

# Racism in Nell Harper Lee's "*To Kill a Mockingbird*"

Dlnya Abdalla Mohammed Ali

Department of English, School of Basic Education, University of Sulaimani,  
Kurdistan-Iraq

**Abstract**—Racial discrimination and injustice against African-American have occurred among groups of people since the origin of their construction. Throughout history, people of color, particularly blacks, were rejected in American communities because whites believed they had more power and control over them. Although blacks work positively and do manual labor in supporting the structure of white industry, whites have a bad treatment toward colored skin and treat them as an embarrassing inhumane human to serve whites. This paper portrays problems of prejudices and racial discrimination through the kid's eyes in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* 1960.

**Index Terms**—Harper Lee, Racial discrimination, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

## I. INTRODUCTION

There are many harmful forces in the world that may corrupt all mankind, defeat beliefs, and contemplate morality. Anger, arrogance, greed, ignorance, etc., are cases of power, but none is as powerful as racism. Racism is the worst kind of prejudice that can cause a lot of destruction in any society. It is a global phenomenon that has occurred throughout history in almost entire societies in different forms (Grosfoguel, 2011).

Although in January 1863 Emancipation Proclamation was issued by Abraham Lincoln, who proclaimed freedom for all slaves, blacks were impacted by government legislation that prevented equality; these laws were known as the Jim Crow Laws which were state and local laws that enforced Southern United States racial segregation. These laws mandated the segregation of public schools, public places, public transportations, restrooms, restaurants, and drinking fountains for blacks and whites. Many states (and cities, too) impose legal punishments on people for mixing with members of another race (Cell, 1982).

Lee set *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the 1930s, the era of the Great Depression, in fictional Maycomb, Alabama, a south reign in America where the battle for integration and equal

rights was at its peak. In the book, Lee depicts a fanatic society characterized by poverty and racism. She demonstrates the content of the story through the eyes of a little girl, named Scout, and her brother Jem (Dave, 1974). *To Kill a Mockingbird* gives a more familiar picture of the agitation among blacks and whites living side by side, but not equally, in the South and explains how white people were prejudiced against blacks. Researchers have recognized the book as one of the three books often cited as making a difference in people's lives, many people only thought of blacks as stereotypes. The novel can drag out the statement that prejudice and racism blind people from the truth. To further elaborate on this statement, the novel shows that the individuals of the South are deeply ignorant of strangers, the whites rule blacks, and that children grow up to be racist by their parents. Although the South was America's first slavery place when blacks were liberated from, the South was not very impressed. Thus, blacks were deprived of their human rights, ill-treated by whites and subjected to any offenders irrespective of their innocence. Lynching, segregation, racial injustice, inequality, discrimination, and prejudice with blacks were just because they were different from whites in their skin color. They are known as savages, lowbrow, and uncivilized people who are inferior groups in the eyes of whites. In *To kill a Mocking Bird*, the discrimination of blacks can be seen clearly by most of the people in Maycomb County. In South America, they show no kindness to anyone else but their own. Even a white person would be looked down on just for defending a black in a court case; this was the level of disgust for blacks in the south. Lee illustrated how racism can be hazardous in society. In her novel she claims:

As you grow older, you will see white men cheat black men every day of your life, but let me tell you something and do not 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 (Lee, 2011, p. 224).

## II. RACISM IN *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is an anti-racial novel that criticizes racial prejudice, discrimination, and injustice. Injustice is deeply rooted in the individuals of Maycomb; the segregated blacks are isolated from the whites. Moreover, being poor and black generated vulnerability to this group of Afro-Americans (Rezazade and Zohdi, 2016).

The novel is told from a young Scout's point of perspective, whose father, Atticus Finch, defends a black

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Corresponding author's e-mail: dlnya.mohammad@univsul.edu.iq

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man, Tom Robinson, falsely accused of raping a white girl, Mayella Ewell. Scout's innocent and attractive voice is an accessible vehicle to discuss race relationships; it reflects on and questions the social structure to which it belongs. Readers see the story through the eyes of Scout, a young girl, beginning at the age of six and gradually maturing as the tale unfolds over several years.

The writer wanted to put an end to racial discrimination and prejudice through a noble-minded character Atticus who is a color-blind personality in the face of race and skin color and managed to support a black man. Atticus is almost blind in his left eye and wears glasses, but still has the intuition to see clearly. Although Atticus wears glasses cannot physically see well, yet he has insight and wisdom. When Scout and Jem wonder why Atticus is older than their friends' parents, Scout recalls, "Besides that, he wore glasses. He was nearly blind in his left eye and said left eyes were the tribal curse of the Finches. Whenever he wanted to see something well, he turned his head and looked from his right eye" (Lee, 2011, p. 98). Indeed, Atticus sees from the "right" visually perceptive, unconquered eye. In this sense, whereas Atticus possesses insight from his "right" eye, other's right eye is both literally and figuratively bruised. Color-blindness is, therefore, a metaphorical conception in this respect, which can be seen as a lack of sight that provides the individual wisdom and insight and enables him to see every one of different colors equally (Champion, 1999).

