



PalArch's Journal of Archaeology
of Egypt / Egyptology

Gender Construction in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Dr. K. Aruna Devi

Professor of English

Saveetha Engineering College, Tamil Nadu, India

Dr. K. Aruna Devi, Gender Construction in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*- PalArch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology 17(11). ISSN 1567-214x,

Published in 1960, just before the peak of the American Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movements, Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* endeavors to bring about an attitudinal change among the readers, by exploding the traditional stereotypes of gender. Subverting hierarchies, Lee (1926-2016) creates a new strata of society based on the human worth of people. She suggests that individuals must be allowed to develop their own sense of self, without regard to rigid definitions of gender and social roles. She advocates empathy and stresses the need for humaneness in group co-operation.

In this article, Lee's novel is examined, against the insights provided by social psychologists like Myers; *bildungsroman* critics like Jerome Hamilton Buckley, Marianne Hirsch, Pin-chia Feng; and human right advocates in the field of literature like Joseph R. Slaughter.

Lee's novel portrays the childhood experiences of Jean Louise Finch (Scout), during the Great Depression years in a racist society. Located in Maycomb, a fictional town in Southern Alabama in the 1930s, the novel deals with the experience of growing up as a female in the South, with its very narrow definitions of gender roles and acceptable behavior. Looking beyond the binary hierarchies, Lee presents the gender issue from both etic (cultural outsider) and emic (cultural insider) perspectives, to use the terms from anthropology.

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* serves as male-female double *bildungsromane*, dealing with the growth of two protagonists, six-year old Scout and her ten-year-old brother Jem. These children evolve from innocence to maturity, almost like "psychological doubles", and are intensely involved in the psychic life of their counterpart (Goodman 31). Through this brother-sister pair, Lee discusses the complementary nature of the binary otherness – male/female – and presents the 'Other' as a lovable lot.

Bringing in a structure to the novel, Lee initially depicts the shared childhood experiences of Scout and Jem, reminiscent of the "evanescent harmony of a prelapsarian, pre-patriarchal, pastoral world where the male and the female were undivided" (Goodman 34). Later, the differences in the way they understand their common experiences and react to them depict their separation. Finally, these two plot lines are linked, bringing about a sort of reunion. Tom Robinson's trial is mainly responsible for Jem's transformation, whereas it is Boo Radley, who brings about a change of heart in Scout.

Scout and Jem lose their mother when Scout is two years old, and are brought up in Maycomb County, Alabama by their fifty-year-old father Atticus Finch, a defense lawyer and Calpurnia,

their African American maid. Boo Radley, their neighbor, initially scares the children to death, but later he becomes friendly, and even saves their lives from Bob Ewell, their father's enemy. Atticus has incurred the enmity of Bob Ewell in trying to defend an African American named Tom Robinson, falsely accused of raping Bob Ewell's daughter. Lee advocates an idealistic state where justice is done "in the secret courts of men's hearts (244)", and the children end up with a positive outlook on society, with no frustration.

The main theme of the novel is Scout's evolution into womanhood. Lee shows how a harmonious and balanced androgynous self like that of Scout, can get fractured by a culture, which assigns radically different roles to males and females. In accordance with the dictum "One is not born a woman; rather, one becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 301), in the first part of the novel Scout behaves in a tomboyish manner, but in the second half, she learns social etiquette, and acquiesces with the role society has assigned for her.

Harper Lee voices her opinion against the secondary position women are relegated to, making them culturally marginal, passive, and dependent. Her Scout understands that being called a girl is an insult, and being female is of less value in the small southern town. Her pain is seen in the line – "Jem told me I was being a girl that girls always imagined a thing, that's why other people hated them ..." (45). Envious of prerogatives of Jem and Dill as males, Scout takes part in all the tomboyish activities indulged in by them. Only in playing the Boo Radley game, she keeps herself aloof, "on pain of being called a girl" (46).

