

THE CHILDREN'S ENTRY INTO THE SYMBOLIC WORLD IN LEE'S
TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

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Abstract

In a whole lifetime a human being goes through various psychological changes. He/she has to go through different psychological stages. Psychology says that the changes mainly occur in our childhood. A child or an infant after its birth gradually steps in different stages and faces the world. It soon comes to know the system of the society in which it is reared. In Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* we get three such children who gradually come to know the systems of their world. They are like cocoon coming out of its shell. Jem, Dill and Scout face the world when Atticus started fighting for Tom, a nigger. Their world of fantasy breaks down when the trial does not go in Tom's favour. Though it is proved that Tom is not guilty, he is judgmentally sentenced imprisonment only because he is a black. Simultaneously, the three children become aware with "rape." Atticus tells them that it is a "carnal knowledge." Suddenly, they are brought from the semiotic world to the symbolic world. In this paper I have tried to discuss how their psychological changes occur and their infantile megalomania breaks down.

Keywords: race; psychology; identity; infantile megalomania; rape; Negro; aggressivity; frustration.

Through Tom Robinson's case the three children in the novel, Jim, Dill and Scout, have been moved into the world of colour. The division between white and black races has become clear to them. Atticus' defense of Tom was legal to his children. The loyal and legal Atticus knew from his sense and conscience that Tom was not guilty. Rather, it might have been a trick against Tom, only because he was a Negro. So, he undertook his case and fought for him in court against his "white" racial brothers. He tried to save Tom's life though he knew that it would not have been possible for him.

When Scout, the narrator, charged her father with the question, “Do you defend niggers, Atticus?” Atticus had to reply unpleasantly that he was “defending a Negro—his name’s Tom Robinson.” (Lee, 83) He told Scout about Tom, but briefed it by saying that “Scout, you aren’t old enough to understand some things yet, but there’s been some high talk around town to the effect that I shouldn’t do much about defending this man.” (Lee, 83) Scout was a child still though she could perceive and make out what was going on around her. To her the idea was still not clear. Jem, Dill and Scout were entering the world where there was distinction between men; where there was divisions between caste and creed. Maycomb was a place to them that led them into the broader world where the divisions and distinctions were made by the human beings. A White man was superior to a Negro. The Negro were more supposed to be of a lower class. Their world seemed to be different to them. In America the Negroes were the slaves. Even in the Renaissance times the slavery could not be done away with. In Du Bois’s book *The Negro* in the chapter headed ‘Africa’ he raises the question “What is a Negro?” and of which he tries to find out some definition historically, “There is a certain type in the minds of most people which, as David Livingstone said, can be found only in caricature and not in real life.” (Bois, 7) Again he quotes from Winwood Reade that the typical Negro is a very “rare variety” and it is difficult to find out even among the Negroes. (Bois, 7) But their geographical origin points at Africa. But in this case to Scout, the problem is not regarding their origin. The problem here is about the justice. In his interpretation of W.T. Washington August Meier says that Washington urged the Negroes to stay in south and he urged the White people “to lend a helping hand in the uplifting of the Negroes in order to further the prosperity and the well-being of their region.” (Meier, 100) Scout also noticed Atticus’ love for the Negroes. He asked Scout, “Don’t say nigger, Scout. That’s common.” (Lee, 83) Later on, they could see even in the court how Atticus tried his best to save the life of Tom. To him Tom was not only a case in which he had to win but that was a case of honesty, faith and above all humanity. To Atticus Tom was not a Negro or nigger, but he was a human being. Atticus believed in his conscience that Tom was never a guilty. He surely had been trapped because he was a Negro, a black. In a case against a Negro the White people had always won and Tom’s case was not an exception. Atticus explained, “This case, Tom Robinson’s case, is something that goes to the essence of a man’s conscience—Scout, I couldn’t go to church and worship God if I didn’t try to help that man.” (Lee, 116)

