

# Racism and Hierarchy in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: A Psychoanalytic Approach

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## Abstract

Racism and prejudice are the words that have been intertwined with the lives of coloured people for centuries. The acts of bullying, oppression, and falsifications of crimes against African American people have become so common in the world that not only the whites even the African American people themselves have integrated such acts into their day-to-day lives without even realising the dangers of such conscience. There have been numerous studies on the topic of racism and prejudices whose general conclusion turns out to be social differentiation, inferiority-complex, different religious and cultural practices, and the concept of 'otherness' to be the cause of racial practices. Previous research on the topic of racism and prejudices have analysed that racism as a social construct becomes the main culprit of African Americans. However, this paper explores and adds to previous research's depth, that racism is not only a social construct but a psychological construct as well. This research paper attempts to examine the normalisation of racism in the conscience of African American people and how such notions strengthen the hierarchy of whites through various characters presented in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* using the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud.

**Keywords:** Hierarchy, Normalisation, Psyche, Racism, Unconscious

## Introduction

The 1961 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee follows the life of an inquisitive and rebellious kid Scout who witnesses various forms of prejudices and racist mentality of the people living in the fictional town of Maycomb in Alabama. The novel showcases the trial of an innocent, helpful, and disabled African American man Tom Robinson who has been unjustly accused of raping a white woman, Mayella Ewell. Lee, lightly, tries to present a subjugated and charitable image of African Americans and how their amiable acts ultimately lead to their “killing” through a child narration.

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, has dug deeply into different states of mind and explained the concept of the “unconscious” and its effect on a person’s behaviour. The novel is depicted through the eyes of dominant white characters, focusing on their lifestyle, relations, and mentality whereas African American characters are almost sprinkled for the sake of the plot. Therefore, the readers are not acquainted with African American’s lifestyle and mentality. However, their certain

actions and language showcase the dominance of their unconscious mind and reveal a deeper sense of trauma through their personality.

## Objectives of the paper

The main objectives of this paper are to use Austrian neurologist, Freud’s concept of “unconscious” to investigate how the actions and behaviour of certain African American characters like the accused Tom Robinson, the housekeeper Calpurnia and the prominent figure of the African American community Reverend Sykes reflect a deeper sense of their trauma that ultimately underlines their normalised psyche of the injustice.

Moreover, the paper also attempts to explain the hierarchal and hypocritical ideology of whites, in general, through different minor characters and in particular through the character of Atticus Finch. Finch is looked upon as a saviour for Tom thus strengthening the notion of a “white God” while also focusing on the unconscious psyche of the author in promoting humanism.

## Research Methodology

The term ‘psychoanalysis’ was coined by the

Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud in 1896, describing the method of treating hysterics of the mind. His psychoanalytical theory provided various discoveries like Oedipus complex, id, superego, ego, and the unconscious. In his theory, Freud's foundational talks are about the unknown tenant of a person's mind, that is, the unconscious. He at length talks about the complex states of mind, specifically the ones of which humans themselves are not even aware:

Everything that is repressed must remain unconscious, but at the very outset let us state that the repressed does not comprise the whole unconscious. The unconscious has the greater compass: the repressed is a part of the unconscious. [5]

In the contemporary world, Freud's theory has been incessantly attacked by various clinical disciplines and medical practitioners for its unreliability and lack of scientific evidence in treating patients as a "gentleman's agreement" between patient and analyst was observed. Both of them were satisfied with small improvements. The psychotherapies instead of providing a permanent cure to a patient's

health, give a temporary remedy that satisfies both the psychoanalyst and the patient. Most psychoanalysts have been criticised for misusing their positions for profit and money making because their "market value" was high. [4]

Concerns have been raised over the diminishing relevance of psychoanalysis and therefore this theory has also been defended from various stances by stating that it is a branch of analysing a person's behaviour and by focusing on the repetitive and particular patterns, the analyst can reach the root cause of the problem. Clinical care including drugs and medications is not reputed in psychoanalytic theory as "Psychotropic drugs symbolized the triumph of pragmatism and materialism over the vague lucubration of psychology and philosophy that were trying to make sense of humanity." [14] In the world of super-fast technology and lack of in-depth connections and emotions, patients prefer anti-depressant pills to cure them quickly even if it means physical deterioration of their health instead of slow and regular treatments of psychotherapy that would understand the cause of the patient's particular behaviour and help them

overcome their sense of trauma.

Pointing out the significance and relevance of psychoanalysis, Roudinesco and Bowlby (2004) write that without Freudian theories psychology “would have got lost in the hedonistic cult of the power of identity, promoting a smooth, faultless subject entirely shut up in a physico-chemical model.” [14] No one would have dug up into the minds of the people, understanding the reason behind their certain actions and desires, and focused only on the exterior complications of the body, thus creating a faultless and perfect individual. To contribute to the understanding and relevance of psychoanalysis, the present paper intends to work with the described theory of Freud to investigate the unconscious minds of characters of different races, exploring the concept of racism as a mental illness as advocated by “a committee of black psychiatrists in 1975.” [14]

### **African Americans’ Victimised Conscience: Tom Robinson and Other African American Folks**

Racism in literature has had a long history from Shakespeare’s *Othello*, and Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* to Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, and

Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. However, one thing that is common in these works by white authors is the victimised representations of characters of different races and for many critics, the concept of racism is merely used as a “functional fictional device” [7] and not for any major social change in such works.

