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Racial Elements in Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*

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Harper Lee's novel *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960) depicts three crucial years in the life of its young narrator Jen Louise "Scout" Finch, in the small American Southern town, Maycomb in the 1930s. Recalling her experiences as a six year old from an adult perspective, the narrator exposes the issues of racism that she observed as a child in Maycomb. One can visualize life in the segregated South from Lee's description of the racially divided town and the strict class system enforced there. Lee speaks of three communities in the novel - the white folk, the black community and the white "trash." Apart from the superficial peace among the three, there exists underneath a combination of racial prejudice and enmity among them. In my paper, I have dealt with the effects of Racism on Maycomb citizens such as Tom and Helen Robinson, Calpurnia, Dolphus Raymond, Boo Radley etc. I have also linked the racial theme to other important themes in the novel like the themes of education and prejudice and the mockingbird symbol in the title of the novel. The mockingbird metaphor in the title represents innocent persons injured or destroyed by persecution in general and the African American community in particular.

Harper Lee's 1961 Pulitzer Prize winning novel *To Kill A Mockingbird* is set in Maycomb, a small American Southern town in Alabama. As an older woman, Jen Louise "Scout" Finch, the narrator, reflects back on three decisive years in her childhood in Alabama during the 1930s. The story takes place from the time Scout is aged 6 to 9. The novel deals with the ramifications of racism that she observed as a child in her hometown of Monroeville, Alabama.

Scout's father Atticus Finch is Alabama town's principled lawyer with high moral standards. The Finch family is cast off when Atticus defends Tom Robinson, a crippled black man, who has been falsely charged with raping a white woman, Mayella Ewell. Scout, her elder brother Jim and their summer friend Dill are perplexed by hearsay about their secluded neighbor Boo Radley. Atticus and his children regard Calpurnia, their black housekeeper, as a part of their family, though Aunt Alexandra regards her little more than a slave and an unpleasant influence on Scout.

By the 1930s, most people in the South had only a faint memory of the American Civil War (1861 – 65) fought between the Northern states and the Southern states. But the war did not put an end to racial segregation, particularly not in the Deep South. The Jim - Crow laws and the Black Codes enacted in the South intensified the legal segregation between African – Americans and white Americans in all public spheres. Although racially stimulated organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan were being opposed in the 1930s, racism was still flourishing excessively throughout the Southern states. Again, the South, which was still dependent on its agricultural traditions, was rocked violently by the Great Depression, a worldwide Economic Depression. American President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 formally put an end

to slavery. But even after a century in 1960, when the novel *To Kill A Mockingbird* was published, African – Americans were deprived of justice. Though the Civil Rights Movement was just taking shape in the 1950s, and its principles were beginning to find a voice in American courtrooms and the law, the South vehemently supported slavery. Richard Wright’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938) also presents the racism of the South where many blacks were share croppers.

The novel *To Kill A Mockingbird* offers a glimpse of the deeply ingrained racism of Maycomb. Racism is being displayed in an open and subtle manner through the speeches and actions of the citizens of Maycomb. The layout of the town itself is based on racial discrimination. The town is composed of three communities – the white folk, the black community and the white “trash.” The Negroes are situated in a small camp quite out of the town “past the dump, ... some five hundred yards beyond the Ewells (p,188)” which shows that they are somewhat less valued than the local dump.

Blacks are not permitted to co- mingle with whites in public settings. This is exemplified in the courthouse physical separation of races and the absence of Negroes in the jury. Again the Negroes have to sit in the gallery of the court room. There was little opportunity for African Americans to advance themselves in the South. Schools were segregated between whites and blacks. The blacks were not allowed to attend white high schools. In the novel, Calpurnia tells the children she is only one of four members of her church who can read.

Throughout the novel the blacks are referred to as “niggers,” and those who support them or show them any kindness, “nigger lovers.” Strangely, the churchwomen form a missionary circle to support the wonderful work being done with the heathen savages in Africa, but express their disapproval for those who do anything for the black residents in their town. This reveals the insincerity of the ladies of the Missionary Circle.

There are many people in Maycomb who are racist because they think of Negroes as a dishonoured race and are mostly undependable and dishonest. An example of such a character who is severely racist is Mrs. Dubose who lives next door to the Finches. Her intolerance of white and black people has become her characteristic. She insults people in many ways but becomes most spiteful when it comes to matters of race. Mrs. Dubose calls all black people “trash” without exception. She has insulted Jem once by saying that his father was “no better than the niggers and trash he works for!” (p,102) causing Jem to rush wildly through her garden.

Another character who discriminates between the whites and the blacks is Aunt Alexandra. She looks down on both African Americans and low social economic groups. She feels that she and the whole Finch family are above them, and she insists that Scout should behave accordingly. Aunt Alexandra refuses to let Atticus’ children visit Calpurnia’s home because it would be inappropriate for white children to interact with the black community in their neighborhood. As Claudia Johnson notes in ‘The Secret Courts of Men’s Hearts: Code and Law in Harper Lee’s *To Kill A Mocking Bird*, ‘Aunt Alexandra brings with her a code that delineates very narrowly ladies and gentlemen, black and white people, ‘good’ families and trash’.

Although Lee depicts these characters as real racists such that their speeches and actions are aimed at segregating and dishonouring the black community, there are different shades of racial discrimination among the white citizens of Maycomb. For instance, Mr. Underwood, the editor

and printer of Maycomb's town newspaper *The Montgomery Advertiser*, is known to despise black people. But he is prepared to protect Atticus and Tom Robinson from the lynch mob with a shot gun. Besides, after Tom is killed during his attempt to escape prison, Mr. Underwood writes a compassionate editorial where he compares Tom's death to the senseless slaughter of songbirds by hunters and children.

