

## **Exploring the Voices of Racial Prejudice in Harper Lee's Novel *To Kill a Mockingbird***

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article attempts to explore the voice of racial prejudice in Harper Lee's Novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The writer presents some expressions and experiences of the characters related to racial prejudice found in the novel. Racial prejudice is a rigid and unreasonable generalization and deliberation exercised by certain white people towards the black people without knowing clearly about them. This study reflects the real condition of racial prejudice in Alabama. The blacks have always become victims of racial prejudice and discrimination not only in the society, but also in the court. Scout Finch, who is one of the main characters, does not only experience the external conflict against some other characters and the society, but also experiences the internal conflict against herself. Although her father Atticus is a white man, he is in favour of a black man Tom, who is accused of raping a white girl Myella. As a lawyer, Atticus takes Tom's case to defend him. This makes the white society angry and the white people go against the Finch family. The family members are treated as if they are the blacks. This article concludes that racial prejudice spoils the sense and sensibility of the people from seeing and realizing good virtues of the prejudiced people.

**Keywords:** Lee, mixed-child, mockingbird, racial prejudice.

### **INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVEL**

*To Kill a Mockingbird* by Nelle Harper Lee is a well-known novel published in 1960. It is probably the most widely read book dealing with serious issues of rape, race and inequality in America. It has become a classic of modern American literature winning the Pulitzer Prize. It is widely taught in schools in the United States. Students, in this novel, explore the lessons that emphasize tolerance and decry prejudice.

The novel is an intense portrayal of racial prejudice, justice, and innocence lost into a complex mixture of childish ingenuousness and mature observation. It depicts a brilliant rendering of a specific time and place, and explores the meaning of justice and the loss of innocence. It makes the characters realize that a place can be both a beloved childhood memory and a bitter realization of evilness in the world.

Scout Finch is the protagonist and narrator of the novel. She is a tomboyish girl portrayed as hot-tempered ready to start a dispute when somebody offends her. Atticus is the father of Scout and Jim. He is represented as a good-hearted man with strong morals and faces problems in his profession, family, and society. He not only seeks goodness in others but also teaches his children to follow his principles and to be morally conscious. Jem is Scout's older brother and Atticus's son. We learn in the beginning that he possesses some simple desires like playing football and be outside. He has a strong sense of understanding of the events in Maycomb. By the end of the novel, he learns the positive lessons which his father has taught him. Arthur 'Boo'

Radley is portrayed as one of the novel's mockingbirds, a good person misunderstood and wounded by the evil of humanity. Dill is a curious child who questions everything. He also questions some of the ways of Maycomb such as bias and prejudice of the court system. Dill is an imaginative and sensitive character who successfully hides his pain. Miss Maudie Atkinson is Finch's neighbor and an old widow. She remains busy in her yard working on her garden and also shows tenderness towards kids. She is indifferent in her behavior with the people. However, she finds solace and comfort in her garden. Calpurnia is the caretaker, cook, and housekeeper of Atticus children, Jem and Scout. She acts as a substitute for their mother. She makes positive efforts to teach them morals and values. Her kindness shines when an infectious dog comes into the neighborhood. Tom Robinson is depicted as a hardworking, honest and skillful man. Through Tom's character, Harper highlights the major theme of racism. Tom is the victim of racial injustice, and without proof, he is accused of assaulting and raping Mayella Ewell. He strives to prove his innocence, but because of the color of his skin, his pleadings for innocence get rejected. Myella Ewell is a perfect example of how cruel human beings could be. Myella Ewell exploits her advantage of being a white and accuses Tom of raping her. After this, the people of Maycomb turn against Tom. Aunt Alexandra is the sister of Atticus and aunt of Jem and Scout. She is a kind of woman who judges Jem and Scout on the yardstick of social standards. She is against Tomboy's appearance of Scout and often shows resentment when Calpurnia tries to educate the children. Despite her nature of belittling other class, she is projected as a kind lady who takes good care of the children. Bob Ewell is a white person. He is Myella's father who does not like Atticus for supporting Tom in the case of raping her daughter. Bob insults Atticus. He attacks his children to kill, but they are saved by Bob.