Lee’s debut novel was written at a time when the consciousness regarding racial discrimination had started to develop gradually across Europe. Piliawsky accounts that “During the Civil Rights Movements of 1950s and 1960s, the vote was seen by black leaders, if not as panacea, certainly as a means of improving the quality of life for the black masses.” [13] Various struggles and movements had started to resist white supremacy and the novel is thus seen in the context of highlighting years of silenced trauma of the African Americans.

The novel is set during the 1930s, a tumultuous time for America that dealt with severe repercussions of the Great Depression, and collapse of the Wall Street that gave rise to unemployment, poverty, and prostitution. A general history of those times suggests that

“Subject to continuing racial discrimination, blacks nationwide fared even worse than their hard-hit white counterparts.” [10] Poverty led whites to perform jobs that were traditionally imposed upon African Americans; therefore, whites were struggling in poverty and African Americans were struggling for poverty. The increased racial segregation even led to a controversial court trial of the Scottsboro case which is considered to have influenced the context of the novel. As Greene and Gabbidon claim “[t]he Scottsboro incident would symbolize the dual system of American justice based on race conspicuously present in the early 20th century.” [6] Lee provides a fictionalised version of the historical case to comment on the prevalent racial prejudice in the country.

The novel is not wholly dominated by the trial of Tom Robinson but is surrounded by the impact of Atticus taking up the case of a coloured man on his family. It is only in the second half of the novel that readers are acquainted with the court trial through the eyes of Jean Louise Finch. The act of normalisation of subjugation by whites in the conscience of African Americans could be seen when the

young kids, namely, Jem, Dill, and Scout secretly visit the Maycomb County courthouse:

The Negroes, having waited for the white people to go upstairs, began to come in. ‘Whoa now, just a minute,’ said a club member, holding up his walking stick. ‘Just don’t start up them stairs yet awhile.’ [180]

The courthouse was structured in such a way that gave white people superiority by sitting on the centred benches and with only corners given to the coloured people. Not only the court-house, there are numerous instances in the novel suggesting that places, in general, were constructed in a way that separated people of different races maintaining white supremacy that “manifests in the social, economic, political, and cultural history” [2] of the world. However, there had been no instance that suggested any African American character revolting against such prejudices since the injustice had become so common to their psyche that they don’t even consider it to be injustice and rather a regularity in their lives. They simply adhered to the non-existing rule that coloured people are supposed to be

inferior to whites and they should respect the unwritten laws.

In the court-house, when the questioning of Tom Robinson by Atticus Finch was taking place, the hint of domination of his unconscious mind could be seen:

‘Did you harm her in any way?’

‘I did not, suh.’

‘Did you resist her advances?’

‘Mr Finch, I tried. I tried to ‘thout bein’ ugly to her. I didn’t wanta be ugly, I didn’t wanta push her or nothin’.’ [215]

This incident reveals the fear in Tom’s conscience. As per Tom’s testimony, he ran instead of taking a stand for his dignity and the invasion of his body by Mayella Ewell because it was clear to him that no one would believe him and everything would go against him even if the proofs were laid in front of the jury since he’s African American. Talcott Parsons’ view regarding the unconscious is that “its primary structure at the object level is the internalized object system of childhood experience, which is, of course, heavily affected by the social structure of the human family.” [12] Traumatic

childhood experiences amalgamated with a repressed social environment form the basis of the unconscious mind. Therefore, Tom’s unconscious mind dominated his psyche, unlocking the past traumas of injustice done to him or his community and thus influencing his behaviour to act in a certain way- the act of running away.

‘Now don’t you be so confident, Mr Jem, I ain’t ever seen any jury decide in favour of a coloured man over a white man...’ [230]

Reverend Sykes, one of the primary members of the African American community, provides a mirror to Jem. In the storming silence of the court-room, while everyone was anticipating the decision of the jury, Jem was clear that Atticus would win the case, since he presented the necessary evidence and arguments that would easily strengthen Tom’s innocence. However, the above statement by Reverend Sykes demonstrates the consciousness of biased result that the jury would prevail and again there is no revolt by the African Americans since their conscious mind already knows of the age-old injustice and therefore their unconscious mind influences their mute

response to the jury.

Another African American character who is present only on the outskirts of the novel but still quite prominent is Calpurnia, the housekeeper of the Finch family. When Scout and Jem visit the African American Church with Calpurnia, several questions arise in Scout's mind and one of them is the way Calpurnia spoke in the Church with other African American folks.

That Calpurnia led a modest double life never dawned on me. The idea that she had a separate existence outside our household was a novel one, to say nothing of her having command of two languages. [138]

The above sentence highlights how African American characters had changed into white folk's lifestyle. It was a surprise revelation for the kids since they never saw Calpurnia speaking in her native dialect but it was quite normal for Calpurnia since the change of identity on a hierarchal basis never made to Calpurnia's conscience. This normalisation of white superiority is still prevalent in America as "White dominants-and even non-dominants

who have internalized the view of white moral superiority-consciously and unconsciously perpetrate daily acts of racism against people of colour." [3] The command of two languages also implied a sense of her superiority among the African American folks, more like the spread of white hierarchal disease to the African Americans.

