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Gender Benders in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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Abstract:

The discourse on gender and gender roles has always been a subject of great controversy. Society and social structures dictate roles and parameters which make life consistent and predictable. Normative gender behavior curbs an individual's freedom for personal expression and hinders the formation of one's own identity. *To kill a Mocking Bird* By Harper Lee, is a work that subverts normative gender roles. Within the framework of gender studies this paper looks into the ideas of masculine Hegemony and Emphasized femininity as depicted in the book. The paper aims to locate how gender roles and gender stereotypes established and exercised by the Southern American society dictate and enforce strict parameters of gendered behaviour on its inhabitants. This research will further attempt to understand how the male characters and the Female characters of Harper lee defy the ideas of Masculine hegemony and emphasized femininity through subverting gender stereotypes.

Keywords: Harper Lee, Hegemonic Masculinity, Emphasized femininity, gender, stereotype, *to kill a Mocking Bird*.

"To kill a mocking bird" by Harper Lee is a work that transgresses boundaries. Through its narrative, it attempts to threaten legal, racial and gender frontiers. Deeply planted in the concepts of racism, culture, class, society, and parenthood this work through the representation of its characters also brings forth issues of gender and normative gender roles. Society and social structures dictate roles and parameters that enforce normative behavior. It makes one's life consistent and predictable by hindering the freedom for personal expression thereby curbing the formation of one's own identity. Such rigid definitions and gendered roles has always been a

major factor for pushing the male and the female sex into polarities thereby, allowing no middle position in exercising one's gender.

The paper looks into how the characters of Harper Lee transgress these gender boundaries drawn upon them by the Southern American society of the 1930s. It explores the concepts of 'hegemonic masculinity' and 'Hegemonic femininity' which was later termed as 'Emphasized femininity' and also looks into how Gender Stereotypes are established and exercised through dictating and performing distinctive roles for men and women.

The male characters in this novel subvert the ideas of Masculine hegemony and the female characters defy the ideas of Emphasized femininity through bending gender roles and stereotypes. They are true gender benders. Simone de Beauvoir in her book "The Second Sex" tries to locate the source of these profoundly distinct gender roles. In Book 1 titled 'myth and facts' she tries to explain how the female human occupied a subordinate role, she traces biology, psychoanalysis, and historical materialism. These disciplines reveal indisputable 'essential' differences between man and woman but provide no justification as to why women are treated inferior. The most important aspect of her work relevant to the female characters in Harper Lee's work is that there is no 'predetermined female essence' and 'one is not born a woman but rather becomes one', this concept of having no predetermined essence is also applicable to the other half of the population. Though both the male and the female sex are born without a predetermined essential nature, what confines them to rigid gender roles and behaviour is certain socio-economic factors and the repetition of certain stylized acts. For a woman she is enslaved by the rules and regulations that patriarchal society and men impose on her and as a result she turns ignorant of the potential she has for her own freedom and over time develops a sense that these rigid gender roles imposed on her are natural and is therefore the true female nature.

As for the other half, Hegemonic masculinity embodies the most honourable way of becoming a man. The characteristics of Masculinity that become the idealized norm are those acted out by the most powerful men and it demanded all other men to position themselves in relation to it. The idealized statuses are likely to be of those men who are white middle class and heterosexual in a white southern society, whereas universally the idealized man is the one who is physically and mentally strong, loud, built, active and heterosexual. All other masculine styles

are rendered inadequate or inferior. The ideas of hegemonic masculinity harm and alienate those men who do not conform to this popularly accepted idea of being a male as it narrows their opportunities to choose their enactments of masculinity.

The plot is set in south Alabama, a southern district during the great depression. In this setting the Maycomb society dictates strict gender rules and inhabitants don't cross the boundaries between masculinity and femininity, these rigid barriers in Maycomb stem from the Archetype of a 'southern man' and through the popular image of a 'southern belle'.

