



www.thedawnjournal.in | reach@thedawnjournal.in

RACISM AND INJUSTICE IN *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD* BY HARPER LEE: A LOOK INTO MORAL INJUSTICE

S. Vinitha, P. Maduravalli, F. Jeffrey Aldon

I Year CSE – Data Science

SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Tiruchirappalli

Dr. C. Shanmuga Priya

Associate Professor & Division Chair

Department of English & Foreign Languages

SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Tiruchirappalli

Article History: Received: 20.09.2024 | Accepted: 24.09.2024 | Published: 26.09.2024

Journal DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56602/TDJ>

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56602/TDJ/13.2.1704-1708>

ABSTRACT

This paper on *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee dwells on the racism endured by people in some societies and the moral impacts it has on innocent people. This novel exposes the racial prejudices and how they corrupt society and deny justice to the innocent through the trial of Tom Robinson, a Black man who was falsely accused of raping a white woman in an all-white jury. Atticus Finch, a lawyer, opposes these societal standards and advocates for fairness and equality. This paper focuses on Atticus's character to highlight the prejudice and the impact of racism. With some reference from the novel, we are able to gain a deeper understanding of how the racial injustice shapes the people and society.

Keywords: Racism, Injustice, People, Society, Equality.

INTRODUCTION

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, published in 1960, expresses empathy and moral understanding. Set in the fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama, the novel follows the story of young Scout Finch as she navigates a world filled with prejudice and inequality. Scout's father, Atticus Finch, serves as an honorable lawyer who defends Tom Robinson, a Black man who was falsely accused of raping a white woman. In chapter 3, Atticus Finch quotes, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." The core message of this quote reflects the importance of empathy and understanding others by seeing the world from others perspectives. This paper explores the question: How does this work illustrate racism and injustice, and how does Harper Lee use the character of Atticus Finch to convey this theme? This novel

serves as a reflection of the social struggles that persist even today. Through Atticus's quiet strength and unwavering moral code, Lee presents a compelling critique of social injustice—one that still resonates in today's world.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

To fully grasp the impact of this novel, we must step into the world it portrays- a small Southern town in the 1930s, where the shadow of Jim Crow laws stretches over every aspect of life. This was the time when racism was not just an attitude-it was the law. Black Americans lived with daily injustices, and the legal system that was supposed to protect them often did the opposite.

Tom Robinson's trial feels especially haunting because it echoes real events, like the case of Scottsboro Boys- nine Black teenagers wrongly accused, judged not by their evidence but by the colour of their skin. Harper Lee captures that same injustice in Maycomb. It is not just individuals who hold prejudice-it is the whole system, from the courthouse to the community gatherings.

But Lee does not just present racism as a cold, abstract force—she shows how it wounds, divides, and dehumanizes. She gives us characters like Atticus Finch, who tries to stand for what's right, and Scout, who is just beginning to understand the world's complexities. Through their eyes, we see how deeply racism cuts into everyday life, how it shapes not just verdicts but friendships, fears, and futures.

THE QUITE HERO: ATTICUS FINCH AND THE FIGHT FOR JUSTICE

Atticus Finch stands as the heart and conscience of this novel, embodying the quiet strength of a man who chooses integrity over comfort. In a town where prejudice runs deep, he dares to uphold the ideals of justice and equality, even when they go against the grain of society. During his closing argument in Chapter 20, he addresses the jury with a powerful truth:

“But there is one way in this country in which all men are created equal—there is one human institution that makes a pauper the equal of a Rockefeller... That institution, gentlemen, is a court.”

With these words, Atticus expresses a deep faith in the justice system—not as it is, but as it should be. He speaks not only as a lawyer defending an innocent man, but as a father, a citizen, and a human being who believes in fairness. His voice carries the weight of moral responsibility, even though he knows the odds are against him. The tragedy lies in the painful contrast between this hopeful vision and the bitter reality of the courtroom's verdict.

Atticus's courage is not loud or boastful—it is the kind that chooses to do what is right, even when no one is watching, even when it brings ridicule and danger. Through him, Harper Lee challenges readers to consider what justice truly means, and whether we, like Atticus, are brave enough to pursue it when it is most difficult.

SYMBOLISM OF THE MOCKINGBIRD

To Kill a Mockingbird symbolizes both innocence and the injustice of harming those who have not done anything. In Chapter 10, "It's a sin to kill a mockingbird," says Atticus to Jem, and "Mockingbirds don't do anything but make music for us to enjoy," explains Miss Maudie. They are clearly harmless and given only goodness, and yet they often end up as victims. This symbolism is made

clear by Tom Robinson, who offers Mayella Ewell pity, and the same society that brands him cannot look beyond his skin to see this act for what it is. Boo Radley, too, is a gentle soul judged by rumors rather than truth, ultimately stepping in to protect the children who once feared him. The very use of the mockingbird as a symbol makes the case against it that much bleaker; as some of the images most vulnerable among us deserve to be understood rather than punished.