#### REVIEW OF THE NOVEL

It is one of the best and most popular American novels ever written on racism that is a burning problem in America. Bradley asserts "international human rights institutions and nations alike must acknowledge the deeper problems embedded in racism, including the use of race as a means for categorizing humans, racial ideology that promotes racial supremacy, and racial bias" (58). It is an irrational and inhuman treatment to categorize humans as superior and inferior on the basis of race. There are international human rights institutions and laws, but they are not fair and neutral. The blacks have experienced emotional and psychological strain in different field of activities. Sian points out:

A consequence of embedded practices of institutional racism, female and male academics of color /difference, at all career levels, experience emotional and psychological strain across every aspect of their profession, including in their daily interactions with colleagues, in their teaching practice, and in their future prospects. (22).

Racial prejudice and discrimination can be observed in diverse fields of activities such as in their professions, sports, institutions and teaching learning activities. It is also seen in their daily interactions even the colleagues. It does not affect only the present aspects, but also the future points of view.

The blacks in America have been victimized due to cultural racism. It is very tough for the whites to avoid the existence of culture, because it is deep-rooted in the society. Bonilla-Silva outlines "cultural racism as one of the mechanisms through which color-blind racism is perpetuated in the United States" (3).

Most of the whites consider racial prejudice as their cultural heritage. Coakley states that a cultural heritage is parameter that people use to "identify a particular population" (226). The blacks retain bitter experience in such a social structure where people are evaluated on the basis of color rather than on moral virtues and deeds. Coakley defines the social structure as "the

established patterns of relationships and social arrangements that take shape as people live, work, and play with each other” (5).

This novel presents the painful situation of Tom who is accused of raping a white girl. He is kept in jail although there is no evidence against him. Phelps asserts “at the heart of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a tragedy that was reenacted time and again in the South of the first half of the twentieth century. An innocent black man is adjudged guilty and ends up dead” (929).

Rezazade and Zohdi admire his novel for portraying the life of selfish society full of racial prejudice and injustice. They state “Lee beautifully portrays the life of a fanatic, racist, and selfish society and depicts the racial prejudice and injustice done by these racist poor Whites toward Negroes” (48).

The novel deals with racism and shows that it is evil. It creates a great distance between two races resulting in domination, violence and death. Tyson views racism as “the unequal power relations that grow from the sociopolitical domination of one race by another and that result in systematic discriminatory practices: segregation, domination, and persecution (360).

This novel is a mirror of society. It sees characters, their situations, their problems and deeds clearly, and presents these aspects in the written words clearly. The blacks realize that they are living in a poor and helpless society isolated from the society of the whites although they live in the same society. This novel presents the very picture of the society. Rezazade and Zohdi view this novel with these remarks:

Harper Lee in *To Kill a Mockingbird* pictures a poor, outwardly fanatic, and surely racist society in which people are not equal. Discrimination, prejudice, and injustice are ingrained in them and the isolation of townspeople has made the town in stasis, which has estranged them from each other (50).

This novel exposes the fact that segregation creates bitter feelings in the blacks and they have a sort of pressure torturing them in their life. It has affected them in every step of life. Similar opinion is expressed by Du Bois:

Segregation has affected all aspects of Black’s life. They go to separate churches, they live in separate sections, they are strictly separated in all public gatherings, they travel separately, and they are beginning to read different papers and books (124).

Racial prejudice and discrimination is a problem as revealed in the novel. Du Bois asserts that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line. Slavery is the cause of prejudice and discrimination toward Blacks” (15).

The novel reflects contemporary American society which is tinted with the color of racial prejudice and discrimination as a problem. Agarwal evaluates this novel with these remarks:

To kill a mocking bird by Harper Lee is a reflection upon contemporary American society. American society has always been enticing and enigmatic at the same time; attracting people all over the world to reveal the mystery and more the mystery is revealed the more (975).

