



Research Paper

Maycomb County: From Mud to the Stars: An Analysis of the Concinnity of Voices in Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird

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ABSTRACT: This paper titled *Maycomb County: From Mud to the Stars: An Analysis of the Concinnity of Voices in Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird* attempts to establish the presence of diverse voices in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This paper develops on the concept of polyphony put forward by Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. Polyphony is the presence of multiple voices within the unity of a single work. In this novel, through the voices of many characters, a complete picture of Maycomb County, "from mud to the stars" is depicted.

The polyphonic reason behind the continuing relevance of the novel is stated. The conclusion sums up how *To Kill a Mockingbird* becomes a truly polyphonic novel, truthfully depicting the voices of all the different kinds of people in the twentieth century United States of America.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Of all the books written about racial conflicts, Nelle Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is particularly poignant and unforgettable. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a powerful critique of racism; it is famous for its sensitive and authentic portrayal of different groups of people.

Set in the sleepy little town of Maycomb, the novel covers the time span of two years from 1933 to 1935. The work clearly captures the crushing economic crisis and boiling social tensions of the 1930s. The African Americans, though freed from slavery after the American Civil War (1861-65) were denied equal access to voting, education and employment. The Great Depression of 1929 had the worst effect on the agricultural Southern economy. Many of the Whites were unemployed and found themselves competing with landless African Americans for jobs. The belief that African Americans are inherently inferior and need the firm white hand to help them lead good lives was rampant in the South. There was also a persistent fear that African Americans would attempt to take over the white world by marrying the Whites and producing mixed children. African American men were considered a threat to the White woman's purity. This fear was responsible for several unjust events like the case of the Scottsboro Boys. Many real life cases could have served as the basis for the accusation and trial of Tom Robinson.

Essentially a coming-of-age story, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been described as a "wedding of social relevance to literary aesthetics" (Hovet and Hovet). The core of the plot is the alleged rape of a White woman by a Black man and how Atticus Finch, the upright and noble father of Scout Finch takes upon himself the task of defending the accused. He fails and Tom Robinson, the wrongly convicted man is shot dead when he, fully aware of his desperate situation, tries to escape prison. These events influence Scout and her brother Jem profoundly. The novel brings to light the voices, attitudes and views of the people of Maycomb. In fact, these voices construct the novel and a view of the society.

Mikhail Mikhaioovich Bakhtin was a Russian thinker. Polyphony is one of his famous concepts, which he formulated when he was analysing the works of Dostoevsky. Polyphony literally means "many voices". Polyphony was brought to the renewed attention of the literary world when Svetlana Alexievich was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2015 for her polyphonic writing.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, "We have a cross section of humanity: men and women, young and old, good and bad, white and black" (Dave 40). The novel is rich with multiple voices making it polyphonic. This paper is an attempt to trace the instances of polyphony in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, to study the voices presented and analyse the conditions of the society in a Southern state of the United States of America in the 1930s.

Voices from the South: White, Black and Grey

One of the amazing things about the writing in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the economy with which Harper Lee delineates not only race—white and black within a small community—but class. I mean different kinds of black people and white people both, from poor white trash to the upper crust—the whole social fabric. (Murphy 178)

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* provided a space for the articulation of a multitude of voices. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a novel that defined an era, when a novel is praised as the documentation of a particular place at a particular time, it becomes worthy of the praise if only it succeeds in depicting all of the chronotope, particularly the different voices there; this is exactly what *To Kill a Mockingbird* does.

“Mikhail Mikhaiovich Bakhtin (1895-1975) was without doubt the most astonishingly productive thinker in the Humanities to emerge from Soviet Russia and one of the twentieth century's most significant theoreticians of literature” (Renfrew 1). Bakhtin's emergence from obscurity unhinged the world of humanities. Bakhtin was a Russian who survived the darkest years in the history of his country. His major works are *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, *The Dialogic Imagination* and *Rabelais and His World*.

Heteroglossia, dialogism, polyphony and carnivalesque are the main concepts put forward by Bakhtin. Polyphony is the concept applied here. The term polyphony has its origin in music. It refers to music in which two or more simultaneous lines of melody are used. Polyphony as a concept of literature was first explained in Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Dostoevsky was acclaimed by Bakhtin as the creator of the polyphonic novel. Polyphony is described as, “A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses. . .” (Bakhtin 6). Bakhtin believed that Dostoevsky, by creating a polyphonic world, destroyed the established form of the homophonic European novel. Polyphony is seen when the author gives great freedom to the voice of the characters. In a polyphonic novel, the characters' voices reach the reader without being diluted by the authorial voice.

In Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the reader can find that the accommodation of multiple voices has been made possible by the meticulous construction of the voice of the narrator. This novel is narrated by six-year-old Scout. The voice of the young, innocent and unscrupulous Scout is precisely that which makes *To Kill a Mockingbird* a polyphonic novel. Harper Lee seems to consciously choose the voice of young Scout, even though, upon scrutinizing the events of the story, they may seem a little too adult for the young narrator. In order to ensure that all the other voices in the novel are heard without compromising their independence and validity, Scout is the apt person for narrating the events in the novel. It is evident in the novel that she has very little awareness about the complicated divisions which exist in the society both economic and racial. An instance which can be cited is her innocent question why Mr. Cunningham is paying Atticus using agricultural produce. Even after he tells her about the former's poverty, she treats him without any condescension, because she is quite incapable of that. Her notions of racial and economic layers are very shallow and untainted by the prejudices which clutter the minds of worldly wise adults. This could be partly because of her age and also due to her upbringing. Atticus teaches Scout the most important lesson when he asks her to put herself in another's position before judging him or her, this kind of an advice prompts Scout to open her mind and treat people in a less biased manner.

It would be wrong to state that Scout's opinions are entirely unbiased and unprejudiced. But among the three important characters in the novel, she is the best choice to depict the voices. Atticus who spends his days in his room in the courthouse would not be able to give a perspective on the neighborhood whose diversity is unmatched. Atticus being Atticus would crowd the novel with his resonant thoughts on the state of racial discrimination and parental concerns.

Another character who could have been the narrator was Jem Finch, but he was a little too old, not quite innocent of the ways of the world as Scout and he would never be able to afford the freedom of expression Scout conferred upon the multiple voices in the novel. Jem in the novel is on the verge of his teen years and his volatile nature would have pulverized the polyphonic picture by clouding it with his emotional conflicts. Jem was a little too old, quite more judgmental than Scout, besides he would have been unable to bring out the voice of the Southern ladies, chiefly Aunt Alexandra, simply because the latter never tried to make a lady out of him. Thus Scout is able to voice yet another aspect, gender, which the others would never be able to portray effectively.

The plot is set in the closely connected town of Maycomb which is apt for the polyphonic novel to blossom. Maycomb is, “a microcosm of the South” (Erisman 24). The geographical size of Maycomb and its closed community are a major reason behind the polyphonic nature of the novel. The author strikes the right balance between a town just large enough to include a multitude of voices, at the same time small enough to ensure they are heard. Maycomb is strategically located in the racially vicious state of Alabama where the alleged rape of a White woman by a Black man would be bound to draw a flourishing riot of voices. In the novel, Scout remarks, “There was no need for Aunt Alexandra to identify herself; people in Maycomb know each other's voices” (Lee 290).

To Kill a Mockingbird presents the complete picture of Maycomb. In this novel, the voices of numerous characters are presented. The voices have been represented without any silencing based on racial or economic boundaries, they are clean and pure, no pretentious masking or euphemistic prose has been employed. The voices covered in the novel gives the experience of having actually lived in a 1930s Southern town.

Thus we hear not only from the white middle class but also from such people as the drug-addicted Mrs. Dubose . . . themiscegenationist, Dolphus Raymond; and a variety of individuals from the black community. But most significantly, members of the group considered “white trash” are given the opportunity to speak. (Hovet and Hovet)

No voices, including the minority ones such as the voice of the Blacks and the White trash have been muffled. To Kill a Mockingbird is an exploration of the race relationships which existed in a typical Southern society in the United States of America during the 1930s. Through the eyes of Scout, the equation between those communities which existed within the racial divide and the peculiarities of the Southern way of life has been revealed.

