



Silenced Voices: Racial and Social Marginalization in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Ms. K. Subha

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, JP College of Arts and Science, Tenkasi
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu*



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Abstract

*This study looks at the theme of racial and social marginalization in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which takes place in the 1930s in the racially segregated town of Maycomb, Alabama. The book shows how people who are on the fringes of society, like African Americans, poor whites, and those who don't follow traditional rules, are silenced or pushed to the edges. The story shows how deeply ingrained prejudice and strict class structures affect the community through characters like Tom Robinson, Boo Radley, and Mayella Ewell. The study looks at how systemic racism, class-based discrimination, and gender expectations all work together to deny some characters justice, a voice, and respect. The study also looks at Scout's changing point of view as a way for the reader to understand these wrongs. Harper Lee brought the silenced voices to the front by Harper Lee criticizes a society that says it values justice and equality but doesn't live up to those values. The author of this paper says that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is more than just a coming-of-age story; it's also a powerful critique of how people who are seen as different, weak, or powerless are pushed to the edges of society.*

Keywords: social injustice, systemic racism, class discrimination, gender expectations, silenced voices.

Harper Lee's 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* is more than just a tale of maturation. It is a powerful indictment of the profoundly ingrained oppressive structures that characterized Southern America in the 20th century. The story revolves around little Scout Finch and her father, Atticus Finch, a lawyer hired to defend Tom Robinson, a Black man wrongfully accused of raping a white lady, and is set in the racially segregated town of Maycomb, Alabama during the Great Depression. Readers are given the opportunity to observe the terrible reality of racial

and social injustice via Scout's naive yet perceptive eyes throughout the book.

The concept of silenced voices comes up a lot in the book. Characters like Tom Robinson, Boo Radley, Mayella Ewell, and even Calpurnia represent people whose opinions are ignored, suppressed, or misunderstood due to social norms. This essay aims to comprehend these voices marginalization, their importance, and how their silence reveals a lot about Maycomb culture's power dynamics.

The historical and social context. Thorough comprehension of the setting of *To Kill a*



Mockingbird is necessary in order to appreciate the significance of marginalization in the book. Jim Crow laws, which prohibited Black people from voting and enforced racial segregation, afflicted the American South in the 1930s. The economic effects of the Great Depression further widened the gap between classes. Harper Lee was born in Monroeville, Alabama, and experienced firsthand racial injustice as a young girl. These social undercurrents had a significant impact on her book.

In this setting, black voices were not only ignored but deliberately silenced. There was essentially no social mobility and no legal protection for African Americans. Given this, the trial of Tom Robinson represents the systemic racism in American culture. "Calpurnia rarely commented on the ways of white people to me, but I did not begin to understand anything so I asked her why she talked nigger-talk to the other colored folks..." - Scout Finch, p. 167

Tom Robinson is the most famous example of racial marginalization in the book. After being falsely accused of raping Mayella Ewell, he becomes a target for white guilt and fear. The fact that an all-white jury found Tom guilty shows that any Black man in the South will be found guilty, even if there is a lot of evidence that he is innocent.

Tom's voice is muffled in both a literal and figurative sense. Even though he tells the truth in court, his statements are overshadowed by racial bias. People don't believe him when he says that a Black man can't be trusted to testify against a white woman. His death by gunfire while trying to escape from prison represents how society brutally destroys Black humanity and hope. "But there is one way in this country in which all men are created equal there is one human institution that makes a pauper the equal of a Rockefeller... That institution, gentlemen, is a court" (274).

Atticus Finch is the moral center of the book. He fights for the weak and speaks for those who can't. Maycomb's society is very intolerant, which is very different from his values of fairness, compassion, and honesty. Through Atticus, Harper Lee looks at the possibilities and limits of being a white ally.

The ruling shows that institutional racism is resistant to even the most morally righteous and rational defenses, even in light of Atticus strong defense of Tom Robinson. He has a crucial but limited role. He can discuss the poor, but he can't speak for them.

His advice to Scout, 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, highlights the importance of empathy. But meaningful understanding also requires listening to voices that are often ignored.

Scout Finch's first-person account shapes the reader's understanding of what happened. Her innocence limits her ability to completely understand the adult world, even though it allows her to see injustice and hypocrisy without prejudice. Through Scout, Harper Lee presents two viewpoints: hindsight and innocent childishness. "Tom was a dead man the minute Mayella Ewell opened her mouth and screamed." (323)

However, Scout's narration also demonstrates how dominant circumstances can silence minority voices. Although she can identify with Tom and Boo, she is not entirely sympathetic to their situation. Finding these gaps and interpreting the text to hear the voices that are not directly spoken is the book's challenge.

Despite taking place in the 1930s, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is still relevant when talking about social injustice, race, and justice. The current struggles of marginalized communities that continue to experience systemic oppression are paralleled by the novel's silenced voices. The need to give voice to long-silenced voices is echoed in today's world by movements like Black Lives Matter. The book serves as a helpful reminder that the first steps toward equity are listening, speaking up, and questioning social norms.

Calpurnia, the Black housekeeper for the Finch family, moves between Black and white neighborhoods. Especially when she takes Scout and Jem to her church, she serves as a conduit for their understanding of the Black community. Calpurnia is



still in a subordinate position in spite of her loyalty, wisdom, and dignity.

Calpurnia is intelligent and well-spoken, but in order to keep her place in the Finch household, she frequently has to repress her actual emotions and thoughts. “Calpurnia rarely commented on the ways of white people to me, but I did not begin to understand anything so I asked her why she talked nigger-talk to the other colored folks...” (167)

Her dual code-switching between Black and white vernaculars illustrates how Black people had to constantly adjust in order to live in environments where white people predominated. Even in a sympathetic white household, she is marginalized because, despite giving the Finch children moral guidance, little is known about her inner life.

Another voice that has been muffled is Arthur Boo Radley, but this time it is due to social exclusion rather than race. Because of his solitary nature, this white man becomes the focus of local lore and terror. He is described in rumors as a danger, a madman, and a ghostly figure. But as the narrative progresses, Boo is shown to be a kind and protective character who ultimately saves Scout and Jem from Bob Ewell. The trauma of previous abuse and social judgment force him to remain silent. Boo’s marginalization demonstrates how society frequently suppresses those who don’t fit in with social norms because it fears what it doesn’t understand.

Mayella Ewell holds a special place. Despite having greater social power than Tom Robinson, she is still marginalized because of her gender and class as a poor white woman. Because she was lonely and desperate, she made advances toward Tom, which was not acceptable in the racially divided South. “She was the loneliest person in the world. She was even lonelier than Boo Radley.” (218)

In order to defend herself and please her violent father, Bob Ewell, she accuses Tom of rape when he learns of this. It becomes clear throughout the trial that she is a victim of both social pressures and her father’s dominance. In a society that gives her no

voice or support, she uses her false testimony as a survival tactic.

A compelling story of voices silenced by racism, poverty, loneliness, and fear is told in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Readers are forced to face difficult social realities by the stories of Tom Robinson, Calpurnia, Boo Radley, and Mayella Ewell, who each represent distinct aspects of marginalization.

Readers are invited to follow Scout’s journey from silence to speech and from innocence to awareness. Justice, according to the novel, starts with recognizing the humanity of people whose voices have been silenced and trying to make sure they are heard at last.

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