

## **Analysis of the Criminal Justice System in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird***

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### **ABSTRACT**

The American justice system in Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* focuses on the 1930's legal system which did not always give the morally right verdict. This American novel discusses the serious issues in American society, including injustice, racial segregation, racial discrimination, crime and violence. It was first published in 1960. In the story, the court issues a decision guided by prejudice and does not follow the ordinance that justice is to be served equally regardless of race or social circumstances. The novel is analyzed based on the historical approach to understand Harper Lee's background and how it influenced her writing.

### **KEYWORDS**

American law; Harper Lee; justice system.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is a classic novel that explores the profound themes of justice and racial prejudice in the deeply segregated society of 1930s America. Before the 1950s, Black Americans in the South were subject to discrimination, or Jim Crow laws. They were often the victims of extreme cruelty and violence, sometimes resulting in death. By the post-World War II era, African Americans became increasingly discontented with their long-standing inequality. In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., African Americans and their supporters challenged the nation to "rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed...that all men are created equal..." (King Jr, 2002).

Some major events that were happening in the 1960's, when the book was written, were the Vietnam War, Civil Rights Protests, the Assassination of JFK,

The Cuban Missile Crisis, and the first man on the moon. The most relevant major event of this time is the Civil Rights Protests because an overall problem in the story is racism against blacks, and a lot of the major events in the story have to do with or involve racism against blacks. The storyline of the book is set 30 years before it was written, and some major events of the 1930's were the Great Depression and the start of World War II, which most likely affected or made an impact on the events of the story. The story is set in the 1930's, a time when blacks were still being discriminated against though it was published in the early 1960's, about 6 years after the famous *Brown v. Board of Education* court case in Topeka, Kansas. The case proved segregation in public schools unconstitutional, causing the start of desegregation.

The story follows the Finch family, particularly the inquisitive children Scout and Jem, as they witness the trial of Tom Robinson, a black man who was falsely accused of assaulting a white woman. Through this gripping courtroom drama, the novel powerfully portrays the systemic challenges and injustices faced by African Americans in a legal system heavily influenced by prevailing racial biases and discrimination. The Finch family's experiences serve as a poignant window into the harsh realities of prejudice and the ongoing struggle to uphold the principles of fairness and equality in the face of deeply entrenched societal divides. Stiltner (2002) mentioned that Harper Lee wrote this book to show the way people should live in harmony by dealing with others with kindness and respect. The novel is important because it displays the American conception of race and segregation. Watanabe (2018) asserts that Harper Lee formed an unusual and well-designed novel to create harmony relating to familial relationships and racism. The novel shows how justice was not awarded by an unfair trial of a black man called Tom Robinson. The novel portrays the suffering and torment of black people in the southern of America. Tom is not allowed to be set free due to his color leading him to be condemned to death in the end. Similarly, Karson (2005) mentioned that the novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, highlights the issue of racial segregation as well as injustice. Lee depicted the dilemma of the poor blacks in the novel. On the other hand, Khokhar (2018) mentioned that the novel stands for the killing of innocence with reference to the death of Tom Robinson. Atticus attempts to defend the black man and clear his name. Additionally, Rapping (2016) said that Atticus had a significant role as a lawyer in the novel. Atticus was considered as a symbol of lawyers who struggle against segregation and racial injustice within American society. Africans were denied their rights in America

because they were black and because of their race. Furthermore, Winarni (2013) said that Atticus Finch was a victim because he decided to defend Tom Robinson against the prejudice of the whites. Atticus was depicted as a victim because he insisted on helping a black man to reveal the truth. Similarly, in his analysis of the novel, Saini (2015) said that white people enjoyed power over black people. The power of white people was strong to the extent that black people had their separate churches. Moreover, Anderson (2010) pointed out that the novel achieved great success despite setting the events in a small town during a critical time in America. Atticus Finch, the morally upright lawyer, embodies the pursuit of justice as he tirelessly defends Tom Robinson, a black man falsely accused of a crime, despite the overwhelming evidence of his innocence. Throughout the gripping courtroom proceedings, Atticus passionately argues for Tom's acquittal, but the jury, influenced by the prevailing racial biases of the deeply segregated society of Maycomb, Alabama, ultimately convicts him. This trial becomes a powerful and tragic symbol of the systemic injustice faced by African Americans in the legal system, which often fails to uphold the principles of fairness and equality in the face of deeply entrenched racial prejudices. Karson (2005) asserted in his introduction to *Civil Rights* that the conditions of black people in America got worse and worse due to the false doctrine of "separate but equal". This doctrine allowed the white people to exploit the blacks. The movement which was known as "The Civil Rights Movement" was launched by the black people against racial discrimination in America.

Historically in the mid1930s, American society was completely controlled by racist beliefs, because many white people, particularly in the southern states of America were racist towards black people. Although slavery had been

abolished in 1890, that did little to change the way many white people felt about black people, which made the American society still stuck in the idea of inferiority of the black people. This idea not only spread among individuals of society, but rather became a prevailing idea until it dominated the law and judges, and also affected the entire justice system. The community and all-white jury continuously assume "that all blacks lie, that all blacks are immoral beings" (Lee Chapter 20) and take the word of a white man over a black man, despite evidence proving otherwise. This is exactly what happened with the character "Tom" who was proven innocent, but remained an agonized convict and an insulted prisoner only because he is black. Therefore, the American justice system was unfair, which means it repeated false slogans about justice, equality and a strict law that was not influenced by individual opinions. In *To Kill a Mockingbird* clearly showed that the legal system was flawed as it worked for the white society and was dictated by what the white people thought was right.

The theme of justice is also evident in the character of the white man Boo Radley, who experiences a different form of injustice through social alienation and misunderstanding. Boo Radley's story exemplifies how societal prejudice and assumptions can lead to the unjust treatment and marginalization of individuals. As the story unfolds, Scout and Jem come to understand the complexities of justice and morality, grappling with the harsh realities of prejudice and empathy. Through their interactions with Boo Radley, they learn to look beyond surface-

level judgments and recognize the humanity in those who have been ostracized by the community.

Harper Lee's exploration of justice in *To Kill a Mockingbird* continues to resonate with readers, prompting critical reflection on the importance of fairness, compassion, and understanding in society. Regardless of all this Atticus Finch strongly believed in the justice system, Atticus said: "Our courts have their faults, as does any human institution, but in this country, our courts are the great levellers, and in our courts, all men are created equal" (Lee 205). In this idealized vision, he assumed a jury would deliver justice by issuing a decision guided by reason rather than passion and that their judgment would treat all individuals equally, regardless of their race or social circumstance, because equality and lack of prejudice are essential preconditions to justice.

The novel serves as a powerful commentary on the flaws of the American justice system and the need to confront deeply entrenched racial prejudice and discrimination. Even decades after its publication, the timeless themes of the novel remain profoundly relevant, as society grapples with ongoing issues of systemic inequity and the persistent struggle to uphold the principles of equal justice for all. Through its poignant depiction of the trial of Tom Robinson and the experiences of the Finch family, the novel encourages readers to examine their own biases, cultivate empathy and understanding, and actively work towards creating a more just and equitable world.

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