

## Theoretical Perspectives of Race and Racism in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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### Abstract:

The issue of racism is prominent in many American novels. *To Kill a Mockingbird* reflects upon the racial treatment to the black community. The author of the paper deals with the issue of race from different perspectives- biological, cultural, social, legal and linguistic. It is also examined in the paper how the black are treated with negative discrimination and the colour of their skin affects their trial in courts, which is absolutely bad in law.

**Keywords-** Race, Law, Language, Racism, Discrimination

Among all other novels such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The New Jim Crow*, *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Bluest Eye* which reflect upon various experiences of racial treatment, *To Kill a Mockingbird*<sup>1</sup> is the one that gives us an insight into the thematic concerns of the social issue of racism in its historical context. The text gives us an idea about how race prefigures in all fields of life of an individual living in racial society and how racist inclinations begin to dominate the people around in the broader structure of society. However, what is more crucial in this novel is the criminal trial of Tom which is coloured by the issue of race.

Racism has been one of the major issues involved in the text. People with stereotypical attitudes about race live in Maycomb, a small town in America. These attitudes become evident when men and women of Maycomb react to the trial of Tom, Atticus's defence of Tom in the trial and through the gossips of women in the missionary circle. Race has been at the forefront in consideration of their lives in their community which has been divided almost into two groups-whites and blacks. Therefore, it would be appropriate to shed some on the concept of race and how it operates through the social fabric of Maycomb.

Most scholars believe that racism may have ancient roots but its rise took place due to European expansion in many parts of the world and it arose from the intellectual process of social transformation of European societies in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Mosse affirms the same view regarding the rise of race discourse, "Racism has its foundations both in the Enlightenment and in the religious revival of the eighteenth century. It was a product of the preoccupation with a rational universe, nature, and aesthetics..."<sup>3</sup> Mosse's remark clearly implies in which way the idea of race was couched in words and how racism began to emerge in discourse.

First off, race has been understood from the biological perspective; it has also been defined through the sociological angles. Some theorists discuss it in relation with genetical qualities. It is true that human beings differ from each other biologically. On the basis of this variation, human beings have been grouped into "a discrete number of definite categories, called 'races.'"<sup>4</sup> Each race carries a set of common characteristics like the colour of skin, blood group, hair type, facial changes or some other features of genetic make-up. This was the firm belief of many scientific scholars in the nineteenth and almost the first half of the twentieth century. Malik notes that "race" is commonly considered synonymous with "colour."<sup>5</sup> Therefore Africans is one race, Asians another and Europeans is the third one. Scout makes an

indirect remark about a child of Mr Raymond who has married a black woman, “He looked all Negro to me; he was rich chocolate with flaring nostrils...” (178). But there is another group of some scientists who think of race in terms of “human genetic diversity” (Wade 158). This group believed that the biological variation is complemented with inherited genetic qualities. The point is that the outward appearance of a person goes hand in hand with the genetic development of human beings. The former and the latter belief are correlated with each other. There has also been a general presumption that the genetic qualities have substantial influence upon cognitive abilities or intelligence or capabilities of a person (Wade 159). Till the recent times, race has been defined “not only in terms of aspects of biology such as skin colour and facial features, but also in terms of moral and intellectual characteristics” (Wade 159). This meaning of the term, race, was apparently very popular even in intellectual groups in Western countries in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

Americans have adopted the same kind of innate racial differences from the European Enlightenment providing some rationale for the superiority of whites. American phrenologists contended that “nonwhite races had structures that were fundamentally deficient, and that they could not be developed to the level of the white brain.”<sup>6</sup> Such kind of belief continued to grow in America, particularly in the south and held a strong hold on Americans. This is how the issue of race began to shape the lives of people (Malik 2). It created not only a sort of biological hierarchy but a hierarchy of intellects also among different groups of races. These differences drawn on the basis of fallacious rationality evolved as social differences and became natural through the race discourse. Justification for social inequalities was attributed to nature. Later this led to “the development of racial ideology” which was “transposed on to the concept of culture as well” (Malik 7). Horsman quotes Kneeland on the point of civilization, “History need not be very deeply consulted to convince one that the white races, without an exception, have attained a considerable degree of civilization and refinement; and that the dark races have always stopped at a considerably lower level” (48).