The Archetype of a southern man in the 1930's was a widely used image in American literature. In the popular work *Gone with the wind* written by Margaret Mitchell the idea of an upper-class southern man is clearly portrayed. The character Rhett Butler is a true example, he is extremely romantic and adventurous. He was a man of chivalry and at the slightest insult would lose his temper, also possessed a great physique and vigour. However, the male characters in the novel do not act in accordance to this popular idea of the Southern man. They emerge in the novel as true gender benders. They defy the ideas of masculinity and do not perform the gender roles popularly accepted in the Maycomb country. Masculine hegemony takes its form through creating Fantasy figures, In Maycomb it is a condition where a heterosexual, white male occupies the centre and all other male figures are rendered as less male, thereby being pushed to the periphery. These ideas were widely prevalent and practiced among its inhabitants the selected characters Atticus Finch, Uncle James and Uncle Jack are treated unmanly as they lack so many of the markers of manliness prescribed by the society, they live in.

Atticus Finch, the most important male character in the novel, is much adored and appreciated all across the literary world and is at times given a larger than life status. He is assigned a number of titles from being a Christ-like figure, a saviour of the black marginalized men and women of Maycomb to being an ideal father and a wise mentor to Scout and Jem. However, the most striking aspect of Atticus is his gender-bending behaviour. He is considered less man by the inhabitants of Maycomb as well as by his children. This is because he does not conform to the popularly established code of behaviour if been born a man must adhere to. Scout states that:

Our father worked in an office, not in a drug store, Atticus did not drive the dump-truck for the country, he was not a sheriff, he did not farm work in a garage. Or did anything that could possibly arouse the admiration of anyone. He never went hunting, he did not play poker or fish or drink or smoke. He sat in the living room and read. (Lee 34)

This statement of Scout on Atticus gives the readers a crystal-clear character Sketch. What led to a remark of this kind by his daughter are the normative ideas of being man imposed by masculine hegemony and engrained into the minds of the people, In these lines there is a parallel voice that claims, to be man enough and to arouse a sense of admiration in Maycomb one must work in a drug store, drive huge trucks, be a sheriff or work in a farmhouse, one must be engaged either in hunting or in sports, must drink smoke or play poker. Passive reading was not considered a manly attribute. Further examining these roles reveal to the readers a common thread which is physical strength. All the above-mentioned activities demand athleticism and vigour and universally across all cultures and nations being physically strong is a much-desired quality of the male race, a quality that makes one truly masculine. Atticus displays none of these qualities. This is not because Atticus is incapable of such behaviour. It is not his weakness-physical or mental that projected him as less of a man in the eyes of the Maycomb inhabitants; in fact, Atticus was both physically and mentally strong. At a particular instance in the novel, Atticus shoots a mad dog out of necessity. He was brilliant in accomplishing this task and from this; the readers along with his children Scout and Jem learn that Atticus was at once the deadliest shot in the Maycomb country. He gave up hunting because he believed that God did not give him an unfair advantage over any living creature to shoot it for his sheer pleasure. Atticus who is by nature a good hunter was never proud of his ability of shooting which was considered extremely heroic and manly among his people. Atticus truly believed, practiced and taught his children that true Courage is not a man with a gun.

Indirectly Harper Lee is trying to say that confronting a mad dog is easy, it involves a concrete action like picking up a gun and shooting, a mere display of physical strength and the unfair advantage man possess over other living creatures. But true courage is much beyond being physically strong. Atticus possessed the kind of courage that gave him the strength to confront as well as to stand for the cause of humanity, Atticus possessed plenty of it, but this didn't add to

making his masculinity stronger, rather only kept it at further stake as he used this to defend a black man named Tom Robinson.

