful, a black slave from Africa. Hetty

Handful and Sarah Grimke's friendship forms the backbone to this novel. Their unconventional relationship and their regard for one another create a substantial, life changing support for each woman. In this novel, true bond between friendship transcends extremes of social position, class and race. Through their friendship, the girls Sarah Grimke and Hetty Handful succeeds in their ambition.

Sarah Grimke's ambition is to become a jurist and Hetty Handful wants to escape from the white society. Friendship brings humanity in the mind of the white girl Sarah Grimke, she differs in her thought regarding the black compared to other white people. In the beginning of the novel Kidd explores the way in which each woman grows up in their childhood. Sarah Grimke and Hetty Handful has received great gifts from their friendship in their childhood days, yet they experience their friendship responsibility. Sue Monk Kidd through her novel depicts the complexity of a particular relationship in a specific time while also offering a view of the transcendence available through friendship. Kidd indicates that through the true bond in friendship, each person becomes more than they were before. The true bond in friendship is clearly shown in the novel *The Invention of Wings*.

On Sarah Grimke's eleventh birthday, Hetty Handful has been presented as a maid to Sarah Grimke. In Sarah's birthday party, many guests have arrived on that party. At that time, Handful has been presented as the gift to Sarah by her mother. But Sarah refused to accept Hetty as her maid. Sarah said that, ". . . I don't need a waiting maid...I'm perfectly fine without one" (17). Sarah Grimke refuses Hetty Handful because she is on her age. After four months Missus scolds Hetty Handful, as a worst waiting maid in Charleston. After that Hetty Handful starts to work as a waiting maid to Sarah Grimke whole heartily. But Sarah makes a promise to Charlotte, Hetty Handful's mother that she will help Hetty Handful to get complete freedom from their white masters. Sarah Grimke also tells that she too helps Hetty to be free from slavery. Sarah's promise:

I remembered the oath I'd made to help Hetty become free, a promise impossible to fulfil and one that continued to cause me no end of guilt, but it suddenly rang clear in me for the first time: Charlotte said I should help Hetty get free any way I could. Turing, I watched her carry the lantern to my dressing table, light swilling about her feet. When she set it down, I said, 'Hetty, shall I teach you to read?'. (63)

Sarah Grimke teaches Hetty Handful to read and write Hetty also tries to learn the words. Once "she'd scrawled W – A – T – E – R with exact penmanship for the entire world

to see” (67). Hetty Handful was listening carefully to her and learns more vocabulary. Hetty Handful is not sure about Sarah’s friendship, whether it came out of guilt or love. Hetty Handful even doubts herself that her friendship towards Sarah Grimke is because of “love” or “need to be safe”. But they are true friends and they helped each other when they are indeed. Kidd portrays the real and true friendship between Sarah Grimke and the slave girl, Hetty Handful. While Sarah teaches Hetty Handful they lock the door because the white people never accepted that the black people as their friends. Sarah Grimke feels sorry for Hetty Handful because in her young age itself Hetty Handful became as a waiting maid. Sarah Grimke wants Hetty Handful to be free from slavery:

“ . . . I’ll be kind to Hetty”, I said abruptly. The words – remorseful and lordly - came out of as if some pustule of guilt had disgorged. Her eyes flashed open, then narrowed into small burrs. They were honey coloured, the same as Hetty’s. “. . . I never meant to own her . . . I tried to free her, but . . . I wasn’t allowed.” . . . I will try to free her. (35)

Doe Zantamata’s view on the concept of friendship is “Good friends help you to find the most important things when you have lost them . . . your smile, your hope and your courage” (1996 b). Sarah helps Handful to find the most important thing in her life, that is to read and write. Sarah reveals Hetty Handful about her ambition to become a jurist, as her ambition she keeps a silver button with her. Hetty narrates to Sarah Grimke about her family which is in Africa. Sarah’s mother Mary advise Sarah to forget about her dream to become a jurist. On hearing the advice of her mother Sarah get frustrated and throws the silver button into the fire. Hetty Handful acts as a true friend to Sarah by saving the silver button from the fire. Hetty Handful encourages Sarah to become a jurist which is her wish. Through the novel, Kidd portrays the difficulties Sarah and Hetty Handful faces to achieve their dream. Their friendship starts with guilt and to live a safe mode as days passes Hetty Handful shows her real affection towards her friends wish. According to Seneca, her view on the concept of friendship is “One of the most beautiful qualities of true friendship is to understand and to be understood”.

Handful’s role in the novel is the best example of friendship. As a true friend Hetty understands the situation of Sarah Grimke and she saves the silver button from the fire. Sarah Grimke gets disappointed because she thinks that she has lost her silver button and begin to cry. Sarah’s eyes are so raw because of crying, even she cannot see while she writes. Hetty

shows the tray in front of her and in the tray the silver button is displayed. Hetty Handful brings the silver button and remembers Sarah about her ambition. Sarah cannot believe that her friend Handful has saved her silver button from the fire. Handful also remembers Sarah about her ambition as a jurist. Sarah was sitting at her desk, writing in a notebook. Her eyes were so raw from crying I didn't know how she could see to write. I set the tray in front of her. "I said, "Look what's on the tea saucer." She hadn't laid eyes on the button in all these years, but she knew right off what it was. "How did . . . Why, Handful, you saved it?" (153).