In spite of the blacks’ hard work in agricultural and production fields, they are not respected because of their skin. They have not been provided with as much rights, justice and liberty as the whites have entertained. The racial prejudice is portrayed as an evil aspect. Considering Atticus Finch as his role model, Rapping states:

To appreciate the importance of *Mockingbird*, and of Atticus Finch as a role model, one must consider what was happening in America at the time. The

nation was grappling with the fact that many Americans were being denied basic civil rights simply because of their skin color (849).

Even after the end of the slavery system, the minds of the whites are still poisoned with the racial prejudice and discrimination. Treatments of the whites towards the blacks are unfair and full of prejudice. That's why the blacks are experiencing unpleasant discrimination and domination.

Most of the critics and writers seem to have enjoyed this novel because of its multifaceted aspects. The novel is considered as a timeless classic that deals with racism, human qualities, message for good deeds, maturity, immaturity, moral lesson, conflict, cultural differences and so on. Despite all these things, the racial prejudice is a prominent issue in this novel.

### **THEORETICAL LITERATURE REVIEW**

Allport defines prejudice as attitudinal bias, "an aversive or hostile attitude toward a person who belongs to a group, simply because he [or she] belongs to that group" (7). Feagin and Eck-berg assert that racial discrimination is behavioral, including "practices and actions of dominant race-ethnic groups that have a differential and negative impact on subordinate race-ethnic groups" (9). Dovidio and Gaertner view that the word "prejudice" is often used to refer to a preconceived, usually unfavorable, evaluation of another person (41). They mean to state that the very word is based on that person's political affiliation, sex, gender, beliefs, values, social class, age, disability, religion, sexuality, race, language, nationality, beauty, occupation, education, criminality, sport team affiliation or other personal characteristics. Auestad remarks that "prejudice is characterized by 'symbolic transfer', transfer of a value-laden meaning content onto a socially formed category and then on to individuals who are taken to belong to that category, resistance to change, and overgeneralization" (xii).

According to Morales, prejudices are "beliefs, thoughts, conducts or negative affections towards certain groups and their components" (45). For Eagly, "an attitude is an evaluative manifestation towards a socially relevant object" (695). The object of the attitude varies: it can be people, situations, social problems, or social groups and their members.

For Katz and Bradley, prejudices are "grouped within the category of stereotypes, which also include beliefs, evaluations and emotional responses" (180).

Both concepts - prejudice and stereotypes- are closely linked: the latter provides information that reinforces the prejudicial emotional reaction towards certain groups.

### **EXPLORING THE VOICES OF RACIAL PREJUDICE IN THE NOVEL**

Harper Lee has clearly given descriptions about racial prejudice in her novel. There are some victims who get racial prejudice from the other people in society; it is experienced not only by black people, but also the whites. There are several incidents and situations that are reflected as evidence of racial prejudice in Lee's novel. Atticus Finch is a sensible person. He does not like injustice; therefore he advocates in favour of a black person named Tom Robinson who is accused of raping a white girl Mayella. Francis does not like Atticus Finch for supporting Tom. Francis calls him a nigger-lover. People's use of the term 'nigger' hints at the bitter reality of racial prejudice and discrimination.

"Nigger-lover!" he yelled.

When stalking one's prey, it is best to take one's time. Say nothing, and as sure as eggs he will become curious and emerge. Francis appeared at the kitchen door.

"You still mad, Jean Louise?" he asked tentatively. "Nothing to speak of," I said.

Francis came out on the catwalk.

"You gonna take it back, Francis?" (110).

Scout is angry with Francis because Francis mocks her father as a nigger lover, even Scout does not know what the meaning of nigger lover is, but the way she says it sounds

rude and she can't accept her father's step for taking the case of a black man. That's why Scout forces him to take his words back.

The novel reveals that anything that has any relation with crime or something suspicious is supposed to have done or happened by a nigger even though they never meet him so in a real life situation. The white people have reared such an irrational concept in their mind without any reason except the case of race or color. Even in the court of judgement, judgement is not done by considering any proof or evidence or facts.