The conventional white southern male of the 1930s romanticized the Lost Cause of the Confederacy and adhered to a strict code of chivalry that required the use of violence to assuage insults to honour, particularly the honour of white southern women. According to this chivalric ideology, the greatest threat to white womanhood was black male predation, and the manly response was the lynching, not only of alleged black rapists but of other black men whose behaviour seemed to question white supremacy. (Adams 239)

Atticus puts up a strong fight for the Tom Robinson case and defends him at the court with all his might. But this passive display of courage is not acknowledged or taken as a marker for Atticus's manliness and the fact that the white, middle class, heterosexual, upper-class southerner he is defending a black man kept his manliness at an ambiguous position, he is not only failing to protect a white southern belle from rape but is also fighting in the court for a black man who is accused of raping a white woman. All through the case, Atticus chose the path of non-violence, which is very unlike the archetype of the southern man as he is conventionally expected to adhere to a strict code of chivalry, violence and with all his might protect the white woman.

Atticus's brother, Uncle James who is to a large extent a replica of his brother is also an exception to the archetype of a southern man. They are both men of learning and are indulged in the passive pursuit of acquiring knowledge. Passivity stereotypically believed of being a female attribute is a trait found in both these men. Women right from the beginning of time were given the position of a passive brainwashed victim of patriarchy, and it is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the 'southern belle'. Here both these men are found to be extremely passive, to be precise they choose to be passive. A typical man in the May comb society was engaged in intensive labour, but it can come with the counterclaim that most men in Maycomb were less educated and therefore performed labour intensive Jobs, but even men of Atticus's rank, Like Cecil Jacobs father, played football. When the rest of the Maycomb men participated in the locality's football games Atticus sat in the gallery along with the women and children. Atticus spends most of his leisure time reading.

Coming back to Uncle James, he was a favourite to Scout and Jem. Being a calm and gentleman, he was one of those few men of science who never terrified Scout, probably because he never behaved like a doctor. Whenever he performed a minor service for Jem and Scout as removing a splinter from a foot, he would tell them exactly what he was going to do, used to give them an estimation of how much it would hurt and explain the use of any medical instrument he employed. Uncle James displayed a large amount of patience. He was never aggressive, had no outbursts and clearly understood the tribulations of childhood Scout and Jem went through, he was supportive and genteel with the children and often showered them with gifts.

To further establish these male characters of Harper Lee as subverting the ideas of Masculine Hegemony, a clear examination of the Archetype of a southern man is much needed and also an inquiry into the Jim Crow code of white Chivalry:

Southern white males conventionally embraced violence more than their northern and western white counterparts. This was obviously the case in the Jim Crow South, as white men used violence to enforce a white supremacist social order. But even long after the end of Jim Crow, social science finds that southern white men are more inclined than non southern white men to use violence in response to verbal insults and that southern institutions are more likely to excuse and forgive honour violence than are non-southern institutions. One wins an argument with fists, not words. (Adams 242)

The male characters of Harper Lee, Atticus Finch and Uncle James are clearly seen to embrace non-violence and believed more in the power of words and knowledge than in the power of fists. Major studies done on the southern man clearly helped delineate the characteristics of the conventional southerner. Emmaline Gross in a detailed study conducted on southern masculinity through the works of W.J Cash and Bertram Wyatt Brown states

The southern man is individualistic, independent and resentful of authority. Most importantly, as Cash emphasizes, the southern man —did not (typically speaking) think; he felt; and discharging his feelings immediately, he developed no need or desire for intellectual culture in its own right (Cash 99). (31)

The male characters in this novel are less driven by emotions, nowhere in the novel are they seen to discharge their emotions or charge forward driven by them, Atticus is for the most

part extremely rational and less emotional, he thinks before he talks and is calm even when faced with the greatest of atrocities. The only time Scout witnesses her father being a little mad is when he was accused of not raising his children in the right manner, to which Atticus replies that he is doing the best he can as a single parent. Many a time Atticus performs both the role of a mother as well as a father to his children. Uncle Jack also exercises these characteristics by being extremely patient and calm as well as caring deeply for the children. Both men feel the need and desire for intellectual culture. Atticus truly believed in the power of words and education and gave his children an equal education. Taught his daughter and son the power and importance of reading and did a great deal of reading himself.