Sue Monk Kidd shows how Hetty Handful understands the situation of her friend Sarah Grimke and appreciates her to win in her ambition. Handful shows her real affection towards Sarah, When Sarah fell in love with a white man. Sarah has accepted the marriage proposal made by Burk Williams. After some days Sarah comes to know about the real nature of Burk Williams that he is a man who already proposed two ladies and he never respect slaves. Sarah feels disappointed by hearing the news about Burk Williams. "Thomas says Burke Williams has two more fiancées" Sarah sense the delay in naming the marriage date. My eyes filled" (149). Disappointed strives Sarah Grimke twice in her life. At first her ambition is rejected by her parents, at second, when Sarah Grimke comes to the truth regarding Burk Williams, thus Sarah Grimke has been hurt too badly. The one person who stood by her during her hard times is her close friend Hetty Handful.

A proverb "A friend in need is a friend indeed" suits this novel. The character Hetty Handful plays a vital role in the theme of friendship. Kidd does not pretend that their friendship is easy or uncomplicated but she portrays the real fact. Sarah Grimke and Hetty Handful overcomes prejudice. Sarah feels guilt for having a slave and Hetty Handful feels painful to be a slave, amidst their differences they support and care for each other. As years goes by, Sarah and Hetty endure seasons of distance from the sacrifice for each other while never losing sight of the great worth of their friendship. Whenever Sarah is in trouble Handful helps her. Sarah joins the Quaker Movement in the North. Hetty still stays in the house of Grimke as a slave. Sarah Grimke gives speech against slavery. Though Sarah and Hetty are away from each other, they discuss the events happens around them with letters. Sarah Grimke returns back to Charleston after, sixteen years first Sarah goes to find Hetty Handful. It shows how much Sarah loves Hetty and how much she believed her. Because, as a friend Hetty helps Sarah many times. Hetty Handful also happy to see Sarah. Sarah makes a talk about the freedom of Hetty and Sky. Missus knows that Sarah will give freedom for

Hetty and her sister Sky. Then Sarah informs that the mother agrees to set free Hetty Handful and Sky as Sarah's will. Sarah makes a plan that Handful should disguise as white masters and so she can escape from slavery as well as she boards a boat. Hetty starts the travel, she looks Charleston because she is going far away from Charleston. Hetty is happy and so she become speechless. Sarah holds the hand of Hetty. Finally, Sarah and Hetty shows their friendship publically. Now they are away from Charleston. As a friend, Sarah Grimke makes Hetty Handful to escape from Slavery: "People say don't look back, the past is past, but I would always look back. I watched Charleston fall away in the morning light. When we left the mouth of harbor, the wind swelled and the veils round us flapped, and I heard the blackbird wings. We rode on the shining water, onto the far distance" (411).

In the end of the novel, Sue Monk Kidd depicts the friendship and attachment of Sarah towards Hetty Handful. In the beginning of the novel, Sarah promises Charlotte to help Hetty Handful to get freedom. She too, attempts many times in order to get freedom to Hetty Handful. In the first attempt of Sarah Grimke about Hetty Handful's freedom it has been rejected by her father itself. Sarah's father torn the freedom paper of Hetty into two. Hetty Handful has plans to revolt against slavery but it comes to end even it began. Sarah Grimke helps Hetty to escape from Charleston as well as slavery; Sarah Grimke makes Hetty Handful to disguise as a white and makes her to escape from Charleston. In the novel Sarah and Hetty Handful have shown their love and affection towards each other. They also helped each other when they are in need. Through their friendship they have succeeded in their life. When Sarah has been betrayed by a white man Burk Williams, Hetty helps Sarah to remember about her ambition. This shows the real love and affection towards Sarah by Hetty Handful. Sarah Grimke shows her love and affection towards Handful, Handful also succeeds in her life and gets freedom from slavery. Handful and Sky has finally left the place Charleston as well as slavery. Sarah Grimke and Hetty Handful stays devoted to each other. They share their feelings and suffering within them and they find solution for their problems.

### **Conclusion:**

Through *The Invention of Wings* Sue Monk Kidd portray successful girlhood bonds that allow Sarah and Hetty to build new identities and comfort and support each other. The interracial Relationship between Sarah and Hetty gives them the opportunity to achieve a unity between self and other that empowers them to invert their own wings. This paper

demonstrate how female friendship helps the girls face challenges related to race, class and gender oppression and leads to healing and survival.

-----

**Works Cited:**

- De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Edited and translated by H.M. Parshley, Penguin Books, 1986.
- Fehr, B. *Friendship Processes*. Thousand Oaks, Sage, 1996.
- Hooks, Bell. *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*. Henry Holt, Doubleday, 1995.
- Kidd, Sue Monk. *The Invention of Wings*. Tinder Press, 2014.