We can see how the sheriff had no heart to put a white man in jail along with Negroes. The white man crushes or breaks the law, but he is not supposed to be as bad as a black one. The punishment between the black and the white is different because of racial discrimination. If Boo is black, he may already be kept in jail. He is white so the punishment is changed, and he is locked in the courthouse. The same crime committed by a white man and a black man is treated differently. The following extract shows how people set up the place for the black and the white in the court:

The courthouse square was covered with picnic parties sitting on newspapers, washing down biscuit and syrup with warm milk from fruit jars. Some people were gnawing on cold chicken and cold fried pork chops. The more affluent chased their food with drugstore coca-cola in bulb-shaped soda glasses. In a far corner of the square, the Negroes sat quietly in the sun, dining on sardines, crackers, and the more vivid flavors of Nehi Cola. Mr. Dolphus Raymond sat with them (214).

In the court there were two sides of the place where the two sit. The one was for the white and the other for the black. It is unfair because white get the strategic one and the black got the other side. The surrounding where the white one is placed was comfortable and entertaining, where the black one is kept is poor. It is an unfair deed of the court.

Bob Ewell does not like Atticus to be appointed to advocate in favour of a black boy Tom. They think that it is not good for the white man to support the blacks. The whites believe that they should not help the blacks, shouldn't defend the blacks. It shows how law is handled and who handle it. The Negroes, having waited for the white people to go upstairs, began to come in. "Whoa now, just a minute," said a club member, holding up his walking stick. "Just don't start up them there stairs yet awhile" (218).

The Negroes have to give priority to the white people. The blacks get a chance to move ahead just after the whites have moved ahead. The blacks have to wait for a while to let the white ones go up the stairs. The way is the same for everybody, but the whites consider that they should be given a chance to walk first. The colored balcony ran along three walls of the courtroom like a second-story veranda, and from it we could see everything (219). The black people always remain in the second list after the white people in some activities in the court. The Negroes have to wait for the white people before they enter. And the other proof is how the sitting place is arranged. The white people get in the down stair and the black get in the upstairs. It means they are separated and cannot mix in one condition or place even in a law court. When there is a case between the white one and the black one, the judge declares his decision in favour the white one, and the black one is punished in spite of his innocence. The black one is always considered wrong:

Tom Robinson's a colored man, Jem. No jury in this part of the world's going to say, "We think you're guilty, but not very, on a charge like that. It was either a straight acquittal or nothing" (294).

Jem is told by her friend that Tom is a black person. Because of being black, the jury will not take decision in his favour. The same type of injustice is mentioned in the following

extract: In our courts, when it's a white man's word against a black man's, the white man always wins. They're ugly, but those are the facts of life (295).

It is not surprising and secret that the black man always loses the case with the white man. It is a bitter fact or reality of life. People know that the white are ugly or guilty, but they are not punished, therefore defending the black is in vain. It is impossible to fight with the white one. It clearly shows that even the judges are in the hands of the white ones. They are unfair.

We can also see an improper behaviour of the white towards the church of the black. The whites have no respect for the church where the blacks worship. "Negroes worship in it on Sunday and white gambled in it on weekdays" (157).

There is kind an improper act that whites do to the blacks. The church where the blacks go for prayer, the whites use it as a gambling place. The whites do not consider that the church is a holy place for both the whites and the blacks. They treat such a holy place negatively because of their negative attitudes towards the blacks.

The socialization of racism formed by some people is unfair. The white people thought that the black people were the black sheep for the society; therefore they did not want to keep any relation with the black people believing that the relation could be dangerous:

"Why, I run for Tate quick as I could. I knew who it was, all right, lived down yonder in that nigger-nest passed the house everyday. Jedge, I've asked this county for fifteen years to clean out that nest down yonder, they're dangerous to live around 'sides devaluin' my property (234).