The caste system in Maycomb was in clearly visible in the narrator’s mind from her childhood. In the beginning part of the novel she comments, “A Negro would not pass the Radley Place at night, he would cut across to the sidewalk opposite and whistle as he walked.” Then she tells about the First Purchase African M.E. Church that the “Negroes worshipped in it on Sundays and white men gambled in it on weekdays.” (Lee, 130) Herein we find the African church system about which Du Bois said in his chapter entitled ‘The Negro in the United States’ that the African pries had enormous power even in the state of Negro slavery. “The Negro priest, therefore, early became an important figure on the plantation and found his function as the interpreter of the supernatural, the comforter of the sorrowing, as the one who expressed, rudely but picturesquely, the longing and disappointment and resentment of a stolen people.” (Bois, 113) Negro church arose from this. As we find in the novel it can be divided into two parts: the first part tells about the childhood days of the three children and the second part leads us to their adolescence. But the idea about the caste distinction according to colour remained the same in their minds.

Scout and Jem were very anxious about the term “nigger-lover” when they heard outside that their father was called with that name. They felt that it was quite humiliation. It pained them. Being confused, one evening Scout asked her father about it and got a clear and generous answer: “ ‘Atticus,’ I said one evening, ‘what exactly is a nigger-lover?’” In reply Atticus said, “ ‘Scout,’ said Atticus, ‘nigger-lover is just one of those terms that don’t mean anything—like snot-nose. It’s hard to explain—ignorant, trashy people use it when they think somebody’s favouring Negroes over and above themselves.’” (Lee 120) But he acknowledged that he certainly was a nigger-lover.

In adolescence Scout entered another world of “carnal knowledge.” She did not find the meaning of “rape” to Calpurnia. When she asked, “...what’s ape, Cal?” she got the answer, “It’s somethin’ you have to ask Mr Finch about.” (Lee, 137) Later when Scout asked the meaning of “rape” to her father, “He sighed, and said rape was carnal knowledge of a female by force and without consent.” (Lee, 149) With it Scout enters the world of gender and sexuality where there is opposition, not only between white and black people, but between men and women also. There is sexuality; there is rivalry; there is opposition and hierarchy. What is more important here? The rape of a girl, or the rape of a white by a black? Both colour and gender are equally important as soon as they enter the semiotic world.

During the trial the difference between the white and the black becomes more prominent. In the court the sitting arrangements divide the white people from the “coloured” mob. “In the corner of the square, the Negroes sat quietly in the sun, on sardines, crackers, and the more vivid flaviours of Nehi Cola.” (Lee, 176) Scout, Jem and Dill sit with the coloured folk, not be discovered by Atticus who forbade them to come to the trial. Sitting amidst the Negroes, they found Mr. Dolphus Raymond among the coloured folk. Mr. Raymond’s preference of the coloured folk was known to Scout and Jem.

Mr Raymond once loved a coloured woman and “all sorts of mixed chillun.” Mixed race was another new term that was thus introduced to Scout. Jem told her that a mixed child is “half white, half coloured.” But the fate of these mixed children is uncertain. These people belong to nowhere. Coloured folks don’t grant them because they are half white and the white people don’t allow them as they are half coloured. So a mixed child is oscillated like a pendulum. Jem informed Scout that the Negroes at first came from Ethiopia during the Old Testament. But, now, having a drop of a Negro blood would make one mixed and would cause the lack of identity. In a world where the white people rule in the hierarchy, Negro and the mixed both are despised equally. Negroes are always at the margin. This marginal identity is also clear from their waiting “for the white people to go upstairs” (Lee, 180). Even when Jem and Scout entered the courtroom and found no seat among the white people, Negroes arranged space for them to sit there. “Four Negroes rose and gave front-row seats.” (Lee, 181) The seating arrangement inside the courtroom was also a division with which the children became newly familiar.

As soon as the trial began, the system of the world started to be clear to the children. They witnessed a system with which they were not familiar. Tom’s crime was not grave because he raped a girl, but because he was a Negro. For that reason even after the revelation of the truth, he was sentenced as a criminal. Tom’s commitment of his suicide was his freedom. It was his freedom from the coloured skin. It was his liberation from the assumption about which Atticus said, “that all Negroes lie, that all Negroes are basically immoral beings, that all Negro men are not to be trusted around our women, an assumption one associates with minds of their caliber.”