An Antebellum southern Belle by convention was supposed to sit at home and embrace her gentle femininity, They were expected to marry respectable young gentlemen who possessed a large fortune, and become ladies who would dedicate their lives to their family and society, 'The Southern Belle archetype is characterized by Southern hospitality a cultivation of beauty and a flirtatious yet chaste demeanor '(Spears, 23) Harper Lee presents us with female characters that not only defy the ideas of emphasized femininity dictated by the idea of a 'southern belle' but constructs a whole new identity through it. The characters are Jean Louise Finch popularly called Scout, Miss Maudie and Miss Alexandra

In order to fully understand Scout, the protagonist of the novel as a gender bender we must place her in contrast with the character Aunt Alexandra who could be one exception to the claim, yet still, possess a few gender bending traits. Aunt Alexandra completely disapproves of Scout, but the more she tries imposing the ideas of femininity on Scout, the little girl turns out to be more tomboyish. Primarily, Scout rebels because Alexandra wanted her to become a genteel Southern belle.

Aunt Alexandra was fanatical on the subject of my attire. I could not possibly hope to be a lady if I wore breeches; when I said I could do nothing in a dress, she said I wasn't supposed to be doing things that required pants. Aunt Alexandra's vision of my deportment involved playing with small stoves, tea sets, and wearing the Add-A-Pearl necklace she gave me when I was born; furthermore. (lee, 89)

From this passage, Aunt Alexandra's conception of femininity is crystal clear, an ideal southern woman according to her wore a dress and sat passive and idle embracing her femininity, she strictly orders Scout that she is not supposed to do anything that couldn't be done in a dress. Aunt Alexandra believed girls should play with stoves and tea sets and definitely not walk around in breeches and climb trees. Since Atticus was a single father, there was no female presence in his life except for that of Scout's, though they had a maid Calpurnia. Aunt Alexandra emphasizes the point that if Scout behaved more like a woman and wore a dress she could be a ray of sunshine in her father's lonely life. She is defining Scout in terms of Atticus. By defining Scout in terms of her father, Alexandra uses a patriarchal assessment. The irony is that according to Atticus, Scout is already a ray of sunshine in his life. Atticus is extremely proud of his daughter and her Tomboyish nature is what he believed made his daughter unique.

I should be a ray of sunshine in my father's lonely life. I suggested that one could be a ray of sunshine in pants just as well, but Aunty said that one had to behave like a sunbeam, that I was born good but had grown progressively worse every year. (Lee 89)

Due to the extreme concern for Scout's inappropriate behaviour, she moves in with the Finches so that she can inflict some feminine influence on her niece. When Scout demands a reason for her aunt to move into their household Aunt Alexandra states that 'It won't be many years, Jean Louise before you become interested in clothes and boys" (Lee 137)

From these examples, we can infer that being a woman in the south was all about appearance and strict dress code which Scout was more than pleased to discard as she clearly states she can be sunshine in her father's life in pants as much as in a dress. She clearly states that she will never be interested in clothes or boys ever. Scout choosing a boyish Attire and exercising masculine traits despite being criticized for it is her most defining gender-bending trait

Scout's way of dealing with anger is also unconventional. At one instance in the novel, Scout enters into a fight with her cousin Francis who she is not really fond of. Francis ridicules Scout's friend calling 'him a little runt 'who is tossed back and forth between his relatives during summer. When Scout disagrees to this Francis addresses her as mighty dumb and calls Atticus a nigger lover. This infuriates Scout and she challenges a fight with Francis. She chases him down

the catwalk, grabs him and this time she connects with her fists and splits the skin of her knuckles on his front teeth and then she swings with her right fist when she is suddenly stopped by her uncle. Apart from this Scout is always in the company of men, she spends most of her time with her brother and her friend Dill. All along the novel, we have no references for Scout having any female friends of her age. She enjoys going on in adventures with them, shooting Air rifles, rolling in tires and climbing trees. Whenever they enacted little plays in the backyard, Scout was assigned supporting female roles by her brother who was always in charge; Scout was never happy about this and in fact, in real life was more notorious than her brother or Dill. At one instance when her teacher unfairly punishes her, she takes her anger out on a fellow classmate by rubbing his nose on dirt. The boy had no choice but surrender to her power and he failed to return her punches. The above instances illustrate Scout displaying a strong bend towards masculine traits and therefore are in no doubt a gender bender. As per Emmaline Gross 'The American south produces a woman whose appearance is emphasized from being a baby to the detriment of her talents, personality and intellectual capability.