The above consideration shows that the negative qualities such as sluggishness, grossness of intellect, lack of national and personal pride and listlessness have been attributed to blacks in racial culture of America (Horsman 47). *To Kill a Mockingbird* is one of the examples that gives us an idea about how Scout has to face insults just because Atticus decides to defend an innocent black person accused of a rape, how blacks are despised and disliked and how they are considered lower in the ranks of human beings. We can find the example of this in Scout’s school where Cecil Jacobs makes a public announcement, “Scout Finch’s daddy defended niggers” (82). Next day in the school Cecil yells at her, “My folks said your daddy was a disgrace an’ that nigger oughta hang from the water-tank” (85). This clearly shows how even children pick up racial differences in the beginning of their lives. When she asks Atticus some questions about this announcement and his defending Tom, he states that there has been high talk about this around the town that he should not defend. He further states, “I can get Jem and Scout through it without bitterness, and most of all, without catching Maycomb’s usual disease. Why reasonable people go stark raving mad when anything involving a Negro comes up, is something I don’t pretend to understand...” (98). Atticus calls racism a disease among the white public in Maycomb. Later Scout has to hear an insult from Mrs Dubose who bawls, “Your father is no better than the niggers and trash he works for” (113). When Scout, Jem and Dill go to the court for the hearing, they hear the passing remarks regarding Atticus, “You know the court appointed him to defend this nigger... Yeah, ... That’s what I don’t like about it” (180). Even Scout states, “I had become almost accustomed to hearing insults aimed at Atticus” (113). Someone who works for Negroes is ironically called nigger-lover.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* also exhibits how the white community men and women also consider themselves different from others. The remarks regarding this show the feeling of white people being proud of themselves and the family. Scout as the narrator of the text talks about her Aunt, “She never let a chance escape her to point out the short-comings of other tribal groups to the greater glory of our own...” (142). Atticus tells them what Aunt Alexandra means when she teaches them some family morals, “Your aunt has asked me to try and impress upon you and Jean Louise that you are not from run-of-the-mill people, that you are the product of several generations’ gentle breeding- ... you should try to live up to your name-” Aunt wants them to be lady and gentleman with all etiquettes. At the same time, the same lady does not allow Scout to go to Calpurnia’s. She says, “You may not” (149). It is rather ironic that Alexandra teaches them to be a lady and a gentleman and at the same time, she treats blacks differently.

People of Maycomb come to attend the hearing of the trial of Tom. The narrator gives the picture of how the white consider themselves privileged and they maintain separation from them out of prejudice. Blacks cannot enter the court first as they cannot exercise any privilege. Scout observes, “In the far corner of the square the Negroes and Mr Dolphus Raymond stood up and dusted their breeches.... They (blacks) waited patiently at the doors behind the white families” (178). In the missionary circle women talk about the Mrunas, an African tribe. These women believe that the women of the Mrunas have no sense of family and children are put to terrible ordeals. Mrs Merriweather remarks again about the Mrunas, “The poverty...the darkness... the immorality- nobody but J. Grimes Everett knows.... Jean Louise, you are a fortunate girl. You live in Christian home with Christian folks in a Christian town. Out there in J. Grimes Everett’s land there’s nothing but sin and squalor” (255). She believes that only white people follow the principles of Christianity and outside their community, there is a lot of sin and squalor committed by blacks. The horrible presumption that these women hold is that Tom’s wife should be encouraged to live a Christian life. She further adds, “There’s nothing more distracting than a sulky darky. Their mouths go down to here. Just ruins your day to have one of ‘em in the kitchen” (256). This simply shows how much hypocritical these women are. They hire black women for their kitchen and by the same token they abuse them.

This racial hypocrisy also appears in another remark by a woman in the missionary circle. Mrs Farrow says, “we’re fighting a losing battle, a losing battle.... it doesn’t matter to ‘em one bit. We can educate ‘em till we’re blue in the face, we can try till we drop to make Christians out of ‘em, but there’s no lady safe in her bed these nights. ... I told him that was certainly a fact” (256). The gossiping after Tom’s being shot when he tries to run away from the prison is another example of white hypocrisy. The narrator says:

Maycomb was interested by the new of Tom’s death for perhaps two days; ... 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... You know how they are. Easy come, easy go. Just shows you, that Robinson was legally married, they say he kept himself clean, went to church and all that, but when it comes down to the line the veneer’s mighty thin. Nigger always comes out in em” (265).

