
An Examination of Prejudice in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a Novel by Harper Lee

The Devastation of Prejudice

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee, is a book about racism and coming of age for the character Jem during the Great Depression era in small-town Alabama seen from the perspective of a six-year-old girl. Prejudice is directly defined as a preformed opinion about a person or group of persons. In this context, however, prejudice is seen as disregard towards a group of people by considering them as lesser in the society (Maddox n.p). According to Atticus, prejudice can only exist where people are many, and there is a lack of closeness, and so, prejudice should not exist in Maycomb. Furthermore, prejudice against the characters in the story is characterized by discrimination, dislike, and disregard due to race, gender or opinion. In the 1930s America, as being shown in the novel, prejudice is seen to exist and affect mostly the Black race even though the women also face discrimination. The three classes of prejudice presented in the novel are a social prejudice which is discrimination based on one's social status. Racial prejudice which is discrimination by race and gender prejudice is discrimination by gender.

In the novel, the author presents to the audience the protagonist who is a young girl called Scout Finch. Scout and her family are living in an imaginative town in Alabama called Maycomb. She lives with her brother Jem and their father Atticus in the town of Maycomb where racism towards Negroes is rampant. Calpurnia is Scout's house help and she does not like her very much she claims she loved ordering her around often and sending her out of the kitchen. Aunt Alexandra is Scout's aunt and she is described as very strict and always knowing what is right for the family. Dill on the other hand is one who cries a lot over everything sensitive for instance when Tom is treated differently. Tom Robinson is the main subject in the story since he is accused falsely by Mayella that he raped her and so the issues of race emerges very clearly. Jem also called Jeremy is presented as Scout's brother who has strange thoughts that even the narrator considers him as having confusing thoughts. Boo Radley is one of Mr. Radley's sons whom as described by Jem looks disabled but the town has translated his disability to mean that he is a monster like individual responsible for all the evils in the town. The author has also presented Bob Ewell who is a parent to a family that is considered as a disgrace to the family. Additionally, John Hale Finch is Scout's uncle and he is described as funny a joker and one who likes playing around with children even though he is always not fair. Then the author also presents Reverend Sykes as the spiritual leader of the African American population within the town.

As such, to show that there are some Whites who were good to the Negroes, the author presents Atticus as Whitman who defends the Negroes. The existence of prejudice is seen to cause suffering for people in the story. As such, social prejudice is exposed when Boo Radley is excluded from Maycomb society, gender prejudice is seen when Mr. Atticus disregards the ability of a single gender (Miss Maudie) in serving on the jury, and racial prejudice is unveiled through Tom Robinson's case. In the process of discussing these forms of prejudice, the research will prove that Lee explores the devastating consequences of social, gender, and racial prejudice during the Great Depression era in small-town Alabama.

Social prejudice is exposed through the exclusion of Boo Radley from Maycomb society and the poor treatment of Atticus Finch for defending an African-American. The novel exposes social prejudice when Jem describes Boo and says, "Boo was about six-and-a-half feet tall. He dined on raw [animals] that's why his hands were bloodstained. He had a long jagged scar on his face, rotten yellow teeth, popped eyes and drooled all the time" (Lee 11). Social prejudice is seen to exist when Lee shows that the entire town dislikes Boo due to his appearance leading to his exclusion from the others. When a person is prejudged due to how they look, then this is qualified to be prejudice (Maddox n.p). The people of Maycomb have concluded that all crimes are also attributed to him. Such conclusions are made of this character just because of the way he looks, such as him being an evil person is a classification of prejudice. Prejudice in most is also confirmed to arise where a person concludes that a person is capable of committing a certain act just because they are of a given kind. In other words, it is another form of stereotyping individuals. Consequently, due to such misinformation, Boo becomes an outcast without being found guilty. Furthermore, Boo's father is also displayed as one who discriminates against his son because he locks him up for the most of his life. Additionally, because he is always locked in and raised up by very cruel parents, the citizens of Maycomb are more suspicious of him. The appearance of Boo makes the townsmen have preconceptions of him without proof that he causes every evil that happens in the town. Hence it is a confirmation of prejudice within society. In a nutshell, the author, through the misconceived conclusion by the townsmen over Boo, confirms the existence of social prejudice.