One of the most prominent quotes on racism is a lengthy one, a dialog between Mr. Atticus and his little daughter Scout, asking him what the term "nigger-lover" implies and why individuals are offending each other with it. People in Maycomb used "nigger-lover" as a nickname to refer to those who care about blacks and consider them as having equal rights. One of those who have called by this nickname was Atticus Finch, a lawyer and an exceptionally morally upright man who strives to treat everyone fairly. Due to her young age, Scout does not know the meaning of that nickname; the way which people are talking about that nickname influenced her; she feels it is bad to be a nigger lover (Faizah, 2016). Her father's response is great;

"Scout," said Atticus, "nigger-lover is just one of those terms that don't mean anything – like snot-note." It is hard to explain – ignorant; trashy people use it when they think somebody's favoring Negroes over and above themselves. It is slipped into usage with some people like ourselves when they want a common, ugly term to label somebody (Lee, 2011, p. 144).

Not only he answers her query but he also demonstrates so obviously his attitude. He shows Scout that foul words mean nothing, and if they do not think it is offensive, you can freely name yourself like this. One clearly sees the horrified girl who heard this word describing her father and who wants him to restore his authority by saying he is not a "nigger-lover;" "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" (Lee, 2011, p. 11). However, in a better way, Atticus shows Scout that he is so above such small offenses that he cannot feel anger, only pity those who said so. This instance will certainly be very helpful in the future for the girl. Throughout the novel, one sees Scout actually learns the lesson and never allows anyone to distract her from what she feels is right, to fool her or insult her self-respect.

In a conversation between Atticus and Scout comes early in the book, after Scout's 1<sup>st</sup> day of school, Atticus tries to get Scout to understand why her new teacher behaved differently than Scout anticipated and discourages her from making judgments about others, especially on the grounds of ethnicity or class, until she has considered her individual viewpoint, "you never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—" "Sir?" "—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it" (Lee, 2011, p. 3). This conversation sets up an ongoing theme of empathy and guides Scout's efforts to imagine other characters' interpretations of important events, such as the Tom Robinson trial.

Whenever anything questionable or a crime has happened people accused blacks and considered it as their responsibility, although they committed nothing and there was no proof, no report, or inquiry against them. Once anyone faced violence the people directly and without going back to what had actually happened they blamed the blacks. A quick judgment was taken by the majority of people whenever it had any relation with blacks. They just think whatever bad things happen are due to them, they also think blacks are hazardous and criminals (Faizah, 2016). White people who were racist or who accepted racism would have no relationship or even worked for suspect black individuals. In Tom's case, no one was willing to offer a job to Tom's wife,

"Cal, I know Tom Robinson's in jail an' he is done something awful, but why will not folks hire Helen?" I (Scout) asked. Calpurnia, in her navy voile dress and tub of a hat, walked between Jem and me. "It's because of what folks say Tom's done," she said. "Folks aren't anxious to – to have anything to do with any of his family (Lee, 2011, p. 12)."

Atticus is very clear on how his children should react to racial slurs, he discusses the problem directly in reaction to his son's questions and said,

"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." "Doesn't make it right," said Jem stolidly. He beat his fist softly on his knee. "You just can't convict a man on evidence like that – you can't." "You couldn't, but they could and did." The older you grow, the more of it you will see. The one place where a man ought to get a square deal is in a courtroom, be he any color of the rainbow, but people have a way of carrying their resentments right into a jury box. As you grow older, you will see white men cheat black men every day of your life, but let me tell you something and do not 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 (Lee, 2011, p. 23).

For Jem Tom's trial is a pivotal moment. He listens to the testimonies and comprehends Tom's innocence, so he is stunned by the judgment of the jury. He does not understand how such an overtly racist decision can get away from the jury. He sees how the racist attitudes of society can lead to the death of a black man.

Not only blacks were treated badly but also the people who defended them were always treated the same way by society; most of white people thought that those who have any connection with blacks also had to be treated like blacks. In this case, Atticus, who defended a black man, was confronted by his community with a very poor treatment (Faizah, 2016).

"You gotta make me first!" Cecil yelled. "My folks said your daddy was a disgrace an' that nigger oughta hang from the water-tank!" (Lee, 2011, p. 9). Scout's father was treated badly by Cecil and Scout's schoolmate. From the declaration, the kids were also deeply impacted and noted by the adults displaying so much hatred toward blacks. The love of prejudice that caused hatred for blacks was reflected not only among adults but also among kids.

Francis and Scout's cousin teased Scout's father because he figured out that he had defended a black man, he says:

"I guess it ain't your fault if Uncle Atticus is a nigger-lover besides, but I'm here to tell you it certainly does mortify the rest of the family" "Francis, what the hell do you mean?"

Just what I said. Grandma says it's bad enough he lets you all run wild, but now he's turned out a nigger-lover we'll never be able to walk the streets of Maycomb again. He is ruinin' the family, that is, what he is doin' (Lee, 2011, p. 9).

