



RESEARCH ARTICLE

**THE EXPERIENCE OF “OTHERING” AND POSSIBILITY OF SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN ANALYSIS OF HARPER LEE’S *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD***

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Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), written at the height of Civil Rights Movement in America, occupies an iconic status in the American cultural imaginary. Thematically revolving around the adventures of the nine-year old Scout, Jem, and Dill in their hometown, the racially-segregated Maycomb, and Atticus Finch’s defense of a Black man named Tom Robinson who is falsely accused of raping a White woman, the novel deals with the perennial questions of identity, its intersections with race, class and gender, and its implications on the individuals’ right to freedom and life. While the events of the novel are firmly rooted in the context of specific time and place, this paper argues that it profoundly resonates with the contemporary experience of racial, gender and class-based “othering”. The paper explores the ways in which the process of “othering” and marginalization manifests in the novel by delving into specific instances from the lives of characters like Tom Robinson and Boo Radley. Amidst these difficult experiences, the novel probes into the possibility of social justice that the power of law can uphold. This paper examines how Atticus Finch, both as a lawyer and a father, upholds law as a means of delivering social justice as well as advocates his belief in each individual’s judicious sensibility that allows him/her to be generous, tolerant and humane towards fellow beings. The proposed paper makes a case for *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a text of enduring value that exemplifies the futility of legal change if not accompanied by fundamental shift in prejudiced mindsets that sow the seeds of institutionalized “othering” and oppression of those different or opposite to oneself.

Keywords: *Othering, Law, Race, Marginalization, American, Freedom*



Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), written at the height of Civil Rights Movement in America, occupies an iconic status in the American cultural imaginary. Thematically revolving around the adventures of the nine-year old Scout, Jem, and Dill in their hometown, the racially-segregated Maycomb, and the defense of Tom Robinson by Atticus Finch against false charges of rape of a white woman, the novel deals with the perennial questions of identity, its intersections with race, class and gender, and its implications on the individuals' right to freedom and life. While the events of the novel are firmly rooted in the context of specific time and place, this paper argues that it profoundly resonates with the contemporary experience of racial, gender and class-based "othering". The paper explores the ways in which the process of "othering" and marginalization manifests in the novel by delving into specific instances from the lives of characters like Tom Robinson and Boo Radley. Amidst these difficult experiences, the novel probes into the possibility of social justice that the power of law can uphold. This paper examines how Atticus Finch, both as a lawyer and a father, upholds law as a means of delivering social justice as well as advocates his belief in each individual's judicious sensibility that allows him/her to be generous, tolerant and humane towards fellow beings. The proposed paper makes a case for *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a text of enduring value that exemplifies the futility of legal change if not accompanied by fundamental shift in prejudiced mindsets that sow the seeds of institutionalized "othering" and oppression of those different or opposite to oneself. It develops Jeffrey B. Woods' argument that as Harper Lee's "barometer [...] about the purpose of law", Atticus Finch represents "human dignity, the common good, love of neighbor, equality, fairness, and the progress of humanity toward these

values" (qtd. in Meyer 81). I argue that conflation of social justice and the clarion call for human rights for all across class, race, and gender with these values in the contemporary era is a useful approach to make sense of the crisis of the present-day centered around racial and gendered violence and oppression.

To Kill A Mockingbird is most often remembered for Atticus Finch's humbling observation that "you never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view". Stepping into the shoes of people of Maycomb in racially-segregated Alabama, would in fact, entail participating and understanding the community of people who are disabled, crippled, or most significantly "othered" in various senses. There are instances of physical deformity in the novel including the premise of the novel i.e. Jem's 'deformed' arm; Atticus' blindness in one eye; Tom Robinson's 'useless' right arm; and Mrs. Dubose physical limitations forcing her to be stuck on a wheelchair. Boo Radley is a "feeble-minded" individual while the Ewells hailing from the lower planter class are considered illiterate due to their limited ability to think. These various conditions of disability and 'aberrations' in the novel also act as a metaphorical device to establish a larger critique of social conditions such as racism, classism, and gender difference.