Lee emphasizes, through the character of Scout, that gender is a construct, something learned or acquired, rather than natural. Sigmund Freud's "penis envy" is found in Scout both literally and figuratively in the novel. Seeing Mr. Avery urinate from the second story porch of his house, Jem and Dill attempt the same, contesting "to determine relative distances and respective prowess", but Scout says that it "made me feel left out again, as I was untalented in this area"(55) and in Freud's terminology, the unwelcome fact of her castration strikes her.

Pin-chia Feng is of the opinion that, "'Woman' is a legitimate category of theoretical consideration not because of biological determinism but because of positionality"(27). When Scout behaves very frank and outspoken, she is considered ill-mannered in the prim and proper Southern Maycomb. Impulsive by nature, Scout is daring, short-tempered, and even physically aggressive when provoked. Her readiness to argue is viewed as violation of boundaries for a woman-to-be.

There are many incidents in the first part of the novel that expose Scout's tactlessness and lack of manners. At school, though very clever, she vexes the teacher, volunteering to explain why her classmate will not accept money from her. Her neighbor Mrs. Dubose considers her a highly ill mannered girl. Scout exemplifies the same when she embarrasses Dill asking personal questions about his parentage.

Aunt Alexandra enters the household of Atticus saying that Scout needs to have some "feminine influence" (129), and starts setting standards regarding clothes and behavior. She objects to Scout wearing pants because, according to her, a girl is not supposed to be doing things that require pants. Her idea of Scout's etiquette involves playing with small stoves and tea sets.

In the novel Aunt Alexandra is depicted more as a relic of the old South, who sticks on to old notions of gender roles. Through this character Lee ridicules the outdated beliefs, and prejudices of a Southern lady. She introduces Aunt Alexandra as a "back-porch listener" (88) and "an incurable gossip" (131) who is narrow-minded. In the name of inculcating good taste and choices in Scout, Aunt Alexandra is seen to enforce only class-consciousness. Friendly Dill, whom Scout opts to get engaged to, is called a "stray dog" (87), by her. Scout's other friend Walter Cunningham, who lives with dignity in spite of poverty, is considered "trash" by Aunt Alexandra (227). Lee exposes the double standards and social hypocrisies of Aunt Alexandra in the course of the novel.

In the second part of the novel, by the time Scout is nine years old, she shows signs of giving up some of her tomboyish ways. From a feminist perspective, there is a strong emphasis on the constructedness of Scout's femininity, on matters of conditioning and socialization. Earlier Jem has found fault with Scout for being girl-like. But now, after an altercation with his sister, an older Jem shouts: "It's time you started bein' a girl and acting right!"(117) He even advises Scout to accommodate with Aunt Alexandra's viewpoint. Here, Lee suggests "... the tragic fragmentation which growing up entails, particularly for creative and energetic girls whose education perforce trains them to subdue their aggressive instincts and to conform to the narrowly defined female roles assigned to them by a patriarchal society while their male counterparts are free to journey into the larger world." (Goodman 33)

Scout is shown getting indignant when she comes to know that women cannot serve on juries. She realizes that women cannot control everyday business and legal affairs of their society like the men folk. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar call this kind of process social castration, indicating women's lack of social power.

Still, without doubt, Scout understands that she must soon enter that world of Aunt Alexandra. This suggests entrapment and enfeeblement of Scout's vital natural energies. But Scout begins to relent and accept certain aspects of being a Southern female, when she realizes that her Aunt loves her family and means well. Learning some household skills from Calpurnia, she wins the approval of her Aunt. Scout avows that, "After all, if Aunty could be a lady at a time like this, so could I"(240).

Atticus and Alexandra complement each other in molding Scout into a lady and Lee thus makes the dichotomy between male and female perspectives complementary. In the novel, Lee very clearly points out how refinement does not necessarily stop with learning all the social etiquette, as advocated by Aunt Alexandra, but lies essentially in becoming good human beings, as exemplified by Atticus.

Scout's first attempt at conformity to social norms, on the line of Atticus, is when the Cunningham company comes to prison to lynch Tom Robinson. Unaware of their evil intentions, Scout starts a polite conversation, which ends up with the rude Mr. Cunningham acknowledging her a lady. Jean Baker Miller suggests in *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, "Women's sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make and then to maintain affiliations and relationships" (qtd. Abel 10).