The above-mentioned criterion for determining one's femininity was not appealing to Scout because she was least bothered about her appearance and did not do anything to enhance it; Even Atticus fed Scout with materials that sharpened her intellect and abilities more than her looks. Whereas Aunt Alexandra, a contrasting figure to Scout, if closely examined possesses some gender-bending traits herself. Though Alexandra professes the ideas of a southern belle and claims to embrace gentle femininity, she is slightly a hypocrite. Through her actions she progresses away from the concepts of patriarchy, and does not adhere to it either. Aunt Alexandra is not a model wife, she ignores her husband Jimmy. Scout comments, "I never saw any reason to take notice of him. Neither did Aunt Alexandra" (Lee 85). When she came to stay with the Finches out of mere curiosity Scout asked her if she missed her husband, she remarks that she will never and he will keep the place going in her absence. Uncle Jimmy present or not did not make much difference to any of the Finches, though not much information is available on Uncle Jimmy he seems like a passive, submissive man who is subdued by his wife and subduing your husband is not an act a woman who embraces femininity and glorifies patriarchy would ever attempt to commit. He never spoke much; the only words Scout ever heard him speak 'is get off the fence'.

Aunt Alexandra further turns a gender bender when she teaches her Grandson Francis to cook. She encourages her grandson to learn the art of cooking. Francis explains to Scout "Grandma says all men should learn to cook, that men oughta be careful with their wives and wait on 'em When they don't feel good" (Lee 90). This statement is extremely ironical. It destroys the very notion of a patriarchal society that wives are meant to serve their husbands and it is the wife's role to wait on him. The fact that Alexandra taught her grandson the other way round clearly establishes her as a gender bender though at times she appears conventional, occupying a middle position.

Miss Maudie is a major influence on the character Scout; at times she plays a mother-like figure to Atticus's children. She is someone along with Atticus who encourages the gender-bending behavior in Scout. Both Atticus and Miss Maudie playing parental figures to Scout could be the reason why Scout, right from a young age develops unconventional gender-bending behaviors. A study by Flucher (2007) found that parents gender ideology and how they divide their roles regarding parenting, labour and household works have a huge impact on shaping their children's ideas on gender. Parent's ideologies on gender are the best predictors of children's gender –role attitudes. And among this division childcare is the best predictor of children's career option, when mothers tend to exercise more participation in child caring and nurturing and fathers exercised an altogether different kinds of role, children develop more rigid and stereotypical ideas on gender. There are many instances in the novel where Atticus displays his ideologies on gender to his children. He taught both his children to read, gave them equal education and encouraged them to be lawyers. When Atticus gifted his children an air rifle on Christmas, he did not segregate Scout and got her a more feminine toy, like a doll a kitchen set or a stuffed animal. He knew his daughter was an adventurous young girl who loved overalls, muddy shoes and outdoor activities; therefore, he let his daughter be her true self and never tried imposing the ideas of the southern belle. Similarly, Miss Maudie is Scout's closest female friend apart from their maid Calpurnia and she exercises a similar influence on Scout.