Although Francis was only a kid but still he is affected by the racial act due to what he had seen from the mature people who were living around him, this was the reason to have the same reaction and despise black people and those who defend them.

It is not just children. Mrs. Dubose tells Scout that her "father's no better than the ... trash he works for!" (Lee, 2011, p. 11). The fact that Scout and Jem are being attacked with words and fists by adults and kids shows how deeply rooted racism is in Maycomb.

Since Atticus defends a black man, the whole town seems to turn against him and his children; his children are bullied by other children and adults alike. Scout becomes upset and remarks, "Do all lawyers defend Negroes, Atticus?" "Of course they do, Scout" (Lee, 2011, p. 9).

After the hate that came from individuals, Atticus kids became scared and concerned about their father. They feared something bad would happen to their father; that is why they felt anxious and distressed. They asked their father, "what has 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" (Lee, 2011, p. 23).

The children continue to investigate the nature of racism and the next questions they encounter are: Why are such people who do not look black are considered such? What is half blood and quarter blood? When do people start and stop being black? However, suddenly, they understand that it does not matter the real color of the skin. It is much more

subtle, something that cannot be measured. The black blood is regarded filth, which spoils anyone who even has a drop of it and provides others the right to treat them as inferior. As a future young adult, Jem begins to know the white man's socially acceptable behavior in his town and he is obviously upset by this understanding.

"Well, how do you know we ain't Negroes?" Scout said.

"Uncle Jack Finch says we really don't know. He says as far as he can trace back the Finches we ain't, but for all he knows, we mighta come straight of Ethiopia durin' the Old Testament."

"Well, if we came out durin' the Old Testament it's too long ago to matter."

"That's what I thought," said Jem, "but around here once you have a drop of Negro blood that makes you all black" (Lee, 2011, p. 16).

Scout and Jem were discussing why they do not get along with distinct communities in their city. Jem accurately identifies a major source of conflict; he believes that the differences between people are the source of their disagreements. Scout expresses a deeper yet more naïve knowledge of the shared humanity of people, "I think there's just one kind of folks. Folks." (Lee, 2011, p. 26). Her innocence is also a lesson for the reader as it communicates an idealized world where, despite racial distinctions, and individuals are able to respect one another.

Despite threats from the society; a lynch mob tries to kill Tom Robinson before he can come to trial, Atticus agrees to protect Tom and refuses to give him up. The children are watching their father sitting outside the Maycomb county jail and going to investigate. Soon, a white men's lynch mob comes to kill Tom Robinson, but he was protected by Atticus. The mob was described as cold-natured as they unrolled their sleeves and knocked on their cuffs. Some of them wore hats pulled firmly down over their ears. They were sullen-looking, sleepy-eyed people who, to late hours, seemed unused. To get to Tom Robinson, the men are prepared to attack Atticus. Even Jem and Scout are threatened. It is not until they lastly leave Scout's innocent chatter that brings them back to their senses. This shows the absence of maturity in the people.

Atticus attempts to hijack the social beliefs, using them against themselves, "She [Mayella] was white, and she tempted a Negro. She did something that in our society is unspeakable: She kissed a black man. Not an old Uncle, but a strong young Negro man. No code mattered to her before she broke it, but it came crashing down on her afterward" (Lee, 2011, p. 20). He hopes the audience will be caught in a paradox. It is Mayella who breaks the rules, but Tom, as an obedient black man, obeys the white mistress. However, it is still noteworthy, though quite contentious, to attempt to speak for the higher good with racists in their language.

Still, despite all the attempts of Mr. Atticus, he loses and poor Tom is condemned. It shakes Atticus himself, not just as a lawyer who has lost the case, but as an individual whose convictions are crushed against the strong wall of social ignorance. The only hope for Atticus (one does not see it from this quote, but can read about it later in the novel) is that his children and some other people's children will be

free from these prejudices and teach others to treat people without looking at their skin color. Atticus wants to believe that if people cannot break free of this frame of mind, they will at least leave it behind the doors of the courtroom.

### III. CONCLUSION

Due to their dissimilar skin color, African Americans have constantly faced racial inequality, discrimination, and prejudice throughout history. They were segregated and were abused physically and verbally due to their identification as unwanted and uncivilized individuals. Racial segregation was considered a vast veil that concealed the humanity of African Americans and disallowed their good nature to be realized by white people, a reason why they were accused of any illegal or criminal accidents that took place in the environment of the white without investigating their innocence. The impact of discrimination and bias can be significantly affected in blacks' lives in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Lee attempts to eliminate segregation, racial prejudice, and injustice are almost perceptible. The novel's moral message is to offer a message to the world that they should live together in peace through cooperation, kindness, and respect.

On the one hand, Lee makes the children who are still innocent and unaware of such prejudices to ask directly sharp

questions and on the other hand, adults who have already been accustomed as granted to taking racial prejudices have to rethink them while responding to the children.

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