In the words of Hugh McElaney, *To Kill A Mockingbird* is about an exploration of both the stigmatizing power of difference and its transformation into something privileged (qtd. in Meyer 212). In the highly insular social and cultural milieu of Maycomb, the process of "othering" does not hinge merely around instances of racial difference but is premised upon socially constructed notions of disability, impairment and aberrations. Within such a social climate, the children learn how citizens of their



community, which is made up of different races, classes, and temperaments, interact in times of crisis. In the novel, the almost invisibilized 'eccentric' Boo Radley, and the African-American Tom Robinson represent the "outsiders" or those who have been "othered" by the majoritarian sections of the Maycomb society. Even though they have lived in this community for all their life, they are clearly outside the mainstream of Maycomb society inhabiting only its fringes. Because of their position in society, they are at first regarded by the children as demonic and witchlike. But in the process of maturing, the children come to embrace the outsiders among them. Even more, they come to acknowledge their kinship with the outsiders while at the same time discovering the the outsider within themselves.

Boo Radley occupies a central space in Maycomb, a town that is unscrupulously observant of the boundaries, visible and invisible, which separate and define its mixed populations. The decaying Radley house in which the "malevolent phantom" resides does not lie on the fringes of Maycomb. Rather it is in its heart, three doors from the Finches and adjoining the schoolyard. Boo has endured private confinement for years amidst normal daily life around it. He is inaccessible and *shut* away but he has never truly *gone* away, an almost "absent presence" in the town of Maycomb. It is this paradox that captures the imagination of Scout, Jem, and Dill, who try to make Boo "come out". Additionally, while Boo exercises a constant presence in Maycomb, he is always unacknowledged. Boo, therefore, acquires a mythic self like his nickname, which terrifies children while compelling their attention at the same time. Even while being rendered invisible all the time, Boo Radley thus terrifies and fascinates.

Boo Radley's disability is not a verifiable impairment but a construction of community narratives about him. The circumstances leading to Boo's home confinement are the product of "neighborhood legend" and Jem received "most of his information [about Boo] from Stephanie Crawford", a gossipmonger, who unreliably claims to have seen his "skull" peering through her window one night. It is believed that it's because of Boo Radley that the azaleas usually snapped in Buford's garden, and the nocturnal night killings were a routine affair in Maycomb. Thus, Boo Radley is associated with monstrosity, a man-beast who according to Jem, "dined on raw squirrels and any cats", had "yellow and rotten" teeth, and "drooled most of the time". Scout, Jem, and Dill publicly enact the details of Stephanie Crawford's tales about him in their own drama called "One Man's Family". Erving Goffman opines that these narratives thus create a "spoiled identity" for Boo, and his phantom, stigmatized status reduces his whole/usual persona to a "tainted and discounted one" (qtd. in Meyer 213).

The children's initial, thoughtless and taunting behavior towards Boo leads to Atticus admonishing them to stop "tormenting" Boo. Jem, Scout, and Dill thus slowly discover Boo's humanity. Never for a moment does Boo attempt to become socially acceptable in Maycomb by appeasing its residents. Rather, he exhibits a genuine fondness for the children and tries to reach out to them out of his own volition. He makes efforts to strike a connection with them by leaving tokens for Jem and Scout in the holes of the trees. In another instance, he goes out of the way to pick up Jem's pants, fold them neatly, and turn them over the fence after the unfortunate incident in the garden. When Maudie's house burns down after the storm, he flings a blanket over her shoulders.



He also attempts to save the children's lives when Bob Ewell attacks them.

All these acts affirm the socially constructed nature of his disability. He comes out only at night to elude the stigmatizing gaze of the people. His gifts extend an offer of symbolic kinship. Boo becomes like a surrogate father who is caring and protective towards his children. In his encounter with Bob Ewell, Boo comes across as unusually strong. All these events underscore Boo's choice to act out independently and autonomously, with little regard for the validation or sympathy of others around him. In this way, he defies the stereotypes attached to him, and according to Laura Fine, emerges as "a knight in shining armour". Without speaking a word, and relegated to an alien status in the novel while being denied basic dignity of human existence, he emerges heroically at story's most critical juncture, and attains a high moral stature. Most importantly, he compels us to reconsider what is normal and what is aberrant in Maycomb that forecloses the possibility of its citizens being treated fully as equal human beings.

