

Thematic Analysis of Lee's Classic: To Kill a Mocking Bird

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Abstract

It is commonly acknowledged that Literature is the reflection of the society. It is indeed true that literature reflects the attitude and perception of the society where it is written. Literature mirrors the vices of the society with an intention to make the society realize its mistakes and make amendments. The vast literature, produced from time to time, bears evidence to the fact that man is prone to discrimination. Treating a person or particular group of people differently, especially in a worse way from the way in which you treat other people, because of their sexuality, skin, and class has, been core theme of the Harper Lee's master piece To Kill a Mocking Bird. The novel is told from Scout's perspective; through Scout, we witness the social construction of race, class, and gender. The novel continues to be taught in classrooms due to its illustration of themes about race, morality, and innocence. Harper Lee is one of the most expressive novelists in the history of African American literature. She has aptly delineate issues of Racism, Gender difference, and Class variance and vociferated against injustice lashed upon African American community. She describes physical and Psychological aspects of the blacks' lives in her novel. Her master piece is about the people whose voice has been silenced for a long time. Harper Lee's classic novel To Kill a Mockingbird revolve round a young girl named Jean Louise "Scout" Finch. Her father Atticus Fincher, a lawyer by profession, takes a case to defend a black man charged of raping a white woman, namely Nelle. Harper Lee was born on April 28, 1926 in Monroeville, Alabama. Lee drew inspiration from her own childhood: like Scout, Lee's father was also a lawyer. In spite of many similarities to Lee's life, this novel is not considered autobiographical. It is not only a novel about discrimination against race, but it also sheds light on laws, education system, bravery and social inequality and the paper will try to cover-up the issue.

Key words: Racism, Gender Discrimination, Social Inequality, law, education, Bravery.

Racism

"As you grow older, you'll see white men cheat black men every day of your life, but let me tell you something and don't you forget it—whenever a white man does that to a black man, no matter who he is, how rich he is, or how fine a family he comes from, that white man is trash" (mockingbird 252).

Racial discrimination as defined in international law is "any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life."²

Racism signifies the traumatic conditions under which African American lived in white America. There were systems of social and psychological boundaries that have critically exaggerated the lives of blacks particularly in African Americans. Judged from the white man's

standards of life and beauty, the black man's life became intolerable right from the days of slavery. The blacks irrespective of sex had realized the brutal reality of racism. Racism is a common factor in the lives of all blacks, irrespective of sex. The black man faced the hard fact, and cruel reality. Racism started in America when white masters of the land brought the first Africans in chains and used their labor to improve their coffers. As a result, black people ceased to exist as human being in the white world. The study of the origin of racism in the United States, Joel Kovel says that the white master "first reduced the human self of his black slave to a body and then the body to a thing; he dehumanized his slave, made him quantifiable, and thereby absorbed him into a rising world market of productive exchange"(18). All that was left to blacks was their African soul which was also taken away by impressive white values on them. Blacks lost their authentic self and almost invariably fostered feelings of inferiority.

In this novel, Scout and Jem, Scout's older brother, are under care and scrutiny of Calpurnia, who is their black housekeeper. Although Scout admits her differences with Calpurnia, Calpurnia serves and deals as a mother-figure for the children. She's respected and esteemed by Atticus, who admits that Calpurnia is educated. However, it is speech that parts the black community from the white. When Scout and Jem visits Calpurnia's church, Scout comes to know that Calpurnia uses a different speech when she communicates with her colleague churchgoers: "That Calpurnia led a modest double life never dawned on me. The idea that she had a separate existence outside our household was a novel one, to say nothing of her having command of two languages" (143). While Scout and Jem fight with the idea that Calpurnia speaks two different languages, Scout venerates Calpurnia for handling both languages since she asks to visit Calpurnia at her home.

The trial of Tom Robinson serves as the pivotal and highly-anticipated moment in the novel. Tom Robinson is charged of raping a young white woman named Mayella Ewell. The Ewell family has shortage of education and money, demonstrates the lower class. As the oldest child, Mayella becomes a mother figure for her younger siblings. In addition, the novel infers that Mayella is engaged in an incestuous relationship with her father. While Atticus signifies justice and morality, Bob Ewell epitomizes ignorance and racial prejudice. After all, Bob Ewell's full name is Robert E. Lee Ewell, named after the general who commanded the Confederate army. The name displays a noteworthy role considering the Confederate army represented southern slave states and their right to expand slavery, thereby emphasizing Bob Ewell's racism.

