

TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD AND SARTRE'S ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

In his book, What is Literature? French writer and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre raises an important question, "For whom does one write?" Sartre says that a piece of art doesn't exist in isolation. It has to see the light of the day and come in contact with the world, it has to have a readership. For him the role of the reader is of utmost significance. Perception and attentiveness of the reader can make or mar the essence of a text. He says that a text becomes itself through the reader, it is the reader who gives a text its significance. It is the indulgence of the reader that makes a text alive and also makes it cater to a certain goal. For Sartre both the freedom of the author as well as the reader are importance, the author shall be free to express and the reader should be free from all the prejudices to get the true spirit of a text, "the writer appeals to the reader's freedom to collaborate in the production of his work" (Sartre). The author creates a world, its revelation is the duty of the reader, and the things which need the most to be revealed are the things unsaid. The silences need to be given a voice, and it is the reader through whom the silences speak. "Reading is a directed creation," says Sartre. Sartre stretches this argument and finally asserts that literature should engage with real life issues and generate awareness.

KEYWORDS: *Engaged Literature, Human Rights, Reader, Author*

INTRODUCTION

Here I attempt to look at Harper Lee's book, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), in the light of Human Rights Literature. The concept of Human Rights Literature emerged from Sartre's formulation of Engaged Literature, by which he means that there is an integral connection between the work of art (here literature) and the reader. Sartre advocates the influential power of literature and focuses on the human rights. He says that every piece of art calls for an action in the end; that literature functions as a mirror both to the oppressor and the oppressed and hence it can work as a tool to mobilise the masses and unite them to work for and towards a universal cause.

To Kill a Mockingbird is an inquiry into the racism and sexism practiced in America. Harper Lee subtly deals with these issues by seeing the world through a child's eyes, Scout Finch, the protagonist. The story is of a black man, Tom Robinson, who is wrongly charged with the rape of a white girl. Scout's father, Atticus Finch, an honest and democratic lawyer has been provided as the legal aid to Tom by the government. The white girl belongs to the Ewell community which stands low on the scale of social hierarchy and is notorious for their ill deeds. Atticus is a generous man, has appointed a nigger as a granny for his kids and is liked by the black community, as the incident where Scout quotes a clergyman bears testimony to it:

'We were especially glad to have you all here,' said Reverend Sykes. 'This church has no better friend than your daddy.'

-Chapter 12

The novel juxtaposes two communities, the black and the lowly white. Lee also touches upon the issues of the identities of mixed people, their respective positions in the society they inhabit, and the issues related to women.

We are told that the Ewell is one of the most corrupt communities in the society, we say this because Scout says:

Atticus said the Ewells had been the disgrace of Maycomb for three generations. None of them had done an honest day's work in his recollection. He said that some Christmas, when he was getting rid of the tree, he would take me with him and show me where and how they lived. They were people but they lived like animals. 'They can go to school any time they want to, when they show the faintest symptoms of wanting an education,' said Atticus. 'There are ways of keeping them in school by force, but it's silly to force the people like Ewells into a new environment-'

-Chapter 3

On one hand we have people like the Ewells who misuse their rights and simultaneously enjoy their privilege over the black community. On the other, we have the people of the black community. They stand lowest on the scale of social hierarchy. They are honest, work hard to earn a livelihood and do not transgress the boundaries prescribed to them but the white community. Yet they are exploited and made scapegoats, not only by the upper white community but by the lower also - Tom is accused of raping a white Ewell girl. In the course of the novel we get to know that Tom never does that, he is a man with a family and has always helped Mayella, the girl who is supposed to be raped, however, it is she who tries to seduce him and in turn gets beaten black and blue by her father when he catches her red handed. Tom knows that he cannot go against the whites therefore runs away in order to escape this situation but ends up landing in a dire trouble. Look at the predicament of the black man. He is not guilty and still he cannot escape the torturous and unjust clutches of the white community, neither could he retaliate against the white girl who tries to seduce her nor can he justify himself, being a black he's destined to be the scapegoat of the whites. As a paragraph narrated by Scout in the novel says:

It occurred to me that in their own way, Tom Robinson's manners were as good as Atticus'. Until my father explained to me later, I did not understand the subtlety of Tom's predicament: he would not have dared strike a white woman under any circumstances and expect to live long, so he took the first opportunity to run – a sure sign of guilt.

-Chapter 19

Court trials are held and everybody gets to know that the accusation is false, that Mayella has not been raped and the marks on her face and body are given by her father when he thrashed her on finding her seducing a black man. Still the decision is taken in the favour of the Ewells and nobody but kids (and a handful of generous white people) feel disheartened, as Atticus replies to Jem (his son) after the final judgement:

I don't know but they did it. They have done it before and they do it tonight and they'll do it again and when they do it – seems that only children weep.

-Chapter 22

Tom Robinson is but one example. There are myriad Toms who suffer on the hands of the white community and are paid no heed. They do not find a place for themselves in the news, not even in the society. Lee intends to generate awareness regarding the issues of racial discrimination by citing one Tom in her novel.

She also looks pays heed to the situation of the mixed people. The coloured people who are born out of one white and one black parent are perhaps the ones who are the most secluded ones. They are accepted by neither of the communities. In one instance Jem explains to Scout:

They are real sad... they don't belong anywhere. Coloured folks won't have 'em because they are half white, white folks won't have 'em because they are coloured, so they are just in-betweens, they don't belong anywhere.