Again, unlike other white characters in the novel, Mr. Dolphus Raymond opposes racial segregation by marrying a black woman and having mixed children. But he feels the need to excuse his choice to marry a black woman by pretending to be an alcoholic carrying around a paper bag with a bottle of coca cola inside.

The main racial conflict originates from the Tom Robinson court case. "I'm simply defending a Negro - his name's Tom Robinson" (p, 75). With these words Atticus informs Scout of his life - transforming task of standing up to the prejudice and racism that pervades Maycomb in the 1930s. Tom Robinson is a 25 year old physically impaired African - American man who works as a cotton picker. Mayella Ewell, a white girl ruled by an alcoholic and violent father Bob Ewell, is offered help by Tom Robinson in her household chores. Tom Robinson is perhaps the only man who has ever shown her any respect. But misinterpreting this, Mayella makes ill - suited proposals to him. When this is discovered, her father forces her to turn the situation to their advantage by accusing Tom of rape. Bob Ewell makes Tom guilty of rape because Mayella "had tempted a Negro" and in doing so she had broken a "rigid and time honoured code."

During his testimony, Tom relates that he felt sorry for the girl. The all - white jury finds this statement so disturbing. The white community feels that Tom is outwitting his social station. They themselves would not feel the urge to help an Ewell, the most despised of the white population. So they assume that the only reason for Tom to offer such help would be for a wicked purpose. Scout, realizing for the first time the poisoned race relations in the segregated South, informs the reader that Robinson's death is destined beforehand. The white jury does not believe that a black person has a just claim to a fair trial and would happily lynch him if not stopped. "Atticus had used every tool available to free men to save Tom Robinson, but in the secret courts of men's hearts Atticus had no case. Tom was a dead man the minute Mayella Ewell opened her mouth and screamed."(p,241).

Although Atticus actually manages to prove the innocence of Tom Robinson, the white jury still refuses to declare the innocence of a black man over a white resulting in the most flagrant testimony to the fact that the town of Maycomb held racial discrimination above justice. Tom becomes a victim to a racist society.

We also learn that the townsfolk are eschewing Tom's wife Helen and refusing to employ her, because of the allegation against her husband. This reaction promotes the victimization of Tom's family.

Another subtle example of racial discrimination the reader sees is in the treatment of Calpurnia, a black woman, the housekeeper of the Finch family. Although she is treated fairly, it is apparent that she is considered to be on a lower social level than the Finches. When Atticus takes Calpurnia to Tom Robinson's home, she has to sit in the back seat so as not to appear as Atticus' equal. She does not eat at the same table with the Finch family although she has been part of it since Jem was two. She is clearly loved by the family but by no means is she their equal. Issac

Saney in his article, 'The case against *To Kill A Mocking Bird*,' elaborates on this view stating that, 'the most egregious characteristic of the novel is the denial of the history of agency of Black people. They are robbed of their role as subjects of history, reduced to mere objects who are passive hapless victims; mere spectators and bystanders in the struggle against their own oppression and exploitation.'

However Lee manages to demonstrate that prejudice on the basis of race does not itself have racial boundaries. Scout and Jem are also discriminated against when, Lula, a black female character at Calpurnia's church tells them to go back to the white church. This one person manages to make Scout and Jem inferior and that they should leave. This shows that some black people feel that segregation should exist. This also presents the realization that some black people dislike white people as much as white people hate them.

Although racism is probably the biggest theme of the novel, Lee connects the racial theme to other themes in the novel such as education, prejudice and use of the mocking bird metaphor. The education motif comes up early in the novel and lingers until very near the end. In the course of their growing up the children do a great deal of learning, but little of that learning takes place in school. Their most effective "teacher" is life itself, their experience. Dill is made sick during the trial by the way in which Mr. Gilmer, the prosecuting attorney smirkingly cross examines Tom Robinson. As Dolphus Raymond tells Scout, "Things haven't caught up with that one's instinct yet. Let him get a little older and he won't get sick and cry."(p,201). Lee seems to imply that children learn important lessons about life through the examples of others, not through school.

Racism and its effects are also related to the theme of prejudice. Harper Lee describes prejudice as "Maycomb's usual disease." There are people who fear and hate, such as the members of the jury. They convict an innocent man of rape because of his race. On the other hand, Atticus and Calpurnia show understanding and sympathy towards those who might be different or less fortunate. Atticus forms his opinions of people based on their behavior and not on their background. Unlike Alexandra, who calls poor people like the Cunninghams "trash" because of their social station, Atticus tells his children that any white man who takes advantage of a blackman's ignorance is "trash".

Finally Harper Lee links the loudly obtrusive racial discrimination shown by the all – white jury in Tom Robinson's case to the mockingbird symbol in the title. In the novel, Atticus Finch advises his children that it is a 'sin to kill a mocking bird' because mocking birds are gentle harmless creatures and all they do is sing beautiful songs. Boo Radley, who is imprisoned in his own home by his family, turns into a victim for any weird and unfortunate circumstances that occur in Maycomb. He receives a punishment far greater than any court could have given him. Towards the end of the novel, Boo saves Atticus' children from the murderous attack of Bob Ewell and kills him. Scout tells her father that revealing his role in Bob Ewell's death should be similar to shooting a mockingbird. Both Boo Radley and Tom Robinson were falsely accused of something that they had not done. They can be considered mocking birds, innocent people injured or destroyed by evil.

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