It is argued that Maycomb's usual disease is more than the pathology of racism; it is the social fear of widespread infection by exposure to difference, "fear itself" which has caused its people to erect and maintain boundaries among its members. For instances, the afflictions of the Finches persistently link them with the "others": Jem's permanently deformed left arm connects the family to Tom Robinson's. Atticus' "blindness" connects the Finches to nearsighted Calpurnia, the Cunninghams' "blind spot", Boo's nearly "blind" gray eyes, and the symbolic lack of visual acuity that pervades the community. And the tribal "curse" of incest that one of the best families in Maycomb shares with its worst. The taboo lurking in Maycomb's moral center as well as its most

discredited periphery—suggest that Scout and Mayella share a kind of figurative sibblinghood.

In this regard, the central event of the story, the trial of Tom Robinson, a Black man falsely accused of raping a white woman must be read in terms of the novel's critique of the adherence to rigid social norms and racism that forms the basis of Maycomb's attitude towards its so-called "others". Residents of Maycomb are dismissive of Tom's escape and dub it as "typical of a nigger's mentality to have no plan, no thought, for the future". Similar to Boo, Tom's racial identity becomes nothing short of a disability in the insular town such as Maycomb that will ensure that he remains voiceless in comparison to the racially privileged. The trial of Tom Robinson is the one of the largest performance scenes in *To Kill A Mockingbird*. In this context, Miss Maudie astutely observes that the masses of people moving towards the court to watch the trial resembled "a Roman carnival", and by extension turns Robinson's trial into a carnival.

In this context, Atticus Finch, as the moral centre of the novel, acts like a crutch, an enabler, and upholder of true values and character. His defense of Tom Robinson, a black man, becomes a catalytic moment in the story that propels the people in Maycomb to introspect and reflect upon their innate prejudices against the society's "others". The parallel story of Scout and Jem shows how they confront their own prejudices, specifically their misconceptions about Boo Radley. Apart from Atticus and the children, it is also Boo Radley and Tom Robinson—representatives of medical and minority disabilities—who subtly subvert the cultural norms and perform outside the prescribed stereotypes of Maycomb.



Atticus Finch, both as a lawyer and a father upholds and teaches a kind of worldview to the children that is more empathetic, humanitarian and respectful of those different from oneself. In this context, the point of view of children, especially that of the narrator, Scout, becomes extremely pertinent to frame the experience of otherness in the novel and possibility of social justice and equality.

Scout and Jem's innocence opens up the world of children that has not been completely colonized by Maycomb's social norms. Children, being innocent, relate more to certain people around them such as Calpurnia, which gradually uncovers the layers of racism that make up the social fabric of their town. In doing so, they provide a vision of a more just social order. In the scene where Jem and Scout avert a lynch mob outside the jailhouse, the children once again provide us with this vision of an alternative social order. Jem is defiant of Atticus and refuses to go back along with Scout and Dill. He deeply identifies with Atticus and imagines how Atticus himself would act in such a situation, which would have been on principle. On the other hand, Scout's intervention in the tense scene exhibits her ability to reach over and beyond class-based and racial antagonism. Remaining true to her father's teachings, she attempts to stand in the shoes of someone else which enables her to empathize with the pressures of entailments that Mr. Cunningham has to face as a poor man. Even when Jem and Scout disobey Atticus, they do so in the spirit of upholding and practising the teachings that he himself lives by. By imparting his children such values, Atticus himself has given them the freedom to live and act by higher principles, even if it means "disobeying" or disregarding his authority as their father. In the scene where Atticus packs his briefcase and the Black-Americans stand in silence as a mark of

respect, the novel joins the lawyer's appeal and the work of the father in passing on his values. For Maycomb's African-American community, and for his children who stand with them, Atticus is a true embodiment of law, of a law whose gaze is oriented beyond this courtroom to a time when equality is achieved, segregation ended, and African-Americans and whites sit side-by-side. In the larger context, Atticus Finch represents a belief in the co-existence of contradictory ideas disregarding the exclusionary bias or "otherness". Such a belief propounds that simultaneous existence of competing values can help forge stronger and more long-lasting resolutions to the problems we face.

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