



Reinterpretation of 'The Dark' in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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Abstract

Harper Lee's 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, set in the fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama, during the days of the Great Depression in 1930s is based on child character Scout Finch's observation of the people of her town as well as her family members. One of the striking features of the novel is the presence of the dark elements in their lives. Darkness held terror for the children but as they obtain a better understanding of the world around them, they realise that darkness is not so frightening after all. The prejudiced and often ignorant Maycomb community of gossip mongers ensure that the kids grow up in apprehension of the worst possible situations to be faced. However, Atticus instils confidence and empathy among his children. This paper investigates how darkness is interpreted in a new light by the characters of the novel.

Gratitude for the enigmatic Boo Radley who comes out of darkness to save their lives and witnessing the trial of an innocent black man who is punished literally due to his coloured status; all these make the children come off age and see the world not entirely in black and white but also in shades of grey. The present research paper discusses the reinterpretation of the 'dark elements' of the novel in the illuminated gaze of awareness and maturity.

Keywords: apprehension, darkness, discrimination, humanity, jury, monstrous, prejudice.

Introduction

Not always marked by the absence of light in the physical sense, 'darkness' represents ignorance, prejudice or narrow-minded beliefs, all leading to perpetuation of injustice in one

way or the other. Absence of the light of knowledge, empathy and benevolence, creates situations difficult for sustenance of life.

Fear of darkness or prejudice against the dark or coloured folks is a distinguishing

characteristic of Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, set in the fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama between 1933 and 1935, a period marked by the Great Depression. The novel presents the turbulent lives of Southern American people, resonating with the actual life experience of its author Harper Lee's childhood days. As the story progresses, the children, who are a witness to a life of poverty, ignorance and prejudiced beliefs of their town folk, emerge as mature individuals with a clearer understanding of the ways of people and life in general.

Literature review

Literature abounds with many critical reviews of Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Critical analysis of the novel with respect to themes like racism, pro-white contents, lessons of morality and social issues like poverty, discrimination between individuals belonging to other backgrounds etc. are available in great numbers. However, the theme of reinterpretation of the dark in the presence of light is an area where a research gap was discerned and hence the beginning of the present research paper.

The methodology of the research is based on a thorough reading of Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* as the primary text, followed by a systematic and critical analysis of research papers and books pertinent to the topic of the present research paper.

Darkness as an enigmatic force

Narrated by the six-year-old Girl Scout Finch, this novel explores the vicissitudes of life when observed from the eyes of a child. The narrative also provides a glimpse of the adult world marked by malevolence and injustice towards prejudiced and marginalised people.

A very significant aspect of the novel is its representation of the darker elements of existence. It pertains to not only the absence of light, but also to the darkness lurking within the human heart which is capable of creating havoc

in life. Hatred for the dark or coloured people is narrated with precise accuracy of those times.

When Atticus Finch, the father of Scout and Jem decides to take up the case of a marginalised and innocent black man as a lawyer, the entire community of the Whites rebels against him. He is called a 'nigger-lover' as a way of insinuation. Atticus however, remains unfazed in his determination to provide justice to the falsely accused black man.

The Maycomb County was a rather small community with a mixed population comprising white as well as black people. The black people lived in the outskirts of Maycomb, often in filthy conditions and poor hygiene. Each community had its own church and was constituted by both the good as well as the bad folk.

The initial adventures and fantasy of the children rest on the dark and gloomy residence of the Radleys. The Radleys were very queer neighbours who hardly communicated with anyone in the vicinity. Many kinds of rumours ran among the town about one of the Radley boys who lay confined within closed doors, was a monstrous figure. His name was Boo Radley. The darkness of the Radley house surroundings used to excite the imagination of the kids and they played daredevil games, challenging each other to touch the closed Radleys gate and be back safely. Scout and her brother Jem literally crossed the Radley yard while going to school, running in haste. Boo Radley's house, the centre of all the mysteries and fantasies, was described to be located in darkness.

"The house was low, was once white with a deep front porch and green shutters, but had long ago darkened to the colour of the slate-grey yard around it. Rain-rotten shingles dropped over the eaves of the veranda; oak trees kept the sun away" (9).

A great deal of rumour-mongering about the Radleys had let the kids to believe that the most malevolent, violent and ruthless creature

in the name of Boo Radley, resided in the house of the Radleys. Anything wrong which took place with people, was attributed to him. The kids were in thorough apprehension of any untoward happening just due to the presence of the monstrous, lunatic creature in the Radley house, hidden by darkness and prevented by chains from entering the lives of others.

"Inside the house lived a malevolent phantom. People said he existed but Jem and I had never seen him. People said he went out at night when the moon was high, and peeped in windows. When people's azaleas froze in a cold snap, it was because he had breathed on them. Any stealthy crimes committed in Macomb were his work" (09).

