Interracial Relations: History and Cultural Identity in *The Invention of Wings*

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Sue Monk Kidd’s *The Invention of Wings* is a historical fiction novel that takes place during the nineteenth century in Charleston, South Carolina. The story is based off the historical figure, Sarah Grimké, an American abolitionist and advocate for women’s rights. Over the course of thirty-five years, the narration alternates between the two main characters: Hetty Handful Grimké and Sarah Grimké. Hetty is a young slave on the Grimké plantation and Sarah is one of eleven children in her family. The novel begins with Sarah’s eleventh birthday. As a gift for her birthday, her mother presents Hetty as a personal waiting maid, starting the interactions between the two main characters. As the story continues, the dynamics between the two shifts as they learn how to coexist while constantly being faced with the societal and familial pressures that pit them against one another. These external pressures shape each character in their own ways of thinking and heavily influence their perception of freedom and feminism. This study explores the relationship between the critical ideas of racial equality and gender equality and their combined impact on Sarah and Hetty’s relationship within the novel. Additionally, this project examines barriers between the main characters and a theory that provides an understanding of the difficulty in creating and maintaining their relationship.

The nineteenth century is categorized by a primarily patriarchal society. From the patriarchal pressure, the idea of gender equality came to be during this time period. One of the first texts to influence what is known as “feminism,” was *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman* written by Mary Wollstonecraft during the late eighteenth century, only a few years before the novel takes place. Within her text she advocates for women to push against the delicate image imposed upon them by men and to strengthen their mind and body. Some women sought to find their own voice, including Sarah’s character, and took on the idea of gender equality. Nineteenth century society placed pressure on women to bury their own ambitions for those of their husband
and family, a concept that Sarah found difficult to conform to. For African American women, however, feminism was not as valuable as their freedom. Antebellum black women had three separate constraints placed on them. “Black in a white society, slave in a free society, woman in a society ruled by men, female slaves had the least formal power and were perhaps the most vulnerable group of antebellum Americans” (White 15). Because of the multiple constraints, feminism was not as widely talked about throughout black communities as was freedom. This is apparent in Hetty’s character as she is portrayed as a strong female who struggles less with her place in a patriarchal society as she does with her own bondage. The sharp contrast between the two main characters is complementary and described as such by Hetty, “my body might be a slave, but not my mind. For you, it’s the other way round” (Kidd 201).

The relationship between the two main characters is complex and dynamic. But the more time they spent together, the more they were able to communicate, a process that allowed for vulnerability to take place. Cultural Contracts Theory, a theory created by Ronald L. Jackson II, explores identity shifting and identity negotiation within interactions between whites and non-whites. “Our identities are shaped and molded during interactions with others. We use others as guideposts for normative behavior and we also set up implicit and sometimes explicit "contracts" with others, which indicate how we will progress with our relationships” (Jackson 360). Jackson describes communication with others as a way of negotiating one’s identity, a process that enables individuals to redefine themselves and shift their worldview and cultural behaviors. Such a process is evident in the transformation of Hetty and Sarah’s relationship.

The initial relationship between Hetty and Sarah shows the tense relations between antebellum blacks and whites that was normally characterized by one-sided servitude. “If a friend is, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, someone with whom one shares a
‘relationship of mutual trust and intimacy,’ we must consider how structures of inequality might thwart mutuality” (Fielder 326). Within the novel, Hetty and Sarah have different priorities, influenced by their upbringing, that causes conflict within their relationship. Born a slave, Hetty was raised learning about the institutionalized system that changed her life. She was often told stories to inspire and remind her of the value of freedom, an ideal that would motivate her throughout the novel. Sarah, however, was the daughter of a wealthy and influential judge. She was raised with the expectation of finding a husband and being a good wife and mother. Instead, she dreamed of becoming a jurist, a dream that was unacceptable in a patriarchal society.