Miss Maudie was part of the southern crowd where 'fragrant ladies rocked slowly fanned gently and drank cool water '. Whereas Miss Maudie could never sit still and embrace fragile femininity as perceived by the Maycomb crowd, she loved everything about the outdoors and

never believed that a woman's duty was confined to the indoors. She loved everything that grew on earth and was a great gardener:

Miss Maudie hated her house, time spent indoors was time wasted. She was a widow, a chameleon lady who worked in her flower beds in an old straw hat and men's overalls, but after her five o'clock bath she would appear on the march and reign over the street in magisterial beauty. (Lee,78)

When it came to language, Miss Maudie spoke without fuss, her speech was direct and she spoke her mind out 'her speech was crisp for a may comb inhabitant' (Lee 45). But this crisp talk of Miss Maudie was not used to propagate gossips and meanness like the ladies of her neighbourhood, but rather was always used for a good cause. When Miss Stephanie, Miss Maude's neighbor tries to spread tales of Boo Radley's fearsomeness, Miss Maudie was not ready to take it and let this go on:

Stephanie Crawford even told me once she woke up in the middle of the night and found him looking in the window at her. I said what did you do, Stephanie, move over in the bed and make room for him? That shut her up a while. (Lee 54)

Miss Maudie's joke embarrasses Miss Stephanie into holding her tongue. Miss Maudie is outspoken and loud and this was not expected out of a proper southern white lady. Miss Maudie was also a strong independent woman; she lived alone in her house and spends most of the time engaged in physical activities which included gardening. Her mental strength and her positive attitude towards life, in general, were clearly portrayed by Harper Lee in the part where her house was on fire. When her house is half burnt down in the fire, she comments, "Always wanted a smaller house, Jem Finch. Gives me more yard, just think, I'll have more room for my azaleas now!" (Lee 45). She faces every situation with practicality and unwavering positivity. She refuses to sit down cry and be a 'Damsel in distress'

Miss Maudie when insulted by her neighbors for gardening; she quotes the Holy Bible right back at them to defend her and wears the grin of utmost wickedness. Scout trusts and values her advice unlike the other women in the neighborhood who were engrossed in rumors and in their neighbours private life. Scout reflects upon her relationship with Miss Maudie, saying, "She

had an acid tongue in her head" but "Jem and I had considerable faith in Miss Maudie" as "she was our friend". (Lee 45)

Being a strong woman, Miss Maudie expresses her opinions freely and is not afraid to row the boat in the other direction. At a ladies' tea party, she is upset by the women being intolerant and racist towards their black help and snaps at one of the women complaining about her cook. Scout recollects that, when Miss Maudie was angry her brevity was icy and her grey eyes become as cold as her voice. Miss Maudie is disgusted by the prejudiced opinions of people and does not adhere to them. She also supports Scout and helps her to stand up against forces that try to push Scout into stereotypical assumptions and judgments about others. From this, we can delineate the characteristics of Miss Maudie as opposed to the popular ideas of a southern belle. None of these characters be it Miss Maudie, Aunt Alexandra or Scout adheres to the conventional notion of being a woman practiced among the people in Maycomb. They validate one is not born a woman and there is no predetermined female essence, gender is nothing but a social construct which is reemphasized through gender roles and stereotypes.

From the detailed analysis of the following characters Atticus Finch, Jean Louise Finch, Uncle James, Uncle Jack, Aunt Alexandra and Miss Maudie, the gender-bending traits that these characters possess and display are clearly evident and established therefore. The male characters in this novel clearly subvert the ideas of Masculine hegemony and the female characters defy the ideas of Emphasized femininity as prevalent in the southern Maycomb society, therefore, it is evident that these gender roles are socially constructed and are therefore unnatural. There is no predetermined female or male essence, femininity and masculinity are exercised through certain gendered roles which are the expected attitudes and behaviours a society associates with each sex. When the sociological concept of role is combined with the biological concept of sex, misunderstanding and stereotypes originate. This *Work to kill a mocking bird* can be further analyzed within the framework of Feminism, Racism and cultural studies as this paper only looks into it through the ideas of gender. Further studies can also be done on the character Jem as well as on the minor characters in the novel.

Harper Lee, herself is a reflection of her characters, though born and brought up in a conventional society that dictated strict gender boundaries, she never acquired the life of a conventional woman. She gives her character the freedom she enjoyed to threaten these

boundaries and shows her readers that the paradigms of masculinity and femininity are open to interpretations, and fluctuations.

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