

Racist Manifestations in Harper Lee's *“To Kill a Mockingbird”*

Lecturer: Hameed M. Daikh

University of Al-Qadisiyah, College of Education, Dept. of English

DOI: 10.37648/ijrssh.v10i04.042

Received: 15th November, 2020; Accepted: 21st December, 2020; Published: 23rd December, 2020

ABSTRACT

The book tackles the issue of racism from the perspective of a 6-year-old girl in Maycomb, Alabama. Lee wrote the novel during the 1950s, a time of extreme change for the civil rights movement. Clearly inspired by the uproar of blacks Lee began her novel and chose a small town in the south as the setting for her novel. Much of the novel is autobiographical and Lee built many of her characters around the people in her own life. The novel goes deep into the problems of a small town when a black man is accused of raping a white woman. The novel explores how natural racism is in Maycomb and how this mentality is hardly challenged. It gives a critical look into how the town functions and how the issues are allowed to exist. Lee uses her character Scout to help the reader experience racism and sexism for the first time. Scout's innocence is supposed to make the reader be outraged at the injustices that is the American justice and social system have done. shows how natural racism and segregation seem to the adults in the novel. The Finch children learn of it and come to understand its meaning. And they are shocked to see the reality of their otherwise friendly home. To Kill A Mockingbird is the story of humanity learning to understand each other. As a reader, we see the world through the eyes of all children, who enter this world as the most pure of human beings. The realization of life's hard lessons is taught through Scout and Jem Finch as they watch their father and community struggle with the Depression, racism, and the justice system of the Old South. We see the remnants of the old stereotypes toward blacks, women, and anyone who is considered to be an outsider.

Keywords: racism, scout, Maycomb and rights movement.

To kill a Mockingbird is told by the little six-year-old girl Jean Louise Finch nicknamed Scout. She is a rebellious girl who has tomboy tendencies. The storyline is based in Maycomb, a small town in Alabama in the 1930s where Scout lives with her elder brother Jem, and her father, Atticus, who is widowed. They have a housekeeper named Calpurnia, who is a stern kind-hearted African-American. They also befriend Dill, a

small boy who comes to visit and stay with his aunt every summer. The timeline is placed during the depression where the status of her father as a respected and successful lawyer alleviates the Finch family from the harshness of the depression gripping the small town. The two major themes in the novel are judgment and justice. Scout and her brother get to learn some crucial lessons about judging others through the character of Boo, the

cryptic and solitary neighbor. Early in the story, the children mimic and mock Radley, but they, later on, come to experience his goodness. (Mancini, 1993)

The judgment theme is depicted in the circumstances that befell Tom Robinson, a poor African-American field attendant who is accused and put on trial for rape. He was charged with trying to rape a white woman Mayella Ewell. Atticus is appointed by Judge Taylor as Robinson's defense against the disapproval of many of the town's citizens. Despite the apparent evidence that proves Tom's innocence, the jury convicts him. The racist nature of the white supremacy society places all odds against Tom. After being humiliated in court, Bob Ewell sets out on a revenge mission against the Finch's as he spits into Atticus' face; he tries breaking into the Judge Taylor's house; he menaces Robinson's widow, and he later attacks Scout and her brother as they walk home at night. Boo comes to the rescue of the children where Jem is injured, a fight erupts, and Bob is killed. The dominant element of style the author applies in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is storytelling. Her talent has been described in several reviews as "tactile brilliance." She narrates her story in a visual and cinematographic fluid prose merging scene after scene without jolts of transition. The narration style adopts two perspectives; one that of the young girl growing up in hardship and problematic era and that of a grown-up woman reflecting on her childhood memories. The method of narration applied allows the author to fuse the simplicity of childhood observations with the adulthood situations intricate with veiled motivations and unquestioned custom. By adopting a child's perspective, the author efficiently applies satire, parody, and irony. (Mancini, 1993)