(Lee, 225) But Atticus's own assumption was different. According to him, "some Negroes lie, some Negroes are immoral, some Negro men are not to be trusted around women—black and white." (Lee, 226) He was correct in saying that men's attraction towards women do not depend on any particular race. Every living man looks upon a woman with desire. But this statement is not beyond attack. Atticus's own assumption rejected the "queer" people. There are many queer who because of their attraction towards men do not look upon women with desire. Their subject of desire is different. Only the bisexuals among them look upon women with desire.

Before ending his day's arguments Atticus raised Thomas Jefferson's comment on the equality of every human being. He exemplified that every human being on earth was not equal because in many respects everyone is different. But then he praised that only in the Supreme Court of the United States there was equality. He requested the court to judge the case "without passion" (Lee, 227), but unfortunately the result of the trial was not judged impassionedly. The result the court brought showed no justice. Jem was confident about the winning of Tom. But Reverend Sykes showed his concern about the history of such cases.

"Jem smiled, 'He's not supposed to lean, Reverend, but don't fret, we've won it,' he said wisely. 'Don't see how any jury could convict on what we heard—'

'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...'" (Lee, 230)

Now that, the judgment was not impartial or unbiased. It was prejudiced. The cognitive theory of prejudice cannot explain the case simply as this theory gives stress on the lack of information and the oversimplification of the case. This theory follows that, "since the ability of human beings to process information is limited while the social world is complex, we tend to oversimplify the available information about ethnic groups, which leads to biased judgments." (Yang, 125) Hence, this theory rejects the assumption that prejudice is intentional and motivational. In Tom's case the result was preconceived because a member of an ethnic group couldn't and shouldn't get privilege against the White people. Reverend Sykes was a clear observer of this result. Whatever the truth could be, a 'black' should not be set free against a 'white.' It was neither intentional, nor motivational; rather, it was conventional.

The result of the trial stirred the infant minds. Jem was expecting to get the positive result. But when the trial was not in favour of Tom and Tom had to commit suicide, the children were moved at the ending. Their whole world seemed to be stirred. What Tom and Scout were expecting from Tom's trial was not their concern for "reality." They expected that whatever they wanted, they would get it. It was their infantile megalomania. Mitchell says, "In psychoses such as paraphrenia, then, the libido is drawn away from objects back into the self. This, Freud proposed, coincided with an obviously observable phase of childhood—infantile megalomania—when the child believes it only has to wish for something for it to materialize, its own 'magic' controls the world." (Mitchell, 32) Mitchell says that the first situation is a kind of narcissism when the self of the child, in this case the self of Jem, loves the self, his ego. When he finds that his self-love has been attacked by the trial, his identity is returned. In this situation he becomes aggressive. Herein, Lacan's fourth thesis on aggressivity is noted because aggressivity is the correlated tendency with narcissism. "Aggressivity is the correlative tendency of a mode of identification that we call narcissistic, and which determines the formal structure of man's ego and of the register of entities characteristic of his world." (Lacan, 18)

Psychotic developments were noted in Jem's sudden ailment after the hearing of the trial. Lacan further elaborates, "Thus, with the *infans* (pre-verbal) stage of early childhood, the situation of spectacular absorption is permanently tied: the child observed, the emotional reaction (pale), and this reactivation of images of primordial frustration (with an envenomed stare) that are the psychical and somatic co-ordinates of original aggressivity." (Lacan, 22, 23) In Jem, this psychotic development can be seen as soon as he enters the verbal stage. Here, ego is at the centre of all the resistances. Jem's sickness at the frustration caused by the unexpected injustice to Tom by the American jury was also his coming out of the spell of narcissism. His identity shatters. This is also similar to the frustration-aggression theory. "This theory states that frustration always leads to the desire to aggress, and that all aggression is caused by frustration. Frustration is caused when people are prevented from having something they want." (Sanderson, 386)

To conclude, through the trial the children of Maycomb are led from the semiotic world to the symbolic world. The aggressivity, the psychotic developments and the frustrations notable in them are not personal; rather, these are common with any child or adolescent. We have to go through mental as well as psychological changes towards maturity in different stages of our life. In childhood and adolescence this transition is more notable. But the entry in a racial world and in the world where "rape" is more enjoyed as a "carnal knowledge" shatters the mental state of a child. Hence, the darker sides of our postmodern and postcolonial society impress much on their minds and it leads them to their psychotic world.

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