About Tom Robinson, we swiftly come to know that he is convicted based purely on the color of his skin. Earlier in the novel, Scout relates that Atticus views the Ewell family as "the disgrace of Maycomb" (33). However, as the Ewells are a white family, they are having a higher social status. During the trial, it is declared that Mayella seduces Tom Robinson, and her father, Bob Ewell, thought that his daughter would shift her warm feelings for a black man. In addition, Bob Ewell's reaction to his daughter kissing to Tom Robinson displays the fear of miscegenation. Atticus, however, strives for justice. Atticus explains the ugly truth to Jem and Scout: "In our courts, when it's a white man's word against a black man's, the white man always wins" (251-252). Atticus shows disgust with white people taking advantage of a black person's ignorance" (252). Tom Robinson is facing a trial and the death sentence because he is black.

Furthermore, Atticus makes it clear to his children that racism exists and tells Scout and Jem: 'In our courts, when it's a white man's word against a black man's, the white man always wins.'

Gender System

The right to feel safe in our workplaces, educational institutions, public places and homes is a basic human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women³. However, women still has to face discrimination, harassment and violence in everyday of life. To annihilate discrimination, harassment and violence women need to consolidate her position in fields like, education, economic, and politics.

The novel tries to bring in public eye another menace which very common in our life that is gender discrimination. Having lost her mother at an early age, Scout does not worry over her lack of femininity; however, her Aunt Alexandra does not accept her unladylike actions. While Atticus shows coldness towards Scout's tomboy-ish behavior, Aunt Alexandra makes it her mission to annihilate Scout's tomboy tendencies.

Scout shares a sort of animosity towards being called a "girl," she always thinks the word as an insult and inappropriate. When Aunt Alexandra is stays for a given amount of time, Scout sadly realizes she must follow her aunt's rules. *"I felt the starched walls of a pink cotton penitentiary closing in on me, and for the second time in my life I thought of running away. Immediately"* (155). The above quote discloses Scout's feeling and view towards femininity. By describing femininity as a penitentiary suggests that girlhood is like a jail that keeps her imprisoned, suffocating her at every point where you should have right to open your heart.

At the Missionary Society meeting which is hosted by Aunt Alexandra; Mrs. Grace Merriweather expresses concern regarding the Mrunas, an African tribe. The discussions and manner of their saying exposes the hypocrisy of these women: the ladies of the Missionary Society pity the Mrunas, yet they do not possess similar kind-heartedness towards the African American community in their own town. Scout in the beginning helps Calpurnia serve the ladies, but Aunt Alexandra interrupts and orders Scout to sit with them, which Scout remarks is *"part of her campaign to teach me be a lady"* (262). After the jury convicts Tom Robinson, Jem is distraught and wonders why good people, "like us and Miss Maudie," the Finches nearby neighbor, don't "serve the jury" (252). Atticus clarifies that Miss Maudie cannot serve because she is a woman; since the jury consisted of men, this point exposes gender discrimination. Like the African American community, the women in Maycomb faces inequality.

Social Inequality

A status hierarchy in which individuals and groups are classified on the basis of esteem and prestige acquired mainly through economic success and accumulation of wealth³. Scout on her first day of school had dispute with her teacher Miss Caroline. At lunchtime, Miss Caroline give some money to one of her students, Walter Cunningham. When Walter rejects the money, Scout explains to Miss Caroline that the Cunninghams suffer from poverty. Scout recollects that time when Atticus served as the Cunningham's lawyer. They had money to repay Atticus so Cunninghams pay Atticus in the form of stove wood and hickory nuts.