The story happens in the fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama, during the Great Depression. The protagonist is Jean Louise "Scout" Finch, an intelligent though unconventional girl who ages from six to nine years old during the course of the novel. She is raised with her brother, Jeremy Atticus ("Jem"), by their widowed father, Atticus Finch. He is a prominent lawyer who encourages his children to be empathetic and just. He notably tells them that it is "a sin to kill a mockingbird," alluding to the fact that the birds are innocent and harmless. When Tom Robinson, one of the town's black

residents, is falsely accused of raping Mayella Ewell, a white woman, Atticus agrees to defend him despite threats from the community. At one point he faces a mob intent on lynching his client but refuses to abandon him. Scout unwittingly diffuses the situation. Although Atticus presents a defense that gives a more plausible interpretation of the evidence—that Mayella was attacked by her father, Bob Ewell—Tom is convicted, and he is later killed while trying to escape custody. A character compares his death to "the senseless slaughter of songbirds." (Watkin, 2012)

The children, meanwhile, play out their own miniaturized drama of prejudice and superstition as they become interested in Arthur ("Boo") Radley, a reclusive neighbour who is a local legend. They have their own ideas about him and cannot resist the allure of trespassing on the Radley property. Their speculations thrive on the dehumanization perpetuated by their elders. Atticus, however, reprimands them and tries to encourage a more sensitive attitude. Boo makes his presence felt indirectly through a series of benevolent acts, finally intervening when Bob Ewell attacks Jem and Scout. Boo kills Ewell, but Heck Tate, the sheriff, believes it is better to say that Ewell's death occurred when he fell on his own knife, sparing the shy Boo from unwanted attention. Scout agrees, noting that to do otherwise would be "sort of like shootin' a mockingbird." (Armstrong, 1987)

To Kill a Mockingbird is both a young girl's coming-of-age story and a darker drama about the roots and consequences of racism and prejudice, probing how good and evil can coexist within a single community or individual. Scout's moral education is twofold: to resist abusing others with unfounded negativity but also to persevere when these values are inevitably, and sometimes violently, subverted. Lee reportedly based the character of Atticus Finch on her father, Amasa Coleman Lee, a compassionate and dedicated lawyer. The plot of *To Kill a Mockingbird* was inspired in part by his unsuccessful youthful defense of two African American men convicted of murder. (Bloom, 2007)

Although southern community as Lee imagines it is thus, as a whole, pervasively queer in its circulations of gender and sexuality, she nevertheless conspicuously

creates individuals who emerge as outsiders within this social matrix. Indeed, as the title indicates, the novel's most pervasive and unsubtle symbolism concerns itself with communal negotiations of these outsiders and their alterity to others. The valorized mockingbird becomes the all-too readable symbol of the innocent Tom Robinson, shot seventeen times by a white guard while attempting to escape imprisonment. In fact, with heavy handedness justifying Sundquist's critique of the novel, Lee has Braxton Underwood's editorial overtly expose and then explain the symbol: "Mr. Underwood simply figured that it was a sin to kill cripples, be they standing, sitting, or escaping. He likened Tom's death to the senseless slaughter of songbirds by hunters and children".⁶ Lee's novel more broadly identifies Tom's crucial otherness as his race rather than his physical handicap. Thus, when readers map the defining attributes of the mockingbird onto Tom, who seems to represent all African Americans in Lee's figurations, he emerges as the harmless victim of empowered whites' destructive racial discrimination. (McCarty, 2006)

The novel confounds the relationship between whites of conscience and the struggles of the black community. The novel is set in the 1930s and portrays Blacks as somnolent, awaiting someone from outside to take up and fight for the cause of justice. It is as if the Scottsboro case—in which nine young Black men travelling on a freight train in search of work were wrongfully convicted of raping two white women who were riding the same freight train—never happened. The trial was a 'legal lynching carried through with the cooperation of the courts and the law enforcement agencies'.¹⁴ All but one were sentenced to death; the jury was hung on whether the ninth one should be sentenced to life imprisonment or death. The germane point is that a maelstrom of activity swept through African American communities, both North and South. They organised, agitated, petitioned and marched in support of and to free the nine young men. *To Kill a Mockingbird* gives no inkling of this mass protest and instead creates the indelible impression that the entire black community existed in a complete state of paralysis. It was African North Americans who took up the task of confronting and organising against racism, who through weal and woe, trial and tribulation, carried on—and still carry on—the battle for equal rights and dignity. Those

whites who did, and do, make significant contributions gave, and give, their solidarity in response. (Bloom, 2010)