Jean Louise Finch better known as Scout recounts her childhood in this novel, but the tale is told from the perspective of the six-year-old Scout. The voice of both mature Scout and the younger Scout can be detected. The voice of the younger Scout dominates the novel, with the older voice surfacing on certain occasions, like the instance when Scout overhears Atticus talking with his brother; while the younger Scout is dumbfounded that Atticus caught her eavesdropping, the worldly-wise older voice remarks that Atticus had intended Scout to hear every word he said.

Scout puts the tomboy-lady conundrum to the forefront as she candidly says that Aunt Alexandra was fanatical on the subject of her attire. When the latter moves into the house to provide some feminine influence, Scout's thoughts firmly assert that she would never be interested in clothes. Later at the meeting of Maycomb's Missionary Society, Scout tries hard to fit in, “There was no doubt about it, I must soon enter this world, where on its surface fragrant ladies rocked slowly, fanned gently and drank cool water” (258). The case of the unladylike tomboy Scout ends on a triumphant but inconclusive note as Aunt Alexandra dazed by the crisis, hands Scout the overalls she despised saying, “ ‘Put these on, darling, . . .’”(291).

Even though Scout is much advanced than her classmates in reading, she displays the inability of a child to recognize abstract ideas. An incident which reminds the reader of the childish innocence in Scout is her persistent question whether Jem is dead. The innocence of Scout is displayed in her inability to understand the tense situation in front of the jail, when Scout's “friendly overture” shames a mob of men into returning without attempting what they came to do. Scout's impromptu speech causes the vehemence of Mr Cunningham to dissipate, he sees a world of light in her seemingly disconnected speech, and it reminds him that he was after all a man, even if he was part of a mob. These incidents show that Scout is precocious and perceptive, yet innocent and non judgemental which makes her a true polyphonic narrator.

Jem is ten-years-old in the novel and is Scout's best friend. Jem is a typical Southern teenage boy. Like a quintessential older sibling, Jem warns his sister against embarrassing him at school and repeatedly scorns the fact that Scout is turning into a girl.

The events in the court initiate Jem into the unfair, adult world. It is a happy, confident Jem who awaits the verdict but a shattered and angry Jem walks out of the court at the end of the trial. Sitting on the coloured balcony, Jem is broken by what he sees. He remarks to Atticus “ ‘It ain't right, Atticus, . . .’ ” (234).. The trial is a turning point in Jem's life when he realises that Maycomb was not what he thought it was.

Atticus Finch, the widowed father of Jem and Scout is a prominent character in the novel. He is “the lawyer”, epitomizing the dignity and responsibility of the profession. Atticus Finch is also a unique parent and as the novel progresses his demeanour cultivates an unbreakable respect for him in his children. There are many instances in the novel when Atticus gives his children certain advices which are worded in the typical Maycomb manner.

‘First of all,’ he said, ‘if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—’

‘Sir?’

‘—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.’ (33)

Here, the voice of Atticus encourages Scout to listen to other voices without judging them by telling her that there is a personal view point, moulded by the circumstances of a person, behind every opinion they give. Thus the voice of Atticus nurtures polyphony by influencing the mind of the young narrator. Aside from giving advice brimming with wisdom, Atticus has a unique parenting style. Atticus, in the entire course of the novel never attempts to hide any unsavoury fact from his children or comfort them with falsely sugar-coated words. Thus his voice is true and uncluttered by hidden ideologies.

Atticus, the lawyer, influenced the professional ethics of many lawyers. Even while encountering the distasteful comments of Bob Ewell, Atticus never raises his voice. He steadily goes about doing his job and

plants a black seed of doubt in the white minds of the jury, predictably it was not time yet for the flowers of justice for black men to blossom..

Another significant aspect of the character of Atticus Finch is his unflinching adherence to non-violence. Atticus, once known as One-Shot Finch put away the gun when he realised that God had given him an unfair advantage over most living things. Charles Baker Harris, rather Dill, is like a breath of fresh air in a novel filled with gothic darkness. Dill is a wildly imaginative boy whose stories reflect his longing for adventure. Dill is an eternal optimist, constantly devising new ways to lure Boo Radley out of his house. Dill's voice evokes tears when he sums up his inadequate understanding of his parents' behaviour as " 'That wasn't it, he—they just wasn't interested in me' " (157).