### **White Characters' Hierarchal Conscience: Atticus Finch and Other Folks**

[t]he text of Lee's 'To Kill A MockingBird', reveals the undercurrents of prejudice that denies justice to the oppressed. This book has at its narrative centre oppressed individuals who cannot "speak" for themselves and are represented by intellectuals. [15]

Looking from a broader perspective, the novel seems to be fighting for African American's justice and more or less being sympathetic towards African Americans. However, a narrowed-down approach reveals Lee projecting African Americans as pitied, helpless, mute, and vulnerable characters, resembling upper-class Indian writers like



Arundhati Roy, Mulk Raj Anand, and Prem Chand, projecting Dalits through the same lens. In Tracy Lemaster's words "the novels' differing American and Indian foci unexpectedly intersect" [9] on various themes like that of colonial marginalisation. It has been discussed in the previous section too, that the novel projects African American characters as oppressed people who couldn't protest for their rights. Though white authors like Lee, did try to show sympathy and pity for the oppressed they unconsciously revealed their hierarchal conscience in doing so. As Sterling A. Brown remarked, "The Negro has met with as great injustice in American literature as he has in American life." [1] Each African American character in the novel, be it Tom Robinson, his wife Helen, or even Calpurnia, expressed no resistance towards their oppressors. It was not like African Americans never displayed any fire of revolt but the white novels deliberately tried to present the African Americans as mute victims in need of a saviour, like Atticus for Tom.

Finch is a New Testament-style prophet whose worldview propels him to this truth: love and understanding open

doors; judgment and condemnation close them. [11]

While trying to sympathise with the African Americans, Lee had unconsciously constructed the Christianised notion of white God through Atticus Finch who provides his hand to Tom Robinson and thus stimulated the hierarchal thinking of white 'civilised' people that whites are superior and only their voice would be heard in delivering justice to the 'uncivilised' African American people. Moreover, through various instances in the novel it is seen that Atticus' behaviour seems to be about moralising people than taking up a firm stand against racism.

'If you shouldn't be defendin' him, then why are you doin' it?'

'For a number of reasons,' said Atticus. 'The main one is, if I didn't I couldn't hold up my head in town, I couldn't represent this county in the legislature, I couldn't even tell you or Jem not to do something again.' [83]

Atticus' morality, in many ways, homogenises the concept of racism with humanism. It is evident since Atticus only takes a stand on



something when it is stood front before him. For example, Scout's question about "niggers" is the only moment when Atticus teaches her about the imprudence of that word. Also, Atticus is never seen taking a stand against racism, in particular, before and after Tom Robinson's case which he performs as his "duty" and not in the form of social reformation. Atticus Finch's character, in a microcosm, is that of Mahatma Gandhi whose focus was on unifying India by getting together people of every class and caste against Colonialism and thus rejecting the notion of caste issues in particular. Therefore, he also homogenised the concept of casteism into colonialism. Atticus' generalisation of African American people, in turn, suppresses the issue of racism.

White characters' hypocritical and hierarchical approach is further revealed through the conscience of Francis' grandmother. During the Christmas dinner, Francis reveals "Grandma says all men should learn to cook, that men oughta be careful with their wives and wait on 'em when they don't feel good." [91] Grandma's feminist conscience is the result of years of oppression against women. However,

her "upward thinking" is only limited to white folks. In the later lines, Francis mocks Scout by stating, "Grandma says it's bad enough he lets you all run wild, but now he's turned out a nigger-lover." [92] This shows that white people's world revolves around improving the status of their folks only and their selfish motives neglect the simple existence of African Americans.

That's the difference between America and Germany. We are a democracy and Germany is a dictatorship. Dictator-ship [270]

Another incident that displays white hierarchy is at the end of the novel through the hypocritical character of Miss Gates who proclaims to hate Hitler and sympathises with the Jews. The irony of this statement can be understood when coming out of the courthouse, Miss Gates proclaims "It's time somebody taught em' a lesson, they were getting' way above themselves." [272] These instances reveal the hierarchical conscience of white people and that their sympathies for the oppressed whites unconsciously reveals their prejudice against African Americans. It can be deduced that Germany openly persecutes the

marginalised whereas America does the same furtively.

### Conclusion

Conclusively, analysed from the perspective of Freud's "Unconscious", this paper has attempted to explain the trauma experienced by African Americans through the fearsome and normalised behaviours of African American folks in the fictional town of Maycomb. Moreover, white characters' consciences has been effectively utilised to understand their ideology of limited or hierarchal humanism. Through this paper, it is observed that African American people's psyche through generations of trauma has normalised the concept of racism, and thereby, African Americans themselves have become a culprits of racism while the white notion of spreading humanism is analysed as being problematic since their psyche showcases the buildup of hierarchal, selfish desires, and suppression of the revolt.

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