Secondly, while still examining the subject of social prejudice, the townsmen react towards Atticus Finch when he decides to defend Tom who is an African American. He is seen to state that "I'm afraid our activities would be received with considerable disapprobation by the more learned authorities" (Lee 30). This statement shows that even within Atticus himself, he is aware that the community he lives in disregarded him because he decides to behave differently from the other Whites. Furthermore, the story shows that he is also condemned by the community. This is evidence of social prejudice. Bloom also claims that prejudice can also be an act of discrimination against a person because they are different (39). The social prejudice, in this case, takes a very radical turn to the extent that this character risks his life all because he chooses to act differently. In this case, Atticus becomes the victim. He is disliked, he is hated, and he also suffers lack of love from his people due to his different opinion towards African Americans.

In brief, the author shows the suffering that these characters go through due to the prejudice that they face. For instance, the first character Boo, is excluded and always kept away from society by his father who locks him up. It is obvious that Boo suffers from lack of socialization and in addition to his cruel father, he grows up to be an antisocial individual who is lonely. Atticus on the other hand has to confront a mob that is ready to kill Tom and he puts his life in danger. He also suffers the lack of approval by his fellow white folks. Furthermore, his looks have made the town to brand him as evil. This social discrimination makes him a victim because when he is claimed to be the one causing evil, the children, as well as adults, dislike him. He thus suffers emotionally.

Gender prejudice is defined as discrimination based on gender. The novel exposes this through Aunt Alexandra's treatment of Scout, and through the jury's belief of Mayella's claims simply because she is a white woman. Scout is reproached when she plays with boys and she states this in the novel that, "I could not possibly hope to be a lady if I wore breeches; when I said I could do nothing in a dress, she said I wasn't supposed to be doing things that required pants"

(Lee 81). From this statement, there is a clear indication that Aunt Alexandra discriminates Scout for being who she desires to be. She considers her to be lesser of a female gender if she wants to play with boys and be in the company of them. This form of prejudice is gender prejudice because it is discrimination that is based on gender when Scout's aunt scold's her for mixing with an opposite gender (Milton 23). In fact, this statement shows that Aunt Alexandra is having a formed opinion on what girls and women should behave or the duties they should undertake. Aunt Alexandra's comments to Scout, illuminates how women also discriminate against gender when they consider that some things should be done by men and not by women. This is seen when Scout states that her aunt told her to avoid doing things that required "pants." In this case "pants" represents men's wear (Lee 81). In this case, gender prejudice has been seen to be propagated through the aunt's behavior of separating among genders

Prejudice is also seen in the case of the incident that happens between Mayella and Tom Robinson. Gender prejudice is exposed when the jury believes Mayella's claims simply because she is a white woman. In the novel the author narrates that, when giving his closing statement to the jury, Atticus is seen to clarify that the reason why Tom is in trouble is because the jury has believed Mayella based on the facts that she is a white woman (Lee 205). Therefore, Tom is victimized because he is a male Negro and this then qualifies to his victimization based on gender hence, the gender prejudice. Consequently, Mayella claims that Tom has raped her. In the end, by twisting the story to make Tom guilty, gender prejudice is seen and further revealed by the jury's reaction. Mayella believes that she can clean her conscience through victimizing Tom because in this society it is uncommon for relations to happen between people of different races (Milton 23). In other words, this is to make the readers aware that, Mayella is hiding her guilt and hence uses the existing discrimination against the Negroes to protect herself. Furthermore, she knows that Tom is a man, the jury is highly likely to believe her story more than Tom's story. Through this incident in the novel, evidence of how women are always considered to be victims in cases of conflict between them and men is also illuminated. The consequences of gender discrimination are evidenced by psychological injuries to a child, like in Scout's case. When it comes to the case of Tom Robinson, the physical harm is the impact of social prejudice he could have been jailed or even beaten by the people, causing him physical harm.