Not having even once set their eyes on Boo Radley, the children created his form in their wildest imagination possible. Together, Scout, Dill and Jem, weave a most ridiculous and improbable yarn around the probable personality of Boo Radley.

'Jem gave a reasonable description of Boo. Boo was about six-and-a-half feet tall, judging from his tracks; he dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch, that's why his hands were blood-stained. If you ate an animal raw, you could never wash the blood off. There was a long-jagged scar that ran across his face; what teeth he had were yellow and rotten; his eyes popped, and he drooled most of the time' (14).

Atticus' humanity

Whenever the children took great delight in the Boo Radley narrative, Atticus reprimanded them and asked them to mind their own business.

Atticus himself was a stalwart for taking up the law suits of discriminated and often poor black folk. He was a humanitarian who believed that it takes all to make this world. He recognized the presence of the forces, good as well as evil. He fights for the rights of a black man falsely accused of molesting a white woman. In his arguments in the court, Atticus

almost proved the innocence of Tom Robinson, the black person whose life lay in the hands of the jury, made up of all the white people only.

As he concludes his address to the jury, Atticus appealed to the jury to provide justice to the innocent black man as everyone is equal before the law.

"I am no idealist to believe firmly in the integrity of our courts and the jury system that is no ideal to me; it is a living, working reality. Gentleman, a court is no better than each man of you sitting before me on the jury. A court is only as sound as its jury, and a jury is only as sound as the men who make it up. I am confident that you gentlemen will review without passion the evidence you have heard, come to a decision, and restore the defendant to his family. In the name of God, do your duty" (227).

Dissipation of Darkness

The bravery of Atticus Finch, combined with his humanity leads to the conviction of the otherwise prejudiced people about the likelihood of the innocence of Tom Robinson. He impressed upon the gathering that Tom Robinson should not be framed for a crime he hasn't committed. Just because he is a black man, does not make him guilty. However, the jury did not acquit him of the rape charges. He was sent to another jail where he was killed while attempting to escape from the prison.

On another occasion, Atticus was guarding the life of his client Tom Robinson in the Maycomb Jail. A group of whites reached the jail asking Atticus to handover the prisoner so that they could kill him. It was an angry mob of a few people who were adamant on taking law in their hands.

Incidentally, Atticus' children Scout and Jem reached the jail and found a mob of drunk and violent people who were ready to even kill Atticus if he came in their way of seizing Tom Robinson to punish him. Though the situation was awkward, Scout, all of a sudden started a friendly chat on recognising one of her

classmate's father in the mob. In the little girl's own words:

"I looked around the crowd. It was a summer's night but the men were dressed, most of them, in overalls and denim shirts buttoned up to the collars. I thought they must be cold-natured, as their sleeves were unrolled and buttoned at the cuffs. Some wore hats pulled firmly down over their ears. They were sullen-looking sleepy-eyed men who seemed unused to late hours. I sought once more for a familiar face, and at the centre of the semi-circle, I found one" (168).

Scout strikes a conversation with her class-fellow's father.

"Hey, Mr Cunningham, How's your entailment getting along?"

Don't you remember me, Mr Cunningham? I am Jean Louise Finch. You brought us some hickory nuts one time, remember? I began to sense the futility one feels when unacknowledged by a chance acquaintance. 'I go to the school with Walter,' I began again. He's your boy, ain't he? Ain't he, sir?

Mr Cunningham was moved to a faint nod. He did know me, after all. (169)

All of a sudden, Mr Cunningham melted down and acknowledged Scout. He changed his mind about being vindictive towards Atticus or Tom Robinson. He ordered all the men who had come with an aim of creating problem to go back. "As they had come, in ones and twos, the men shuffled back to their ramshackle cars. Doors slammed, engines coughed, and they were gone." (Lee, 170)

Thus, a little human touch provided by Scout manages to do away with the darkness of evil thoughts uppermost in the minds of the violent mob. One of the key aspects in the process of dissipation of darkness is the practice of empathy as advised by Atticus to be practiced by his kids.

An extract from the dissertation titled 'Empathy and Masculinity in Harper Lee's 'To Kill a Mockingbird' by Richard H. McAdams is relevant in this context:

"To begin, Atticus tries to teach Scott empathy. One of the famous lines of the novel is when Atticus says: If you can be a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view- until you climb into his skin and walk around in it. (33)

Atticus believes in following his conscience. Driven by a sense of duty towards humanity, he fights for the disadvantaged Tom Robinson, little thinking of his own self. He compromised the safety of his family and boldly stands against what he knows injustice being meted out to an underprivileged black person. His moral superiority is beyond question.

As an excerpt from John Abercrombie's book *The Philosophy of the Moral Feelings* reveals:

"One of the chief diversities of human character, indeed, arises from the circumstance of one man being habitually influenced by the simple and straight-forward principle of duty, and another merely by a kind of context between desires and motives of a very inferior or selfish nature. Thus, also we acquire a knowledge of the moral temperament of different men, and learn to adapt our measures accordingly in our transactions with them. In endeavouring, for example, to excite three individuals to some act of usefulness, we come to know that in one we have only to appeal to his sense of duty; in another to his vanity or love of approbation; while we have no hope of making any impression on the third, unless we can make it appear to bear upon his interest" (35).

