Reflection of American Society in Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mocking Bird

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To kill a mocking bird by Harper Lee is a reflection upon contemporary American society. American society has always been enticing and enigmatic at the same time; attracting people all over the world to reveal the mystery and more the mystery is revealed the more it becomes deep to unfathomable limits. American society is known for racial discrimination and the slaves were transported from Africa to America for the economic purposes because Africans were good for plantation agriculture.

It is also argued that, along with the economic motives underlying slavery in the Americas, European world schemas played a large role in the enslavement of Africans. According to this view, the European in-group for humane behaviour included the sub-continent, while African and American Indian cultures had a more localized definition of "an insider". While neither schema has inherent superiority, the technological advantage of Europeans became a resource to disseminate the conviction that underscored their schemas, that non-Europeans could be enslaved. With the capability to spread their schematic representation of the world, Europeans could impose a social contract, morally permitting three centuries of African slavery. While the disintegration of this social contract by the eighteenth century led to abolitionism, it is argued that the removal of barriers to "insider status" is a very slow process, uncompleted even today.

As a result of the above, the Atlantic slave trade prospered. According to estimates in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, between 1626 and 1860 more than 470,000 slaves were forcibly transported from Africa to what is now the United States. Furthermore, approximately one Southern family in four held slaves prior to the Civil War. According to the 1860 U.S. census, there were about 385,000 slave-owners out of a white population in the slave states of approximately 7 million. This persistence of slavery has been stupendously portrayed in the most celebrated and award winning novel of Harper Lee. It is a novel which reflects upon racial inequality and breaking of innocence.

The title of the novel is self-explanatory which refers to the theme of the novel. We can say the Killing of a mockingbird is a regional novel dealing with the southern region of America i.e. Maycomb. It is bildungsroman novel as Scout the protagonist develops through her experiences and understanding of the world. First of all its very desirable to discuss the significance of the title to kill a mockingbird which makes the theme explicit because mocking bird is used as a symbol of innocence in the novel and it was the trend of American society to kill the innocent. There are so many characters who fit in the role of mocking birds. The title of To Kill a Mockingbird has very little literal connection to the plot, but it carries a great deal of symbolic weight in the book. In this story of innocents destroyed by evil, the “mockingbird” comes to represent the idea of innocence. Thus, to kill a mockingbird is to destroy innocence. Throughout the book, a number of characters (Jem, Tom Robinson, Dill, Boo Radley, Mr. Raymond) can be identified as mockingbirds—innocents who have been injured or destroyed through contact with evil. This connection between the novel’s title and its main theme is made explicit several times in the novel: after Tom Robinson is shot, Mr. Underwood compares his death to “the senseless slaughter of songbirds,” and at the end of the book Scout thinks that hurting Boo Radley would be like “shooting’ a mockingbird.” Most important, Miss Maudie explains to Scout: “Mockingbirds don’t do one thing but . . . sing their hearts out for us. That’s why it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird.” That Jem and Scout’s last name is Finch (another type of small bird) indicates that they are particularly vulnerable in the racist world of Maycomb, which often treats the fragile innocence of childhood harshly. The story starts in era of Great Depression in the fictional "tired old town" of Maycomb, Alabama, the seat of Maycomb County. It focuses on six-year-old Jean Louise Finch (Scout), who lives with her older brother, Jem, and their widowed father, Atticus, a middle-aged lawyer. Jem and Scout befriend a boy named Dill, who visits Maycomb to stay with his aunt each summer. The three children are terrified of, and fascinated by, their neighbour, the reclusive Arthur "Boo" Radley. The adults of Maycomb are hesitant to talk about Boo, and, for many years few have seen him. The children feed one another's imagination with rumours about his appearance and reasons for remaining hidden, and they fantasize about how to get him out of his house. After two
summers of friendship with Dill, Scout and Jem find that someone leaves them small gifts in a tree outside the Radley place. Several times the mysterious Boo makes gestures of affection to the children, but, to their disappointment, he never appears in person. The story progresses and Scout finds that society was suffering from racial discrimination which is against her opinion of giving equality to all and not discriminating on any basis is the right way. Her idea of fine folk is different from the idea of fine folk of her aunt.