This remark is an obvious example of prejudice against the black community and its status in Maycomb. Mr Underwood writes an editorial pouring fuel on the fire. He calls it senseless killing and compares it with the slaughtering of songbirds. He supports the decision of the jury showing they are right. This clearly reminds us of Goldberg who comments, “Racist

expressions, whether practices in the traditional sense or texts, are informed by beliefs. They involve enunciations of racist principles, supposed justifications of differences, advantages, claims to superiority (whether considered natural or developed), and legitimations of racist practices and institutions.”<sup>7</sup> The white Maycomb community has got justifications for their principles even if they are not grounded in any verifiable reality as such.

Even in respect of language, the point of race has some potential meaning and blacks are considered inferior to whites. Being in the same county/country, they speak a different version of the same language which is deemed to be of lower standard in comparison with the English language used by whites. When Calpurnia tells Jem and Scout about the book, Blackstone’s *Commentaries* that she received from Scout’s grandparent, the purpose of the gift of the book was to improve her language as the book has been written in fine English. Jem immediately draws an inference, “That’s why you don’t talk like the rest of ‘em... the rest of the coloured folks” (138). The following dialogue between Scout and Calpurnia also indicates why she talks like that.

‘Cal,’ ‘why do you talk nigger-talk to the- to your folks when you know it’s not right?’

‘Well, in the first place I’m black-’ ...

‘Suppose you and Scout talked coloured-folks’ talk at home- it’d be out of place, wouldn’t it? Now what if I talked white-talks’ talk at church, and with my neighbours? They’d think I am puttin’ on airs to beat Moses.’

But Cal, you know better,’ I said.

‘It’s not necessary to tell all you know. It’s not lady-like- in the second place, folks don’t like to have somebody around knowin’ more than they do. It aggravates ‘em. You’re not gonna change any of them by talkin’ right, they’ve got to learn themselves....’ (139)

The above conversation demonstrates that language plays a crucial in segregation and categorization of people into races or castes. The language used by the superior race becomes a norm and the blacks are always outside this norm. When Mr Ewell testifies in the court, he makes a statement, “I seen that black nigger yonder ruttin’ on my Mayella” (190). Immediately after this remark, Judge Taylor warns him to keep his language within “Christian English usage, if that is possible” (191). Mr Ewell’s use of words of blacks’ language is considered to be below the dignified status of a person. Therefore the language spoken by an inferior race is assumed to have an impure form and is not standardized. Naturally it is presumed to have no independent status and is relegated to the level of impurity. Language being a cultural product institutes a sense of attitude of linguistic weakness. Ironically, this phenomenon continues to reinforce a person’s identity belonging to a particular lower race. Probably the remark by William Fowler quoted by North is good enough to give us an idea about a xenophobic attitude of the purists, “our countrymen are spreading westward across the continent, and are brought into contact with other races, and adopt new modes of thought, there is some danger that, in the use of their liberty, they may break loose from the laws of the English language...”<sup>8</sup> It clearly implies the fear of the native speakers of their language losing purity and the standard form if it is to be used by other races.

If we consider the above analysis carefully, it categorically indicates that there is something more than the scientific proof behind racism. Racism is more of a product of social construction than of biological or genetic features. Barring a few exceptions of genetic make-

up, it is rather difficult to prove that race is deeply rooted in human biology. Therefore Wade observes that “racial identities are constructions that have emerged over time, shaped by social forces” (158). Malik notes the same view, “Race exists only as a statistical correlation, not as an objective fact. The distinction we make between different races is not naturally given but is socially defined” (5). Therefore it would not be appropriate to legitimize the concept of race on the basis of any presumed scientific evidence in the way it is considered today. That means it is simply an idea that emerged out of social processes dominated by the supremacy of whites. As it has now become widely accepted that race is a social construction, a view has come up that it created some patterns of social inequalities leading to the exclusion of blacks from certain institutional contexts in society and eventually it resulted in racial discrimination.

This analysis of racism in the text delineates racial differences and prejudice on the basis of terribly wrong presumptions and not on the basis of correct reasons that could have affected their lives. Naturally due to the racial differences, the black community is outsiders and are always on the periphery. They receive unjustifiably wrong treatment and suffer injustice in almost all spheres of life at the hands of the whites or the dominant. Therefore, through the political struggle of the civil rights movements, activists in the society fight back the supremacy of a race and try to change the situation. Malik notes, “The gains of the civil rights movement have removed institutionalised racism and ensured full equality of opportunity in the USA” (32).

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