Aunt Alexandra, astereotypical Southerner is starkly different from her brother Atticus. Aunt Alexandra holds and is quite vocal about her rather traditional views. Alexandra is obsessed with the past glory and lineage of the Finch family. Scout is unable to understand her preoccupation with heredity. According to her, "Everybody in Maycomb, it seemed, had a Streak: a Drinking Streak, a Gambling Streak, a Mean Streak, a Funny Streak" (143). She is an old-fashioned Southern lady to the core, in her dressing, in her attempts to make Scout a Southern belle and in her belief that the Blacks are inferior. She considers Atticus a nigger-lover and is of the opinion that he lets his children run wild. She is prejudiced against even the trusted Calpurnia and asks Atticus to send her away.

Little by little, the caring sister within the corset is revealed to the reader. Her genuine grief at her brother's unhappiness moves Scout and she aspires for once, to be a perfect lady like her Aunt Alexandra. Jack Finch, Atticus's and Alexandra's younger brother is the humorous, fun-loving uncle of Scout and Jem. Unlike Alexandra, he does not criticise Atticus for defending Tom Robinson, he gently enquires into the matter in a supportive manner.

Calpurnia is the trusted Black housekeeper of Atticus Finch. A strict disciplinarian, she makes Scout practice her writing, a reversal of the traditional race relationship. Calpurnia is a character who has a strong sense of right and wrong. Calpurnia takes Scout and Jem to her church and there, the Finch children discover that she had been leading a double life. Calpurnia's "White" English changes into nigger-talk. She defends the presence of White children in the First Purchase African M.E. Church. When questioned about her "secret" command of Negro language Calpurnia gives two reasons,

The words of Calpurnia give a glimpse into the psyche of the Black people. The fact that Calpurnia, an educated coloured woman, considers the language of her people wrongtells quite a lot of about the internalisation of the inferiority of the Blacks.

The neighbours of the Finch family are Miss Maudie Atkinson, Miss Stephanie Crawford, the Radleys and Mrs Henry Lafayette Dubose. Miss Maudie Atkinson is a great support for Scout and exerts a considerable influence over her. She has a quick and sharp tongue, she is unwilling to tolerate anything she considers nonsense and responds with a sharp retort, whether it is to put Miss Stephanie Crawford in her place or to shout out Bible quotations to foot-washing Baptists. She wholeheartedly supports Atticus, she hopes to see a change in the racist mindset of the people of Maycomb, she says:

' . . . as I waited I thought, Atticus Finch won't win, he can't win, but he's the only man in these parts who can keep a jury out so long in a case like that. And I thought to myself, well, we're making a step—it's just a baby-step, but it's a step.' (238)

Mrs Henry Lafayette Dubose is a thoroughly racist woman but after her death, Atticus explains to Jem about Mrs Dubose:

'She had her own view about things, a lot different from mine. . . . It's when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win but sometimes you do. Mrs. Dubose won. . . . According to her views, she died beholden to nothing and nobody.' (124)

Atticus tells Jem decodes the voice of Mrs. Dubose for Jem. Miss Stephanie Crawford is a gossipmonger who perseveres to be right in the thick of things and later broadcasts an exaggerated account of it to the whole town.

Of all the voices represented in the novel, one is unique. It is the voice of silence, a silence broken at the very end by five words. Mr. Arthur Radley's or Boo's voice is never heard throughout the novel until the very last. But his ominous silence is speculated and commented upon by other voices in the novel. Boo Radley, sentenced to a lifelong punishment by his stern father, in the end, makes Scout realise that his lonely existence is his only refuge. Thus Boo Radley voices his presence, his oppression through his silence, except when he asks Scout " 'Will you take me home?' " (306).

Harper Lee also presents voices of the White trash. It is Burris Ewell who introduces the reader to the depravity of the existence of a group of impoverished White people. Later, in the court room scene through Bob Ewell, a vivid view of the group's culture is revealed. Without a pang of guilt, without caring for the respect the court commands he says, " '—I seen that black nigger yonder ruttin' on my Mayella!' " (190). He completes his career of indecency by spitting on Atticus's face, harassing Tom Robinson's widow and by attempting the worst

of all crimes, harming innocent children. Miss Mayella Ewell, so immune is she to courteousness that she takes polite words as an insult saying, “Won’t answer a word you say as long as you keep on mockin’ me. ...Long’s you keep on makin’ fun o’ me....Long’s he keeps on calling me ma’am an’ sayin’ Miss Mayella’ ” (200).

