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Race and Justice in American Fiction: A Study Through *To Kill A Mockingbird*

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Abstract:

The concept of race and justice has been important issues since the beginning of human history. The theme of race and justice serve a significant position in American fiction. Race and justice also play an important role in Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The novel highlights the idea of race from a different historical period and identical racial perspectives. The aim of this paper is to explore how race and justice exhibits its significance in American fiction. This paper also tries to examine the treatment of race and justice in a post-depression American society. It puts forth the idea of justice by contextualizing the alienation of justice in legal and social terms in the case of a black man. The writer of the select novel has rightly pointed out that though segregation has been abolished from the institutions, from the society, its disease has remained in the minds of a large number of people.

Keywords: Race, justice, history, segregation, alienation.

Race foreshadows all facets of human life. History has also given the evidence regarding the racial inequality that America has gone through. Racial inequality in America is fairly well documented. The discourses on race issues have been examined not only by the white thinkers. It should be noted that when a black talks about the blacks his perspective will

be different as he belongs to that community, in this way the white community's perspective will also be different regarding a particular race which has been under the domination of the whites for a long period of time. Historically racism in the United States can be traced to American South. The problem of making hierarchies among people based on color was not only restrained to the southern states, but it was more dominantly administered there than anywhere else in the United States. Dilemmas regarding race and racism have bothered all modern nations. We can connect white racism of America with the post-apartheid South Africa which has also exhibited itself in a dark, ominous and forceful way in the late twentieth century.

Racism has both an ideological and material aspects, as suggested by Du Bois. Du Bois puts more emphasis on the problems created by racial divisions. According to him African Americans are regarded as a 'problem' by the white society but this problem lies in the binaries that are created by racism. Race plays a crucial role in constituting one's identity. The concept of race is recent. Ideas regarding race does not remain static, rather it changes from time to time on the basis of social, political and cultural scenario. The American society gives dominant evidence of race relation and racial divisions. In America racial category has become a major determinant in a person's struggle for his rights. This aspect takes us back to "Jim Crow" laws that have been passed in the United States after the end of Civil war. It also offers testimony of racial inequality based on color or race. The idea of racial division can be institutionalized. The legal and political institutions also play a major role in legitimizing race relation between blacks and whites. For instance, slavery in the United States can also be institutionalized as it was permitted by the law. Thus the American society legitimizes white supremacy over the blacks with the help of institutions.

Racism has often appeared to be timeless. Now the concept of race as a natural and static category has been challenged by most of the contemporary scholars. We also accept the idea that race is a construction that transforms and shifts in different situations. John Searle, in his

book *The Construction of Social Reality* has clearly pointed out that race is a “social construction” and “ontologically subjective”. Racial ideology is historicized as it is related to certain historical realities throughout time which offers it significance.

Race foregrounds the issue of superior and inferior. Frantz Fanon in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* suggests, “The black man among his own in the twentieth century does not know at what moment his inferiority comes into being through others”. Fanon critiques the whites for looking at the blacks through racial landscape. Fanon is against of the idea of racial discrimination. According to him “The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation” (Fanon 5). Thus the creation of the feelings of superiority and inferiority has categorized the blacks as inferior based on color line. The novel selected for the study explores the idea of race from different historical periods and from seemingly identical racial perspectives. The main purpose, however, is to show how the racial group must encounter with different phases of racial domination within a specific period of history or at a particular given time.

The interlacing of race and justice in American fiction is a major issue that offers significant insights on American society. Race has been a key issue for critical debate since the 1950s. After the 1950s, the debate can be historically traced to the rise of the Civil Rights Movement. But race has dominated American intellectual discourse for more than a hundred years ago when the anti-slavery sentiment of a large group of people give rise to abolitionist movement and Civil War in the late eighteenth century. It is interesting that the major debates on race happen because of the world war movements.

In simple terms, race is a social construct. If we look at the historical implication of the word race we see that it gets different treatment throughout history. By the turn of seventeenth century race was purely a matter based on physical features such as skin color, geographical location, stature and shape, thus people were divided on the basis of their physical traits.