Scout's changing attitude towards Boo Radley is an important measurement of her transformation into a new individualistic Southern woman. The mystery surrounding Boo's past has earlier made Scout assume that he is some kind of a monster. But, later, when he anonymously leaves presents for the children, mends Jem's pants, protects Scout from cold and saves the children from the attack by Bob Ewell, Scout regrets: "We never put back into the tree what we took out of it: we had given him nothing, and it made me sad" (281).

Jem's growth as an individual is depicted almost on a parallel line alongside that of Scout. Even as he enters puberty, he becomes disillusioned seeing that justice does not always prevail, in the case of Tom Robinson. Initially Jem feels confused and rebels against society, but finally accepts society from a broader perspective, when Atticus explains to him the "facts of life" (223). Jem also learns through his father that "a gang of wild animals can be stopped, simply because they're still human" (159-160). Young, "football crazy" Jem gets upset when his father does not show interest in it, but later realizes: "Atticus is a gentleman, just like me!" (103)

Jem keeps learning a code of conduct and positive masculinity from Atticus throughout the novel. Instead of wasting his energy getting annoyed with people, Jem starts learning his lessons on compassion, duty and courage. He understands what real courage is, through certain incidents that involve Mrs. Dubose. Mrs. Dubose disapproves of Atticus heartily till the end, still, Atticus recognizes her a "great lady" and tells Jem:

I wanted you to see something about her – I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. ... According to her views, she died beholden to nothing and nobody. She was the bravest person I ever knew. (116)

Atticus implies the possibility of androgynous wholeness, a state mostly unimaginable in a patriarchal society. Critics are of the opinion that Atticus is far from a stereotypical southern male and demonstrates certain typically feminine qualities like being passive, and tolerant. Highlighting his fair mindedness and wise parenting, Scout proudly remarks: “It was times like these when I thought my father who hated guns and had never been to any wars, was the bravest man who ever lived” (105).

Lee presents a humanitarian perspective to masculinity through her very title, by indicating that it is wrong to harm an innocent. Even though Atticus is “the deadeast shot” of Maycomb County (102), he does not practise shooting and refuses to carry a gun even in self-defense. Atticus is described as “civilized in his heart” (102) and is totally against violence without provocation.

In a 1961 interview, Lee herself describes Atticus as “a man of absolute integrity with as much good will and good humor as he is just and humane” (28). According to Lee, the only way to do away with prejudice and discrimination in society is to aim at integrity as an essential quality. In the novel, Maudie, a neighbour comments: “Atticus Finch is the same in his house as he is on the public streets” (50). Atticus’s integrity of character is best seen towards the end of the novel when he believes that his son is responsible for the death of Bob Ewell. Even when the Sheriff assures him that Jem is not responsible for the murder, Atticus says, “Best way to clear the air is to have it all out in the open... I can’t live one way in town and another way in my home” (276).

Harper Lee shows how women, especially the African American women like Calpurnia, have to play low, even if they happen to be highly intelligent. Though Calpurnia is capable of speaking good English, she indulges in “nigger-talk” (128) when she goes to the black Church. But it is only from Calpurnia Scout learns how to treat guests. When Scout says that Walter is not company, but a mere Cunningham, Calpurnia says, “Hush your mouth! Don’t matter who they are, anybody sets foot in this house’s yo’ comp’ny, and don’t you let me catch you remarkin’ on their ways like you was so high and mighty!” (29).

In the novel, Lee shows the constructedness of gender roles, but also suggests the possibility of androgyny. Though she employs a female protagonist, she has evinced interest in tracing the growth of a person of the other sex as well, indicating to the readers the indispensability of the Other in our lives. She gives new meaning to gender roles – her Scout becomes a lady, by understanding people around her better, and her Jem realizes that courage lies, not in toxic masculinity, but in becoming a useful citizen of society. Harper Lee aims at constructing social harmony through affiliation rather than conflict, and a state of ethnogenesis, where self and society benefit from each other, is made possible in her novel.

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