LESSONS IN EMPATHY: SCOUT'S JOURNEY TO UNDERSTANDING

Scout Finch's coming-of-age story is grounded in a growing sense of empathy. As a child, she views the world in simple terms—right and wrong, good, and bad. But through events like Tom Robinson's trial and her quiet encounter with Boo Radley, she begins to understand that people are far more complicated. Her turning point comes when she stands on Boo's porch and imagines the world from his point of view. Once feared, Boo is no longer a mysterious figure, but a gentle, protective neighbor. "You never really know a man until you stand in his shoes," she recalls—finally putting Atticus's lesson into practice. Atticus models empathy through his defense of Tom Robinson, showing Scout that understanding others often means standing up for them, even when it is unpopular.

This lesson is powerful and relevant today. Brandon Stanton, the creator of Humans of New York, brings empathy to life by sharing the stories of real people. One such story features a man who had been released from prison after 15 years, afraid of reentering a world that had moved on without him. Stanton listened to his story and gave him a voice, allowing millions of readers to see him as a human being seeking redemption, not just an ex-convict. Like Scout's journey, Stanton's work shows that empathy begins when we choose to look beyond labels and truly understand someone's experiences, fostering a deeper connection with others.

SHADOWS AND LIGHT: A TALE OF CONTRASTING CHARACTERS

Harper Lee in this remarkable work paints her characters not in black and white, but in shades of gray—each one shaped by their choices, fears, and values. These contrasts help us see the different faces of morality, courage, and human weakness. Take Atticus Finch and Bob Ewell. Atticus is calm, thoughtful, and principled. He treats everyone—regardless of race or status—with dignity. In contrast, Bob Ewell is driven by hatred and pride, clinging to racism to assert power. Their conflict is not just legal—it is moral. Atticus stands for justice, while Ewell hides behind lies and ignorance.

Then there's Scout and Mayella Ewell—two young women shaped by very different environments. Scout is raised in a home where honesty and empathy are taught every day. Mayella, though pitiful, is trapped in abuse and loneliness. Her false accusation is heartbreaking—not because she is evil, but because she is desperate and broken. Even Boo Radley and Tom Robinson, both quiet and misunderstood, are treated as outsiders. Boo, feared for being different, turns out to be a gentle protector. Tom, judged unfairly for the color of his skin, is punished for a crime he did not commit. Through their stories, we see how society often fails the kindest people.

These characters are not just part of a fictional town—they represent real people we encounter in life. Some inspire us. Some disappoint us. And others challenge us to look beyond what we think we know. By holding up these contrasts, Lee asks us to reflect: What kind of person do we choose to be?

ECHOES IN TODAY'S WORLD: WHY THIS STORY STILL MATTERS

To Kill a Mockingbird is set in the 1930s—a time when racism, injustice, and a lack of empathy were not just everyday realities, they were deeply ingrained in the system. Harper Lee wrote about these themes over 60 years ago, yet they still echo loudly in our world today. The trial of Tom Robinson is not some distant, dusty courtroom drama; it is a stark reminder of the inequalities that continue to shape many people's lives.

One of the clearest modern parallels is the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which began in 2013 after George Zimmerman was acquitted in the shooting of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager. The movement gained global momentum in 2020 after the killing of George Floyd—an unarmed Black man, who died under the knee of a police officer, a horrifying moment captured on video that shook people across the world. Just like Tom Robinson, George Floyd and countless others have been treated as threats simply because of the color of their skin. There is a haunting similarity in how their basic rights were denied and how justice failed them. In Lee's novel, Tom was doomed from the start—not because he was guilty, but because the system was built to see him that way. Today, BLM is calling out that same system—whether it is in law enforcement, education, or the courts.

This is not just about isolated events. It is about asking hard questions: Why are Black lives so often treated as less valuable? Why does the justice system continue to fail those who need it most? And what can we do—individually and collectively—to bring about real change?

In the same way Atticus Finch stood up for Tom Robinson, knowing the odds were against him, today's activists, educators, and allies are speaking out, marching, teaching, and fighting for dignity, equity, and safety for all. Both then and now, it is a struggle for truth, fairness, and basic human decency.

BEYOND THE TRIAL: WHAT THE NOVEL TEACHES US

To Kill a Mockingbird is a story about what it means to be human. It shows us that doing the right thing is often hard, and real courage is not loud—it is standing alone, choosing kindness, and standing up for others when no one else will. Through Scout's eyes, Harper Lee reminds us that people are not always what they seem, and that justice needs protecting. Atticus, Tom, Boo, and Scout each teach us something—about empathy, strength, and doing the right thing, even when it is unpopular. In the end, this book asks us to see others with compassion, to speak up when it matters, and to live with integrity. It is more than a classic—it is a guide to being better.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bloom, Harold (Ed.). Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations). Chelsea House, 2006.
- [2] Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation. "What We Believe." <https://blacklivesmatter.com/what-we-believe/>
- [3] Buchanan, Larry, et al. "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History." The New York Times, July 3, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>
- [4] Carter, Dan T. *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South*. LSU Press, 2007.
- [5] Equal Justice Initiative. "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror." EJI, 2017. Retrieved from <https://eji.org/reports/lynching-in-america>
- [6] Hill, Marc Lamont. *Nobody: Casualties of America's War on the Vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond*. Atria Books, 2016.
- [7] Johnson, Claudia Durst. *Understanding To Kill a Mockingbird: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historic Documents*. Greenwood Press, 1994.
- [8] Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006.