Racial prejudice is exposed through the court case of Tom Robinson and through the reverse racism that occurs at Calpurnia's church when she brings Scout and Jem to service with her. Through Tom Robinson's trial, prejudice is exposed in the book. One type of the prejudice uncovered evidently in the novel *To Kill the Mockingbird* is the hatred that is extended to the blacks and the fear of violence outbreak that can take place such as lynching. In other words, the Negroes are disliked by the White population, and whenever they have been found to have committed a crime, with or without proof, they are always victims and can lose their lives. This, in fact, is what encourages Mayella to victimize Tom knowing very well that the jury will be biased against him due to his race. Consequently, according to the book, the lynch mob took the law into their hands and denied the victim a fair court trial. A fair trial where the jury listens to each party is the basic form of justice to all. The lynch mob decides to kill Tom Robinson before he is tried in court (McKinnon, 432). The killing of Tom Robinson is an indication of underground violence that shows up before the case starts and racism instigates it. Also, the execution shows how the mob has a feeling that they can take the law into their hands and their freedom and right to kill those who are inferior to themselves. The prejudice against lesser people here is targeting the Negroes who are considered as a lesser race. The lynch mob feels powerful as a group, which is the opposite feeling that could happen to each of them if they acted individually.

Also, it is evident that the blacks are segregated in the courtrooms as well as public places and schools. While the whites get front seats in the courtrooms, the blacks are left to sit at the balconies, away from court scenes. This is evident in the book during Tom's trial; Dill, Scout, and Jem are in the black balcony. "Reverend Sykes came puffing behind us and steered us gently through the black people in the balcony. Four Negroes rose and gave us their front row seats." (Lee 170). Unlike the whites who respect no one, the blacks respect their vicar and the white kids accompanying them (McFarlin, 231). Even though the action presented in this context of the novel is a gesture of respect, it is also a gesture that reveals fear from the minority Blacks and shows pride from the majority, White. The African Americans who were seated in the front seats could have given their seats for the not willingly, but out of fear instead. On the other hand, if the Whites are not with pride and discriminative, they should then decline to take the offer. All the other evidence of prejudice in the society during the 1930s. Evidently, from the book, prejudice is exposed during Tom Robinson's trial. Prejudice and discrimination in court always affect the individuals who are always looked down upon or marginalized in a given society. It can be correct to say Judge Taylor is not a racist. Taylor asks Atticus to take on the case of Tom Robinson's case instead of leaving it to a junior who requires experience. It is evident that Tom Robinson is innocent, but the jury gives the verdict, guilty. Through this, the South American life is reflected during the time which the novel was set. Most people in the 1930s were racists, but obviously, there were those who were not racists. However, the non-racists were not strong enough to change the town and were scared to bring forth any change.

Racial prejudice is exposed through the reverse racism that occurs at Calpurnia's church when she brings Scout and Jem to service with her. This is the first case of racism that happens in the novel, and it ensued in Calpurnia's church. Calpurnia is home alone with the children of her employer, she is therefore thinking of what she should do with the children. She therefore thinks and finds that she does not want to send the children to church alone so she decides to go with them to the church she usually attends. When she arrives with the children at church, a member of the church who is a black gets irritated and wants her to leave with the children (Lee, 120). During this period, racial segregation is common. The blacks and whites attended different churches. Calpurnia stands by the children, and the church ends up siding with her. Reverend Sykes and other church members accept the Finch children (Macaluso, 281). Through this, it is exposed that racism was not one-sided. The blacks hated the whites the same way the whites did. The children accompanied by Calpurnia to church get a dozen of racism in the Negro church. After the church service, Scout wants to understand why Calpurnia "does nigger-talk to her folks, when she knows it's not right." (INSERT THEQUOTE) Calpurnia accepts she is black; however, she does not want to talk about it in details (Macaluso, 285). In this way, racism is exposed in church and also, an indication that the blacks do not accept themselves being black.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Lee has explored the devastating consequences of social, gender, and racial prejudice during the Great Depression era in small-town Alabama. Based on the analysis made on the novel, it is apparent that social, gender, and racial prejudice during the Great Depression era in small-town Alabama was not only pronounced but also had devastating consequences. According to the book *To Kill the Mockingbird*, the prejudice and racism have been exposed in the way other characters are reacting towards the selected characters which are discriminated for one reason or the other. Furthermore, the results are seen affecting the society as a whole

both the White people like the character Atticus and blacks such as Tom Robinson. From the whites and blacks, the consequences are hatred, segregation, injustice, and self-denial as seen in Calpurnia, when she did not want to talk about her nature of being a black. Also, it is apparent from the book that racism was not only one-sided, but it was also owned by both the whites and the blacks, as portrayed in Calpurnia's church. From the consequences exposed in the book, it is apparent that racism and prejudice should be avoided at all costs as it does not build the society but instead destroys the morals and attitudes of individuals from children to adults. The study from here can lead a scholar studying the factors that pushed each character to act in the way they acted.

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