In modern times we see that historians, cultural anthropologists and other social scientists have looked at the term race as a cultural category or social construct. Many social scientists prefer the word 'ethnicity' to the word 'race'. In this context, the belief in race as a social formation can be traced back to 1960's Civil Rights Movement that has fought for equality. The movement draws from modern thinkers such as Claude Levi Strauss who believe that race has no innate connection with biological origins or diversity. So race can be studied from the perspective of various disciplines and methodologies.

When *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published in 1960 it succeeded in getting the attention of the reading public and as a result it remained as a best seller for a long period of time. The book had also been chosen to be translated into different languages. "I never expected that the book would sell," said Harper Lee in a 1964 radio interview (Oxoby 127). This novel is a bildungsroman told from the perspective of Jean Louis Finch (also known as Scout) and the novel highlights events from Scout's life during the period of 1933-1935.

Published in the throes of the Civil Rights Movement, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is directly influenced by the social tensions of that era. When the novel was written the white people had the supreme power and control over the community. This novel is based on post-depression American South. This is the time when society reexamines itself. Generally, post-depression literature questions the success story of America. This book is also not an exception. She has revised this book in 1950. This novel in a way has begun as a response to give the power of choice to the black people. This story is about basics of democracy. Harper Lee is responding to the problem regarding the future of America.

This novel fairly presents the social and political scenario of the post-depression era. The central episode of the novel centres around the rape trial of a black man called Tom Robinson. This episode is as significant as it portrays not only the hollowness of American society but

also the hollowness of legal system. Certain real incidents are related to Tom Robinson's trial. Though those incidents are not identical with Tom Robinson's trial, they have importance in the social realm.

While writing this novel Lee draws on her memories of growing up in rural Southern Alabama during the depression. It should be noted that the character of Scout has so much similarities with the author Harper Lee. The character of Dill, the friend of Jem and Scout has been taken from real life. Dill is her childhood friend Truman Capote. There are also certain similarities between Harper Lee's father and Atticus Finch who plays a crucial role in the novel. This novel has undoubtedly made Atticus Finch one of the heroes of literature. Moreover, Atticus's actions and the trial of victimized Tom Robinson can be compared to Scottsboro trial of 1930s. Tom Robinson's trial is akin to the trials of Scottsboro boys, which have become a burning topic in those days. In Scottsboro trial nine blacks were falsely accused of raping two white women one of whom was a prostitute. Though it was proved by the doctors that there was no evidence of raping, they were sentenced to death. This trial had happened in Alabama and Lee was also influenced by this trial. The remarkable parallels between the Scottsboro trials and the trial of Tom Robinson have drawn considerable attention from scholars.

In the Scottsboro trial there was a judge called James Horton who went against his own community for saving the rights of the blacks like Atticus Finch in the novel. Atticus was the lawyer who went against the collective sentiment of a community to defend a black man and bring him justice. The case that the author has portrayed in the novel is identical with the Scottsboro trial of 1930s and this helps the reader to realize the social and political scenario of 1930s largely. Both these trials also hint at the class divisions and how these divisions of racial inequality matter in terms of attaining justice. It may be the real or fictional Alabama but inequality, racial bias is there, and this can be proved with the help of these cases.

To Kill a Mockingbird captures the suppression of a black male by the dominant white people. From the point of view of the whites of American South, a black man is a menace who can violate the purity of Southern Black woman and therefore the black man should be looked at with suspicion and kept in the peripheries. From the perspective of blacks also the white woman always remains as a threat because any accusation from the white woman can turn their life upside down and they will end up in despair. These two perspectives can help us to look at the race relation between two races. This also hints us to a kind of inner turmoil that society has faced. This relation is obviously not free from violence. The novel documents this particular aspect. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is based on Maycomb County. It is Scout's story and told primarily from her point of view.