Later in story Jem invites Walter to their house for lunch. Scout disparages Walter Cunningham, implying that he is not on the same social level with her. When she criticizes his use of molasses on his food, Calpurnia scolds her for being rude. In defensive manner Scout

retorts, "He ain't company, Cal, he just a Cunningham." Scout's harsh words not only embarrass Walter, but also displays a gulf in status between the Cunninghams and the Finches. When lunch is finished Scout returns to her class and sees Miss Caroline "standing in the middle of the room, sheer horror flooding her face" (28). We come to know about a boy known as Burris Ewell who has lice, or more specifically "cooties." While Miss Caroline is sickened by Burris's hygiene, the rest of the class does not seem perturbed. As a matter of fact, one of the students, namely Little Chuck affirms "There ain't no need to fear, a cootie, ma'am. Ain't you ever seen one? ...you just go back to your desk and teach us some more" (28). Scout observes Burris, unfolding his physical characteristics: "his neck was dark gray, the backs of his hands were rusty, and his fingernails were black deep into the quick" (29). Burris Ewell's outward conditions reveal his pitiable status and humble living condition. The Ewells share likenesses with the African-American community: they lack education and money. Despite the Ewells' little education and dearth of money, they possess a higher elevation because they have white skin.

Education

At the very opening of the novel we come to know about the educational system in Maycomb. The first thing we observe is a clear conflict between institutionalized education and education in the home. When Scout surpasses every classmate, Scout is ahead of her classmates because Atticus has taught her to read and write, and Calpurnia has even taught her script. But when her teacher learns this, she punishes Scout and forbids her not to learn anything else at home, because her father has no acquaintance with teaching methods. Atticus leaves no stone unturned to inculcate a sense of morality in his children. He honestly answers to questions they ask whether relevant or irrelevant. He inspires their inquisitive minds by treating them as adults and boosts them to grow intellectually and morally as sound as possible. On the other hand, Scout's teacher has a very little knowledge of what children should be taught and what not. She rebukes Scout when she wrote in script and warns her that she should not be doing that for many years, because it isn't taught in school yet. Scout becomes upset and concludes that her teacher does not understand her and only wants to hold her back. Scout complains to Atticus about her education and he makes her clear that she must get an education, even though she might find the process frustrating. Obviously, Atticus comprehends the faults of the educational system, but also accepts it is necessary for his children to pass through this system to be a part of society.

The Law

Atticus is a lawyer by profession. He takes the case of Tom Robinson who is accused of rape and the whole story revolves around this charge. Atticus loses the trial. He knows that Tom Robinson is innocent yet he is punished for that which he has not done. He has staunch faith that, despite social inequalities, all men are equal in the courtroom. Atticus has a hope that amendment towards racial equality can and will be made in the courtroom in the near future.

He believes strongly hold the view that one should always remain in accordance with law order, law in return should be unbent but in certain situations should be bent. For example, Bob Ewell is allowed to hunt even in the off season because the town authorities know that if he is stopped from hunting, his children may starve. Another example is whether Boo Radley killed Bob Ewell is self-defense or not. However, Atticus fathoms, as does Heck Tate and Scout, that Boo should not be enforced to come to public attention and face harsh criticism of a layman. Therefore, it becomes compulsory to bend the law in this case to protect Boo.

Bravery

“It was times like these when I thought my father, who hated guns and had never been to any wars, was the bravest man who ever lived.” (mockingbird)

Bravery is another major theme of novel. Atticus has a Gandhian view that withholding oneself from violence is one of the highest forms of bravery. He believes eye for eye will make whole world blind. Atticus take very brave step when he decided to defend a black man in a society where it was dam sure to face the criticism and threats of violence. He displayed his braveness to face of danger when he kills the sick dog with a single shot. He depicted his real valour while facing the mob of men outside the jailhouse. Atticus teaches Scout to be brave and avert herself from fighting those who criticize her or her family. The children consider themselves to be brave when they approach to the Radley house, later they come to know that this was false bravery, and in fact, silly. Bob Ewell symbolises the greatest cowardice, as he both lies in the courtroom to protect himself and resorts to attack children in the darkness in order to make himself feel more of a man.

To sum up this bildungsroman with this quote which is its offshoot: “Sometimes the Bible in the hand of one man is worse than a whisky bottle in the hand of (another)... There are just some kind of men who - who're so busy worrying about the next world they've never learned to live in this one, and you can look down the street and see the results.” (*mockingbird*)

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