Scout," said Atticus, "nigger-lover is just one of those terms that don't mean anything—like snot-nose. It's hard to explain—ignorant, trashy people use it when they think somebody's favoring Negroes over and above themselves. It's slipped into usage with some people like ourselves, when they want a common, ugly term to label somebody." "You aren't really a nigger-lover, then, are you?" "I certainly am. I do my best to love everybody . . . I'm hard put, sometimes—baby, it's never an insult to be called what somebody thinks is a bad name. It just shows you how poor that person is, it doesn't hurt you. So don't let Mrs. Dubose get you down. She has enough troubles of her own. (Lee, 1998)

Not only Mr. Atticus answers her question, he also shows his attitude to it so clearly. He shows Scout that the foul words mean nothing and one can freely name themselves like so if they don't feel that it is offensive. We see clearly the horrified girl, who heard this word according to her father and wants him to restore his authority saying that he is not a "nigger-lover." Racists use "nigger-lover" to suggest that a person is trying to give African-Americans special rights, but Atticus points out that all he's arguing for is equality, loving everybody the same. The end of the quote is basically a grown-up version of "I'm rubber and you're glue," suggesting that schoolyard taunt actually has some merit and some insults do tell you more about the person hurling them than about their target.

Scout is a child and narrator of the novel with an adult conscious. She looks for everyone in an equal manner. She has no racist view towards any of the people. Arthur "Boo" Radley is a character that prefers living in voluntary seclusion. The children of Maycomb,

Scout, her brother Jem and their friend Dill, are convinced he's a horrible person because of the rumors spread about him. Boo is a lonely person who seeks friendship. He tries to indirectly form a bond with Scout by leaving her gifts and figures. According to her, Boo is "sickly white, with a thin mouth, thin and feathery hair, and grey eyes, almost as if he were blind". (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 190) Boo is also the anti-hero of the story. He protects the children from the antagonist of the story and refuses to tell the community of his heroic action. The character isn't only there to save the kids, he is also in need of being saved. Throughout the story, Jem and Scout become more compassionate towards him. They deduce that he is voluntarily staying at his because their townspeople are too cruel. They understand that he chose to stay out of humanity's mess. Jem's famous quote on the revelation is¹⁰:

If there's just one kind of folks, why can't they get along with each other? If they're all alike, why do they go out of their way to despise each other? Scout, I think I'm beginning to understand something. I think I'm beginning to understand why Boo Radley's stayed shut up in the house all this time . . . it's because he *wants* to stay inside. (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 161)

In Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we see that both characters are handicapped men: Robinson physically, Radley mentally. The difference is that Robinson is killed and Radley is forced to kill. We learn from these characters that justice and compassion do not know color. Jem and Scout are like Boo's children. He gives them things he considers valuable and saves their lives. Boo's family is hinted to have disapproved his affection towards the children as Mr. Radley cemented the knothole where Boo left the gifts. Robinson sees the victim, Mayella, as a person who needs help. He feels sorry for her and says he had gladly helped her, because her father didn't seem to do so. (Johnson, 1994)

To Kill a Mockingbird is a part of pop culture with the standing joke that it is not actually about killing mockingbirds. While that is true it has lessons of not hurting those who are innocent. America divided itself into whites and blacks. It used segregation to keep the blacks subordinate while whites maintained the power structure that is also relevant today. The racism in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is clear and is presented as the natural way of Maycomb. Atticus refers to it as "usual disease" (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 61) It is clear in the way that the blacks live together on the outskirts of the town. While the whites live closer to the center of the town. There are prejudice against the black in the town and it became evident during Tom Robinson's trial, ". . . absence of any corroborative evidence, this man was indicted on a capital charge and is now on trial for his life . . ." (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 144) Tom Robinson's case is not unusual. While accusations of rape need to be taken seriously the underlying problem of the trial is the racial bias. The cause of the outrage is not simply just the accusation of rape. But that it is an interracial rape. It is the sexual relation between a black man and a white woman. White men established segregation to keep black men from having sexual relations with white women. It was an attempt to keep their superior race to themselves and to avoid mixed children. (Meyer, 2010)