This is the story of a moral white man who has fought for the cause of right and wrong. He stands for the ideal white man who remains by the side of the law. This man is Atticus Finch and this honest lawyer has come to our attention when he defends a black man called Tom Robinson in a false case. Because of his defense of the black man, the whole white community has considered him a disgrace to his own race. The anti-African American feeling in Maycomb is the cause of resentment towards Atticus and his family. This is evident in the scene when the Cunningham-led mob comes to lynch Tom on the very night before the trial. This incident alerts us to violence that has been generated in the minds of people for their hatred towards a particular race. This scene has also been witnessed by the children. It should be noted that Judge Taylor has deliberately chosen Atticus to defend the case of Tom Robinson. This novel also offers a critique on the judicial system. Atticus, in spite of great pressure of the community defends the black man and becomes a hero in his defeat. Within a year, Scout also realizes that the judicial system is important and it is not free from bias.

This novel portrays the aspect of racism not only through society and people, but it also concentrates on dialogues and words. When Scout comes to know about Atticus's court case

from her friend Cecil Jacobs, she asks him, “Do you defend niggers Atticus?” (83) Atticus replies, “Of course I do. Don’t say nigger, Scout. That’s common” (83). Her use of the word ‘nigger’ reveals the fact that she has internalized the words and ideas of the adults. She imitates the words of the adults. Atticus makes her understand that the word ‘nigger’ is a very offensive word to use in terms of a black. Francis has also called Atticus as “He’s nothin’ but a nigger-lover” (92). From the reaction of the people, Scout has also come to know that her father has done something unusual. Thus, this little girl has revealed the fact that defending a black by someone who is white is not a good thing for him. It is no less than committing a sin. The white people have despised him for this and they even do not exclude his children too. In this respect, we can take into account the title of the novel. Atticus once said, “Shoot all the blue jays you want, if you can hit ’em, but remember it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird” (99). Miss Maudie also said, “Mockingbirds don’t do one thing but make music for us to enjoy” (100). This is an indication of the idea that the adults should be careful of what they are doing in front of the children so that they can’t catch up with something illogical. The adults should not destroy the curiosity of the children and to kill that curiosity is a sin.

Scout learns that Atticus will be defending Tom Robinson, a black man accused of raping a white woman. Already Scout is being harassed at school because of her father’s involvement in the case. Nevertheless, Atticus insists that Scout will not allow others to rile her because of their ignorance. The Robinson case serves as the focal point for the second half of the novel. Scout and Jem are exposed to the subtleties of black-white race relations in the South. The white man’s attitude towards Atticus has been changed as he is defending a nigger. Her friend Cecil has also said, “My folks said your daddy was a disgrace an’ that nigger oughta hang from the water-tank” (85). For the majority of white man Atticus is a disgrace to their race because instead of taking side of the white man, he is protecting the black man who belongs to an inferior race. They believe that the white man can never do any wrong. Even if they commit

any crime, they can easily escape from the situation as the law protects them. However, Atticus is fighting for the cause of the justice for the black man irrespective of what race he belongs to because he knows Tom Robinson is innocent.

The character of Dolphus Raymond offers another dimension to understand the race relation between whites and blacks. Dolphus Raymond is one of the intriguing characters though he does not appear frequently in the novel. He becomes interesting for his relation with a colored woman with whom he lives. He is a man who does not care what his race thinks about him. He completely rejects the code of society that believes in racial inequality. As he has preferred to live with the blacks he is one of the outsiders of Maycomb. This highlights the racial boundaries of a society. This aspect is important to realize the circumstances of racial assimilation. The whole Maycomb alienates him because of his relation to a black woman. According to Jem he has a lot of 'mixed chillum.' Jem has also pointed out to the predicament of the mixed people. He says, "They don't belong anywhere. Coloured folks won't have 'em because they're half white; white folks won't have 'em 'cause they're coloured" (177). The mixed people are without any sense belongingness.

Atticus puts on the best defense that he can in the courtroom. While it is clear that he will lose, he is still determined to take a moral stand. Scout and Jem are able to reason, based on the evidence, that Tom Robinson is innocent. However, the jury finds him guilty and the children learn the awful truth that, "a court is only as sound as its jury, and a jury is only as sound as the men who make it up." As Jem struggles to come to terms with the unjust verdict, Atticus explains, "So far nothing in your life has interfered with your reasoning process...but you saw something come between (the jury members) and reason...There's something in our world that makes man lose their heads – they couldn't be fair if they tried" (220). Scout has learned that adults can be wrong in their judgments within a courtroom and that they can be wrong in the everyday judgments. She has realized how the world judge people.