Thus, we find that Atticus is a man with a mission, who looks beyond the dark image of a black man and takes upon himself the arduous task of providing justice to an innocent man pitted against a society in the throes of dark impulses of racial prejudices.

While Tom Robinson's case was being discussed in the court, Scout and Dill happen to encounter Mr Dolphus Raymond and are shocked at the revelation of his true nature. Though a wealthy white man, he preferred to live among the blacks in Maycomb with his black wife and children. He deliberately creates the impression of being a drunkard while he in fact used to drink Coca-Cola from a brown paper bag. He masks his real affection for his black family by acting to be a hopeless drunkard, so that he is not much targeted for his choice.

When Dill and Scout express astonishment at Mr Raymond's deliberate make believe persona of a spoilt person when in reality he was a genuine lover of his black family, Mr Raymond remarks: "It ain't honest, but it's mighty helpful to folks. Secretly, Miss Finch, I'm not much of a drinker but you see, they could never, never understand that I live like I do because that's the way I want to live" (221).

This was Mr Raymond's way of keeping the whites off his back while he could live peacefully with his family of blacks. This revelation about the true nature of Mr Dolphus Raymond is another instance of removal of darkness, as the children are pleasantly surprised to learn that appearance could be deceptive.

MitziAnn Stiltnes, in his dissertation 'Don't Put Your Shoes on the Bed: A Moral Analysis of To Kill a Mockingbird' suggests: "Historians often claim that history teaches so it does not repeat itself. In 'To Kill a Mockingbird', Lee depicts a piece of history to encourage an audience to begin looking

differently at each other and their own prejudices" (22).

Ewells, the white man responsible for framing Tom Robinson and leading him towards death, happens to attack Jem and Scout with a fatal blow in the darkness of night. From the same darkness emerges the heroic figure of Boo Radley, who kills the demonic Ewells, thwarting his murderous attempt to harm the Finches. Thus, as the events unfold, the kids discover that Boo Radley, who lived in the dark, desolate house, comes forth as their rescuer, nothing less than an angelic figure. The darkness of the Radley abode which used to frighten the children, yielded their benefactor in the name of Boo Radley. Little Scout acknowledges the necessity of darkness in the life of their rescuer Boo Radley and makes him sit in the shadowy corner of her house, as a mark of respect for his identity as a dweller of darkness. "Feeling slightly unreal, I led him to the chair farthest from Atticus and Mr Tate. It was in deep shadow. Boo would feel more comfortable in the dark." (Lee, 299)

One of the major factors in their reinterpretation of darkness in the novel is the positive role played by Atticus, who by the dent of his personal integrity, teaches his kids valuable life lessons. Maureen E. Markey, in her research article in *North Caroline Central Law Review*, opines:

'If rationality and civility are the hallmarks of Atticus' demeanour, then empathy is the hallmark of Atticus' character. He displays good, healthy emotions such as love and compassion, but it does not seem to be plagued by negative ones. He teaches tolerance and empathy by repeatedly encouraging Scout to try walking in someone else's shoes before making a judgment, a skill he himself consistently practices. Atticus wants Scout to develop empathy in regard to everyone, not just those whose values reflect his. Atticus' goal in not for

Scout to adopt the view of those with whom she empathizes, but rather that Scout will learn love, kindness, and understanding" (173).

Conclusion

Towards the end of the novel, Scout and Jem, who had been reading *The Grey Ghost*, reach an astonishing conclusion similar to that about their concept of Boo Radley. Boo Radley who was much feared by the kids initially, proves to be their life saviour later on. In a similar vein the Grey Ghost story suggests that its most enigmatic character was after all, not malignant, but innocent and benign.

As the children read-

"Yeah, an' they all thought it was stoners Boy messin up their clubhouse an' throwin' ink all over it an' ..."

An' they chased him 'n' never could catch him cause they didn't know what he looked like, an Atticus, when they finally saw him, why he hadn't done any of those things --- Atticus, he was really nice--? "Most people are Scout, when you finally see them" (309).

When exposed to darkness for the first time (physical or metaphysical), the human mind feels afraid and uneasy. It imagines the presence of various kinds of malevolence in darkness. Only when the light of positivity, hope and benevolence is reflected upon the dark corners of life, does the true nature of things unfold. As the children watch the happenings of the world around them, coupled with positive reinforcement of morality by Atticus, they realise that darkness has to be approached with understanding, without fear. An open-minded attitude and humanity dispel the darkness of ignorance and misunderstanding and leads to accurate inferences about life and situations. In a similar way, Atticus proves beyond doubt that racism is anti- human and is nothing but darkness of the mind.

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