The result was often black men being lynched for allegedly raping white women. In doing so the white men exercised their control over black men but also over white women. By reinforcing segregation the white men attempted to maintain the virtue and chastity of their wives and daughters. This also reinforced their patriarchal roles as husband, father, and guardian of their community Tom Robinson been white the case might not have had the same exposure as it did. In fact the case might have been ignored because of the victim, a poor girl on the lowest level of the social hierarchy. However, since Tom Robinson was black and the victim was white the victim's social standing did not matter. It was more important that it was a black man transgressing on a white woman. Robinson could not possibly have beaten Mayella Ewell on the right side of her face with his deformed left arm. This is a logical counter yet Robinson was still found guilty. Majority of the white residents of Maycomb agreed with the verdict and Scout's teacher declared,

Well, coming out of the courthouse that night Miss Gates was—she was goin' down the steps in front of us, you musta not seen her—she was talking with Miss Stephanie Crawford. I heard her say it's time somebody taught 'em a lesson, they were gettin' way above themselves, an' the next thing they think they can do is marry us. Jem, how can you hate Hitler so bad an' then turn around and be ugly about folks right at home— (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 174)

Scout's teacher addresses this in class and explains that the persecution against Jews is awful. Because the Jews help businesses, are clean, and pious. This leads Scout to wonder as the same teacher had been expressed a racist attitude towards blacks, "Jem, how can you hate Hitler so bad an' then turn around and be ugly about folks right at home —?" (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, 174). The criticism Lee has is that white people can sympathize with the Jews and feel that their persecution is unjust. Yet at the same time ignore the struggles that take place in their own town and fail to see the similarities of their situation. Segregation is an important part of the novel. While the white community maintains the order

i.e. they enter the courthouse first and sit on the first floor. After they have been seated the blacks can enter and sit on the second floor. It is also important to note that when Scout recalls her days in school she never mentions any black children attending. We learn that Calpurnia has taught many of the black church attendants to read, including her own son, using a book she borrowed from Atticus. But many from the black community are illiterate. (Haggerty, 2011)

CONCLUSION

To Kill a Mockingbird is a plea for the genuine application of the core liberal value upon which the United States was, theoretically, founded: the equality of all before the law, regardless of inherited status, innate abilities, or race, as Atticus explicitly argues in his closing statement to Tom Robinson's jury. Atticus's failure indicates that the law is nothing more than an abstraction. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a deeper, more subtle argument that the law cannot guarantee justice. The moral argument in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is thus not the naïve one that Atticus makes—even if he is himself not nearly naïve enough to believe it will work—that an appeal to strictly legal values could end the injustices inherent to a society based upon racist principles. Lee calls for reform that will replace the selfishness that undergirds racist assumptions with a sympathy that challenges them. Atticus is telling his daughter to substitute her own, immature sense of how the world ought to be ordered and arranged for that of another.

REFERENCES:

- Mancini, Candice. (1993). *Racism in Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird*. Detroit, Greenhaven.
- Watkin, Amy. (2012). *How to Write about Harper Lee*. New York, Infobase Learning.
- Armstrong, Jean. (1987). *Mamillan Master Guide: To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee*. Hampshire, Macmillan Education LTD.
- Bloom, Harold.(2007). *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York, Infobase Publishing.
- Bloom, Harold. (2010). *Bloom's Guides: Hraper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York, Infobase Publishing.

Lee, Harper. (1998). *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York, Harpercollins Publishers.

Akkam, Annie. Retrieved March 12, 2020 from <https://women-s.net/harper-lees-to-kill-a-mockingbird/>.

Meyer, Michel J. ed. (2010). *Harper Lee's 'To Kill a Mockingbird': New Essays*. Plymouth, THE SCARECROW PRESS, INC.

Haggerty, Andrew. (2010). *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York, Marshall Cavendish Corporation.

McCarty, Lisa. (2006). *Focus on Reading: To Kill a Mocking Bird*. Irvine, Saddleback publishing.

Johnson, Claudia Durs. (1994). *Understanding To Kill a Mocking Bird*. London, Greenwood.