Judge Taylor appoints Atticus to defend Tom Robinson, a black man who has been accused of raping a young white woman, Mayella Ewell. Although many of Maycomb's citizens disapprove, Atticus agrees to defend Tom to the best of his ability. Other children taunt Jem and Scout for Atticus's actions, calling him a "nigger-lover". Scout is tempted to stand up for her father's honour by fighting, even though he has told her not to. Atticus faces a group of men intent on lynching Tom. This danger is averted when Scout, Jem, and Dill shame the mob into dispersing by forcing them to view the situation from Atticus' and Tom's points of view.

When the book was released, reviewers noted that it was divided into two parts, and opinion was mixed about Lee's ability to connect them. The first part of the novel concerns the children's fascination with Boo Radley and their feelings of safety and comfort in the neighbourhood. Reviewers were generally charmed by Scout and Jem's observations of their weird neighbours. One writer was so impressed by Lee's detailed explanations of the people of Maycomb that he categorized the book as Southern romantic regionalism. This sentimentalism can be seen in Lee's representation of the Southern caste system to explain almost every character's behaviour in the novel. Scout's Aunt Alexandra attributes Maycomb's inhabitants' faults and advantages to genealogy (families that have gambling streaks and drinking streaks), and the narrator sets the action and characters amid a finely detailed background of the Finch family history and the history of Maycomb. This regionalist theme is further reflected in Mayella Ewell's apparent powerlessness to admit her advances toward Tom Robinson, and Scout's definition of "fine folks" being people with good sense who do the best they can with what they have. The South itself, with its traditions and taboos, seems to drive the plot more than the characters.

The second part of the novel deals with what book reviewer Harding Le May termed "the spirit-corroding shame of the civilized white Southerner in the treatment of the Negro". In the years following its release, many reviewers considered To Kill a Mockingbird a novel primarily concerned with race relations. Claudia Durst Johnson considers it "reasonable to believe" that the novel was shaped by two events involving racial issues in Alabama: Rosa Parks' refusal to yield her seat on a city bus to a white person, which sparked the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the 1956 riots at the University of Alabama after Atherine Lucy and Polly Myers were admitted (Myers eventually withdrew her application and Lucy was expelled, but reinstated in 1980). In writing about the historical context of the novel's construction, two other literary scholars remark: "To Kill a Mockingbird was written and published amidst the most significant and conflict-ridden social change in the South since the Civil War and Reconstruction. Inevitably, despite its mid-1930s setting, the story told from the perspective of the 1950s voices the conflicts, tensions, and fears induced by this transition."

Scholar Patrick Chura, who suggests Emmett Till was a model for Tom Robinson, enumerates the injustices endured by the fictional Tom that Till also faced. Chura notes the icon of the black rapist causing harm to the representation of the "mythologized vulnerable and sacred Southern womanhood". Any transgressions by black males that merely hinted at sexual contact with white females during the time the novel was set often resulted in a punishment of death for the accused. Tom Robinson's trial was juryd by poor white farmers who convicted him despite overwhelming evidence of his innocence, as more educated and moderate white townpeople supported the jury's decision. Furthermore, the victim of racial injustice in To Kill a Mockingbird was physically impaired, which made him unable to commit the act he was accused of, but also crippled him in other ways. Roslyn Siegel includes Tom Robinson as an example of the recurring motif among white Southern writers of the black man as "stupid, pathetic, defenceless, and dependent upon the fair dealing of the whites, rather than his own intelligence to save him". Although Tom is spared from being lynched, he is killed with excessive violence during an attempted escape from prison, shot seventeen times.

The theme of racial injustice appears symbolically in the novel as well. For example, Atticus must shoot a rabid dog, even though it is not his job to do so. Carolyn Jones argues that the dog represents prejudice within the town of Maycomb, and Atticus, who waits on a deserted street to shoot the dog, must fight against the town's racism without help from other white citizens. He is also alone when he faces a group intending to lynch Tom
Robinson and once more in the courthouse during Tom's trial. Lee even uses dreamlike imagery from the mad dog incident to describe some of the courtroom scenes. Jones writes, "The real mad dog in Maycomb is the racism that denies the humanity of Tom Robinson .... When Atticus makes his summation to the jury, he literally bares himself to the jury's and the town's anger."

On question if she has any friends, Scout offers that she must be lonelier than Boo Radley. Having walked Boo home after he saves their lives, Scout stands on the Radley porch and considers the events of the previous three years from Boo's perspective. One writer remarks, "...while the novel concerns tragedy and injustice, heartache and loss, it also carries with it a strong sense [of] courage, compassion, and an awareness of history to be better human beings."

References

9. Murphy, p. 178.
10. Lee, p. 27.