-Chapter 16

Lee gives us another examples of the misery of the lives of the mixed people where she tells us that a new bride shot herself up as soon as she got to know that her spouse's first wife is a mixed woman, and since then the man hasn't overcome this mental trauma and remains drunk all the time.

She also touches upon feminist issues and gives testimonies of discrimination against women regardless of their communities. She talks about the hypocrisy of the church when she makes Scout say:

I was confronted with the Impurity of Women doctrine that seemed to preoccupy all clergymen.

-Chapter 12

The same issue is raised when Miss Maudie, a friend of the Finch family and close to Jem and Scout, tells Scout:

Thing is, foot-washers think women are a sin by definition. They take the Bible literally, you know.... You're too young to understand it, but sometimes the Bible in the hand of one man is worse than a whisky bottle in the hand of— oh, of your father!

-Chapter 5

Lee also raises the issue of discriminatory laws of the government itself, how the government privileges men over women on the basis of as petty a reason as sex. Atticus, when asked by Jem that why Miss Maudie can't enter judiciary, replies:

I was wondering when that would occur to you, there are lots of reasons. For one thing, Miss Maudie can't serve on a jury because she is a woman.

-Chapter 23

She raises the issue of rearing kids. With just one example in the entire novel she raises the big question of the difference in rearing up male and female kids and the internalization of roles prescribed by patriarchy to both the sexes and how they are carried forward - by making kids learn and practice them from their early childhood, the way male kids are let out to play and indulge in outdoor activities and female kids are confined to homely chores.

'Baby,' said Calpurnia, 'I just can't help it if Mister Jem's growin' up. He's gonna want to be off to himself a lot now, doin' whatever boys do, so you just come right on in the kitchen when you feel lonesome. We'll find lots of things to do in here.'

The beginning of that summer boded well: Jem could do as he pleased; Calpurnia would do until Dill came. She seemed glad to see me when I appeared in the kitchen.

-Chapter 12

In another instance in the novel we see how women are treated differently on the basis of their social ranking. When Mayella gets piqued and thinks that she's being mocked when Atticus addresses her by the term 'Ma'am', Lee through her child narrator says:

I wondered if anybody ever called her 'ma'am' or 'Miss Mayella' in her life; probably not, as she took offence at routine courtesy. What on earth was her life like? I soon found out.

-Chapter 18

We get to see class difference at work here. The upper-class women are addressed with courtesy while the lower class does not practice this etiquette, rather a lower class woman gets offended when addressed by such adjectives because she feels mocked.

All the issues related to women that have been talked about pertain to white women. Lee doesn't speak anything about the black women. They do not find a place for themselves in Lee's novel. However, we have one mixed race woman, she comes like a flash and is forgotten in a moment. We are never introduced to her. We know about her because Scout sees a lady carrying a black child but is alienated and inquires Jem about her, Jem tells her that they are the mixed ones and that is why she and her child are alienated by both the communities.

Towards the fag end the novel plays a pun on democracy. The ongoing practices that we witness do not, surely, appear to be one of a democratic state. But what the kids are being taught at the school is:

"We are a democracy."

We said it. Then Miss Gates said, 'That's the difference between America and Germany. We are a democracy and Germany is a dictatorship,' she said. 'Over here we do not believe in persecuting anybody. Persecution comes from people who are prejudiced. Pre-ju-dice,' she enunciated carefully.

-Chapter 26

In the novel we see the opposite of what the teacher teaches her students at work. The world in the novel seems to be a dictatorship of the white community. People, the blacks, are persecuted in this world. They are vulnerable and exposed to the torturous regime of the white community. The blacks in the novel are better than the Ewells who stand lowest in the hierarchy of the white community, yet they are below the Ewells in the social hierarchy of races and also subject to their torture, who find no place for themselves even among the whites. There are quite a few people in the novel-like the kids, their father, Atticus, Miss Maudie, the judge-who ponders over these issues and gets troubled. Rest of the gentry seems to be indifferent.

The novel deals with the issues of racism and sexism. Lee subtly lays bare the workings of colonialism and patriarchy. She makes her readers question and interrogate these discriminations by engaging them with these issues with the help of a child narrator. Only the kids in the novel seem to have a sound reasoning because their minds have yet not been poisoned by any external social force or practice. Their innocence makes readers indulge with the issues Harper Lee

tries to raise. Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* serves as an excellent example of a work of Human Rights Literature. Being a novel, a work of literature, it advocates human rights by making its readers ponder over the issues it deals with.

There can be many readings of *To Kill a Mockingbird* or someone can read it just for his own pleasure in leisure time. Here, anadialecical relationship is set up between the author (Lee) and the reader (me), the reader engages with the issues the novel deals with and hence the text comes alive. Sartre says:

Thus, the author writes in order to address himself to the freedom of the readers, and he requires it order to make the work exist. But he does not stop there; he also requires that they return his confidence which he has given them, that they recognize his creative freedom, and that they in turn solicit it by a symmetrical and inverse appeal. Here there appears the other dialectical paradox of reading; the more we experience our freedom, the more we recognize that of the other; the more he demands of us, the more we demand of him.

-Sartre, Why Write, *What is Literature?*

Sartre's concept of Engaged Literature thus comes alive here. In this paper we see an integral connection between the text and the reader. There's also a relationship between the author and the reader. The silences of the text, the things left unsaid only to be given voice by the reader have been addressed. The engagement here is in the terms of human rights, the issues of exploitation of one community by the other, and the dominance of one sex over another have been addressed. Thus, the novel qualifies Sartre's parameters and serves as a piece of Human Rights Literature.

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