In that statement the person uses the term "nigger-nest" and the nest is used for the place of animals or birds, not for human beings. So it is a very rude remark to talk about the black people that they are dangerous. The white believe that it is dangerous to allow the black people to live near their property and surrounding. They think that the blacks are like dangerous animals. It is their inhuman considerations about the whites.

In the novel, people who get bad treatment are not only the nigger but people who defend the nigger. They always get almost the same treatment from other people. "You gotta make me first!" he yelled. "My folks said your daddy was a disgrace an' that nigger oughta hang from the water-tank!" (102).

The prejudice spreads like a poison. The prejudice is not only influencing the adults, but also influencing the children. It creates hatred in their hearts towards the black without any reasons. It is shown by Cecil who treats Scout so badly because her father defends a nigger. Atticus's cousin tries to convince Scout that it is not her fault. From the conversation, it is clear that the mind set of children is influenced a lot by adults. The adults except Atticus desire that the children must have the same negative perception about nigger.

Most of the white persons thought that if a person has any sort of relation with a nigger, he or she should be treated like a Negro too. In this case, Atticus defended Tom Robinson who was a Negro. "With these attributes, however, he would not remain as inconspicuous as we wished him to: that year, the school buzzed with talk about him defending Tom Robinson, none of which was complimentary" (119). It is a painful experience of the family members of Atticus Finch that even the school teachers do not like Atticus for helping Tom. The teachers should admire him, but they do not use the words of complimentary for his supportive work. The teachers know that racial prejudice and discrimination is a sort of crime in the eye of the court and a sin in the eyes of religion and inhuman deed in the eyes of humanity, but in reality they can't admire and support the blacks:

We would squirm our way through sweating sidewalks crowds and sometimes hear, "There's his chillum." Or, "Yonder's some Finches." Turning to face our accusers, we would see only a couple of fanners studying the enema bags in the

Mayco Drugstore window. Or two dumpy countrywomen in straw hats sitting in a Hoover cart (180).

We can notice the effects of defending the negro get a lot of hatred which is expressed by improper words from the society. Complaint about the disagreement of Atticus' decision of defending the negro at first comes from his own family and when the main family member of Atticus go out they experience same bad treatment from the people. Besides from the cynical reaction from the people who do not like Atticus defending the negro, he also get a directly bad treatment.

There is a sort of enmity between Bob Ewell and Atticus, because Atticus takes a case of Tom. Tom is accused of raping Bob's daughter. Bob is angry with Atticus; therefore he spat in his face, threatened him to take his life. It shows that the whites are cruel not to only the blacks, but also the white who supports the black. It is the white persons' prejudice that is shaped by the society.

“What has happened?” “Nothing's happened. We're scared for you, and we think you oughta do something about him.” Atticus smiled wryly.”Do what? Put him under a peace bond?” “When a man says he's gonna get you, looks like means it” (292).

The Finch family is terrified by the white people. The family members are worried about Atticus who is threatened by a white man Bob. Terror that comes from people makes the children of Atticus become afraid and worried about his father.

## CONCLUSION

Nelle Harper Lee's popular novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* can be considered as a classic of modern American literature dealing with serious issues of rape, race and inequality in America. This novel reveals the context of racial prejudice, causes of racial prejudice and impacts of racial prejudice. The racial prejudice can be seen in the behaviors and treatments of the whites towards the blacks in Maycomb County. Such a racial prejudice can also be seen in the court that makes decision in favour of the whites in spite their guilt. The blacks are punished in spite of their innocence. If there is anything wrong or evil, people consider it is because of the black. They just believe so without any evidence, logic or justification. Such a bitter reality is presented in this novel. There is another bitter reality in the novel. If any white person supports the black one, the white one is supposed to be guilty or criminal. He or she is treated as badly as a black person is treated by the whites. The blacks are like the mocking birds with the virtues of innocence and goodness. Therefore, it is a sin or crime to kill a mocking bird. Having a racial prejudice towards the black people is like the act of killing an innocent singing bird. This is the main message of this novel.

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