

Who Decides Your Future: How One Girl Changed Her Destiny

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to have your entire future decided for you at age thirteen? To be married off to a stranger and then, through no fault of your own, find yourself alone in a strange city with nothing but your wits to survive?

That's exactly what happens to Koly, the remarkable young heroine of Gloria Whelan's novel *Homeless Bird*.

The World of Koly

The year is modern-day, and many traditional practices continue in rural India. When we meet Koly, she's living with her family in a small village. They're poor—not starving, but they struggle to get by. And like many girls her age in her community, Koly knows her parents are looking for a husband for her.

Now, before we judge this too quickly, let's remember that arranged marriages have been the norm in many cultures throughout history. In fact, the idea of marrying for love is actually quite recent in human history. In Koly's world, this tradition is simply how things are done.

But here's where Koly's story takes its first tragic turn. Her new husband's family has a secret—her husband-to-be, Hari, is desperately ill. His parents only arranged the marriage to get Koly's dowry money for medical treatments. When Hari dies shortly after the wedding, Koly finds herself a widow at thirteen, living with in-laws who resent her presence.

A Bird Without a Nest

Whelan chose her title carefully. Throughout history and across cultures, birds have symbolized freedom. But a homeless bird without a nest represents vulnerability and displacement. That's exactly what happens to Koly when her mother-in-law abandons her in the holy city of Vrindavan, a place where many widows go to beg or pray.

Imagine being left alone in a strange city at such a young age! There is no money, connections, or way to contact your family. It would be terrifying! But Koly, like many young people who face incredible hardships, finds inner resources she didn't know she had.

History is full of stories of young people who've faced impossible circumstances and somehow found ways to survive and even thrive. During the Great Depression in America, teenagers sometimes left home to reduce the burden on their families. During World War II, European children sometimes had to fend for themselves when separated from their parents. Koly's story,

though fiction, reminds us of this very real human capacity to push through and survive even the most challenging situations.

The Power of Skills

One of the most fascinating aspects of Koly's story is how she uses her embroidery skills to change her fate. Throughout history, women have often used handicrafts for practical purposes and as forms of self-expression and economic independence.

Think about it—quilting in early America wasn't just about staying warm; those quilts told stories and preserved memories. The "underground railroad" quilts may have contained coded messages to help guide escaping enslaved people to freedom.

In many cultures, women's textile arts have been one of the few acceptable ways for women to express themselves and earn money.

Koly's beautiful embroidery connects her to this long tradition. When she begins creating her designs and eventually earns money from her work, she's joining generations of women who've used needle and thread to stitch together independence.

Reading and Freedom

Have you ever thought about how lucky you are to be able to read? For much of human history, literacy was a privilege reserved for the elite and, in many places, only for boys and men. When Mrs. Devi teaches Koly to read, she's giving her a revolutionary gift.

Again, there's a connection to enslaved Americans who risked severe punishment to learn to read. Koly's journey also reminds us of the women's educational movements that fought for girls' right to literacy.

When Koly describes reading as building "a gate that led out of the women's courtyard," she's expressing something that countless people throughout history have discovered: **literacy creates possibility**.

There's a reason that those who want to control others often try to limit their access to books and education. Reading expands our minds and helps us imagine different ways of being in the world—exactly what happens to Koly.

Tradition and Change

One of the things that makes *Homeless Bird* so thought-provoking is that it doesn't present tradition as simply "bad" and modern life as "good." Instead, Whelan shows us a society in transition, where old ways and new possibilities exist side by side.

This reflects the reality of how cultures change. Rarely do societies abandon their traditions overnight. Instead, change usually happens gradually, with people finding ways to honor what's valuable in their heritage while adapting to new ways of seeing the world.

Koly doesn't reject her cultural heritage entirely. She still values family connections, respects many traditions, and appreciates the beauty of her culture. But she also embraces new possibilities—literacy, financial independence, and, eventually, the right to *choose* her partner.

A Real Journey, A Universal Story

What makes Koly's story resonate with readers who may never visit India or experience arranged marriage is the universal nature of her emotional journey. Regardless of where or when we live, we all face the challenge of figuring out who we are and where we belong.

Growing up always involves negotiating between the expectations others have for us and our emerging sense of self. It means learning to balance independence with connection. And it often means facing disappointments and setbacks.

By the end of the novel, Koly has transformed from a child bride into a young woman with options. She's still part of her society, but she's carved out a place that allows for her talents and desires. She's found her self-identity. Her journey from being defined entirely by others to having a voice in her own destiny is one that readers of any background can understand and cheer for.

Homeless Bird reminds us that the search for identity and belonging is a universal human experience, even when it takes place in settings that might seem unfamiliar. Koly's journey—from a dependent child to a young woman making her own choices—is ultimately about finding the courage to write your own story, even when others have tried to write it for you.

Let's Think About This

As you reflect on Koly's story, consider these questions:

1. How might Koly's story have been different if she hadn't learned to read? What does this suggest about the importance of education?
2. Koly's embroidery tells stories that "could not be told in words." What other art forms have historically served similar purposes for people whose voices weren't being heard?
3. How do the different women in the novel—Koly's mother, mother-in-law, Mrs. Devi, and Koly herself—represent different possibilities for women's lives? How might these characters reflect changes that were happening in real Indian society?
4. The novel is set in contemporary India but deals with traditions that go back centuries. Can you think of examples where old traditions and modern ideas come into conflict?