Mr Cunningham and his son belong to a poor farmer family which was hit the hardest by the Depression, but unlike the Ewells, they cultivate their land and pay off their dues with farm produce. They have a lot of pride and consider it affected by the being of a Black man who is accused of having raped a White woman, the inherent humanity in them is revealed when the Cunninghams, after listening to Scout’s speech withdraw without lynching Tom Robinson.

Tom Robinson is the wrongly condemned Black man whose voice was not given value because of the colour of his skin. Tom is a representative of the young hardworking Black family man who has a tragic end because of no fault of his.

Lula, a character who appears for brief minute in the novel is the antithesis of the White supremacists. She is proud of her Black identity and protests the presence of white children in her church. At the same time, Reverend Sykes and Zeebo, Calpurnia’s son welcomes the children to the church. Zeebo is one of the four educated people in the church and leads the congregation in the singing of the hymns. In this church too, Scout encounters prejudice against women being preached. Mr Dolphus Raymond, the wealthy White man who lives with his Black mistress and mulatto children, is a unique voice in the novel; he is alienated by the hypocrisy of the Whites and makes his home with the Blacks, he pretends to be drunk just so that the society can find his choice of living reasonable. Mr Link Deas, the employer of Tom Robinson stands apart from others, as a white man who stands solidly by his Black employee, not because he is legally bound to but because of his compassion. B.B. Underwood, the editor and owner of the Maycomb Tribune, the printed voice of Maycomb describes the pitiful killing of Tom Robinson as the “senseless slaughter of songbirds” (265).

The society ladies of Maycomb express their racist voices in the novel. Led by Mrs Grace Merriweather they sit around, talking about helping the faraway Mrunas, while right in their town a Black man is being unfairly convicted. The ladies fail to see the plight of the African Americans; Mrs Grace Merriweather calls the coloured housemaid a “darky” (256), and talks about her in a superior patronising manner. The second most devout lady in Maycomb, Mrs Farrow, says: “We can educate ’em till we’re blue in the face, we can try till we drop to make Christians out of ’em, but there’s no lady safe in her bed these nights” (256).

This novel reveals that the problems of the Southern States were of a complex dimension. Discrimination on the basis of race, class and gender were being practised. The White people were against the Blacks, the middle class despised the trash and the ladies disapproved of the tomboys. The most potent one among this was and still is racial discrimination. In the novel, even though the Ewells are the most despised among the White people, the jury is not willing to get over their racial prejudice and acquit the clearly innocent Tom Robinson. The goal of polyphony is to show the existence and interaction of different relatively autonomous consciousnesses that express various views of the world within a single work. This novel, due to its multiple voices, is able to articulate the consciousness and ideologies of a diverse group of people, making *To Kill a Mockingbird* a polyphonic delight.

II. CONCLUSION

To Kill a Mockingbird has held readers spellbound with its multifaceted presentation of the society of a typical Southern state of the 1930s. One reason why this book makes so much of a difference in the lives of people could be because of its polyphonic nature. A monologic novel would seldom hold the attention of the readers long enough to break the barriers of preconception and prejudice. Then naturally, the question would arise as to why, in this age of broader minds, this book should produce so massive an impact. It is precisely in this age that this novel has to do much of its work, because today people mechanically accept that racism is bad and that in history, all that was white was black at heart. The polyphony in this book projects the authentic portrayal of racism and the Southern society in the 1930s. Such a novel, seldom exists, which so completely and impartially depicts a society, which in itself, is far from perfect.

It is when the reader hears the voices of Scout, Atticus, Jem, Aunt Alexandra, Dill, Miss Maudie Atkinson, Miss Stephanie Crawford, Arthur Radley, Mrs Henry Lafayette Dubose taken together with those of Calpurnia, Tom Robinson, Lula, Zeebo, Reverend Sykes, Mr Link Deas, Mr Cunningham, Mr B.B. Underwood, Mr Dolphus Raymond, Mrs Grace Merriweather, Mrs Farrow and Miss Gates blending with the voices of the Ewells and many others that a realization arrives about how cruel racism can be, how blind a society can be and how great a virtue tolerance is. Thus, polyphony makes the work an essential reading for those who wish to grasp the different facets of humanity.

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