Upon their forced introduction, both recognized that they had no control of their predicament at such a young age and had to do their best to stay out of trouble. But the more time they spent together, the more vulnerable they became. From the perspective of Hetty, Kidd writes, “I didn’t know for sure whether Miss Sarah’s feelings came from love or guilt. I didn’t know whether mine came from love or a need to be safe. She loved me and pitied me. And I loved her and used her. It was never a simple thing” (Kidd 54). The use of the word “thing,” goes to show the complexity of their relationship as there are no words to truly describe it. This complication stems from a combination of their status within society and personal priorities: Sarah wanting to escape from this life of discriminatory authority entirely and Hetty wanting to escape and be free. Sarah’s love and pity are representative of her disapproval of owning Hetty while still wanting to befriend her. These emotions also come from a position of power because she is a white female. Hetty referring to Sarah as “Miss” further displays her subordinate position and the power dynamic between the two. Additionally, as a slave, she prioritized her safety as she is always at the mercy of the white man or white woman. This feeds into her uncertainty of whether she truly has a feeling of “love or a need to be safe,” regarding her relationship with
Sarah. Hetty’s tone is one of uncertainty, represented in the repetition of the phrase “I didn’t know.” Such uncertainty is viewed throughout their initial interactions as they attempt to navigate a relationship they are both opposed to.

As their relationship continued to develop, Sarah became fixated on the idea of gender equality. This idea aided in her view of Hetty as her equal. However, it also prevented her from understanding the restrictions Hetty faced due to her race. On one occasion, Sarah attempted to relate to an issue Hetty had, but Hetty responded, “so we just the same, me and you? That’s why you the one to shit in the pot and I’m the one to empty it?” (Kidd 89). Hetty poses the question to make a statement. While she was aware that Sarah viewed her as a human being, it didn’t change the fact that she was still a slave. Additionally, the separation of “you” and “I” went beyond Sarah and Hetty and applied to whites and blacks everywhere. Hetty knew that racial equality was a problem everywhere, because she lived it. Her strong language and forceful tone came from her restrained anger at Sarah to not recognize that. But Hetty would come to realize that Sarah’s ignorance could only be changed by her own experiences. Overtime, Hetty would begin to open up to Sarah and even aid her in times of sadness: “I got the hyssop tea she liked, thinking of us when we were little, how we drank it on the roof, her telling me about the silver button and the big plan she had. I’d worn that button in my neck pouch almost every day since she’d tossed it away” (Kidd 134). The quote reveals how grateful Hetty was for the time they shared together as kids. During that time, Sarah had taught Hetty how to read and write, an illegal activity that they both were punished for. But Hetty came to appreciate Sarah’s actions as she would use these skills to achieve her freedom. Moreover, Hetty hadn’t told Sarah she had kept her sterling button, an embodiment of Sarah’s dream of becoming a jurist, until later in the novel, showing that beyond her being forced to serve Sarah, she had found a friend in her. It also shows that
Hetty believed in Sarah, in her dreams and in her as a person. She believed that Sarah could be something more than simply another Grimké child who would grow to repeat the cycle of slavery. She saw a strength within Sarah that was within herself, the strength to break free. It was this same strength that would bring Sarah the courage needed to help secure Hetty’s freedom in the end of the novel.

Kidd’s *The Invention of Wings* bridges the past and the present, through its two main characters Hetty and Sarah. These characters are written with the ideals of freedom and equality that contemporary readers can identify with. By having relatable characters and a setting that is familiar to her target audience, Kidd better illustrates a dark time in American history. Additionally, Kidd uses a multitemporal narrative from the perspectives of Hetty and Sarah that gives the audience an understanding of how the two main characters influenced each other throughout the span of thirty-five years. The novel shows how their personal values of freedom, freedom of the body and of social constructs, lead to a shift in their relationship from strictly one-sided servitude, to one that is more representative of a friendship. Additionally, it reveals that while people may be of a different skin color, over time one can discover more similarities than differences. Ultimately, their relationship reveals interracial relations can overcome barriers and become friendships.
Works Cited


White, Deborah Gray. *Ar’n’t I A Woman?* Norton & Company, Inc. 1985