Justice and the court of law are related to each other. An innocent person gets justice in the court of law. The novel shows that justice is a privilege for those, who have born as white and it is not a right. Reverend Sykes's comment on the trial is also interesting. He comments, "I ain't ever seen any jury decide in favor of a colored man over a white man..." (230). This proves the predicament of the blacks in a white dominant society throughout the ages. They are denied justice because of race, because of color, because of the division that has made them savage and inferior. The law is in favor of the whites. The writer also criticizes the legal system of America through this novel. However regarding the 1930s Southern reality Atticus remarks, "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" (243). This is the legal ground of America that decides the fate of people not in terms of evidence and law, but in terms of race and color. He also says, "There's nothing more sickening to me than a low-grade white man who'll take advantage of a Negro's ignorance" (243). Atticus uses the word 'low' in the case of a white who just takes the advantage of a black's inconvenient condition. The stereotypes that prevail in the society also raise questions in the minds of the children. Therefore Jem questions, "If there's just one kind of folks, why can't they get along with each other? If they're all alike, why do they go out of their way to despise each other?" (251). These are serious questions whose answers can be given with help of history.

Tom Robinson has not given justice in the court of law. He is shot because he has done a mistake by going against the superior race, by blaming the member a white race. It was absolutely ridiculous that a black man's word be taken over the word of a white man. The truth is, Tom Robinson is convicted not because he is guilty of raping a girl but because he is a black. The attitude of the people in Maycomb regarding Tom's death proves that his death does not have any impact on the society. "To Maycomb, Tom's death was typical. Typical of a nigger to cut and run. Typical of a Nigger's mentality to have no plan, no thought for the future, just

run blind first chance he saw” (265). Thus Tom’s escape makes the whole Maycomb believe that he is guilty, his escape from prison compels the whites to hold their pre-existing ideas about what African-Americans are like. No amount of black blood can overcome a drop of white blood in Maycomb genetics and no Atticus Finch can save him from being regarded as “typical”. We can say that Tom Robinson is not mainly killed by the guards; he has been killed by the community, by the people of Maycomb. This is how justice is denied in the court of law and even in the mind of people in the case of Tom Robinson. The white community of the Maycomb County was also indifferent towards Tom Robinson. They even didn’t realize their unfair treatment towards him. This little Maycomb is the representative of the larger American society where the division between blacks and whites is visible and the society does not recognize the injustice done to the blacks. Therefore, we can say every society has a Tom Robinson who suffers because he does not have a voice in him.

For Atticus it is a moral responsibility for him to save that innocent victim irrespective of his race or color. Thus, Harper Lee has featured Atticus so prominently in the novel to question the very basis of underlying assumptions of race and class division. This book offers commentary on the race problem. It concentrates on a judicial system that does not demonstrate what it confirms. *To Kill a Mockingbird* juxtaposes two kinds of justice in the court of law and justice of the individuals. Both of this justice can be reasoned through this novel.

However, if we describe *To Kill a Mockingbird* as the story of a lawyer who defends a black man charged with the rape of a white girl, it will be a great injustice to the text. Though the trial is the main event of the book, it also focuses on other aspects that contribute to the greatness of the novel. This is the study of events and people that has influenced a young girl and helped her growing up to be an honorable, sensitive and well-reasoned woman. Therefore, this can also be said that this novel has justified Scout’s role in a world that is dominated by issues of racial inequality and distinct color division. Through Harper Lee’s treatment of racial

inequality, discrimination, we learn where there is kindness there is also hope. She has conveyed an important message to the next generation that will help them rethink their position on their ethical grounds. Racial prejudices become an obstacle in a black's struggle for justice. Justice is not permitted to the blacks, as justice does not concentrate on fairness, rather on power politics. Justice is conceived as an umbrella of fairness, draining from the primacy of a society's moral obligations to right principles. In the social sphere, justice is often clouded by considerations of race, class, ideology, etc. Literature resists this phenomenon. American fiction resists this phenomenon by drawing on the history of the racially sensitive south.

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