

The power of being color-blind in to kill a mockingbird

Rezazade, Faeze; Zohdi, Esmaeil

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Rezazade, F., & Zohdi, E. (2016). The power of being color-blind in to kill a mockingbird. *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*, 71, 47-53. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:101:1-2019080411504989753705>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more Information see:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

The Power of Being Color-Blind in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Faeze Rezazade^{*1, a}, Esmail Zohdi^{2, b}

^{*1,2}Department of English Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Vali-e-Asr University, Rafsanjan, Kerman, Iran

^afaezerezazade.1991@gmail.com, ^besmaeil_zohdi@yahoo.com

Keywords: Color blindness, Racism, Racial inequality, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Abstract. Discrimination and racial injustice towards Blacks have existed among the groups of people since the very beginning of their gatherings as a communication and society. Throughout history, people of colored skin, especially Blacks, were not accepted in the Whites' communities due to the Whites' thought of supremacy over them. Regardless of their positive role and doing manual labor in keeping the wheels of the Whites' industry turning, Blacks were always treated as nonhuman and "clownish" creatures born to serve Whites. African Americans are the main groups of Blacks who suffer from discrimination and racial injustice because they are living among Whites, though segregated from the Whites' society. However, there are many white individuals who do not consider the skin color and treat Blacks as human beings and only humanity and good nature of the people matters to them. Nelle Harper Lee in her masterpiece, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, written in 1960, introduces three children (Scout, Jem, and Dill) and Atticus, who is Scout and Jem's father, as color-blind characters who fraternize with Blacks as humans without paying attention to their skin color. Therefore, using W. E. B. Du Bois' thoughts- regarding prejudice, discrimination, and racial injustice- in this article it has been tried to investigate Atticus' and three children's color blindness in the case of racism in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Introduction

People of colored skin, especially African Americans, have been under the pressure of racial injustice throughout the history. After the abolition of slavery in the mid-nineteen century, it seemed that there will be a change in the interactions of Whites with Blacks, but Whites emancipated Blacks by passing segregation and Jim Crow Laws. These Laws were legislated to consider Blacks as equal to Whites but separated from them. Nevertheless, Jim Crow Laws, which were supposed to provide Blacks with separate but equal facilities, were just a blatant lie that put Blacks only as the second-class citizens. Thus, Blacks, deprived of their rights as human beings, were treated badly by Whites and were the subjects of any criminals regardless of their innocence. Lynching, segregation, racial injustice and inequality, discrimination, and prejudice have been with Blacks only because they were different from Whites in the color of their skin. They are known as the savages, lowbrow, and uncivilized people who are inferior groups in the eyes of Whites. In this case, many authors and scholars wrote about racism and its issues that among them W.E. B. Du Bois is one of the most prominent figure who devoted all his life fighting against racism and racial discrimination.

Du Bois, as an African American, felt the pain of racism when he was a child so he endeavored all along his life to eliminate this issue. Du Bois in his collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903), resentful of racial prejudice, fights against racism and asserts that there is not any logical reasons behind racial prejudice toward African Americans because they are Americans by their birth, language, religion, and political ideals. He declares that African Americans are American citizens who should not be predetermined by Whites. In this regard, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* can be studied as a great novel which concerns racial prejudice, discrimination, and injustice.

Nelle Harper Lee wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird* in 1960 but set it in the 1930s during the Great Depression and hard times. Lee, by fictionalizing the Scottsboro Trial in the novel, tried to picture racial inequality. She also defended Negros' rights in her second novel, *Go Set a Watchman* (2015),

which is a sequel to the story of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and narrates twenty years later incidents of Lee's first novel. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Lee beautifully portrays the life of a fanatic, racist, and selfish society and depicts the racial prejudice and injustice done by these racist poor Whites toward Negroes. Furthermore, Lee narrates the story through the eyes of a little girl named Scout who along with her brother Jem, her friend Dill, and also her father Atticus Finch can be known as color-blind characters who does not see the skin color regarding race. In fact, Lee wrote the novel to persuade people of any race and class to coexist with each other in peace. She, through moral codes of behavior reflecting by the characters' personalities, intended to declare that everyone should be treated with respect and kindness based on his/her humanity. Likewise, Like W. E. B. Du Bois, the main purpose of Harper Lee was to eliminate racial prejudice, injustice, and discrimination. Therefore, using W. E. B. Du Bois' thoughts regarding prejudice, discrimination, and racial injustice, in this article it has been tried to investigate Atticus and three children's color-blindness toward racism in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Discussion

Racism, now as the profound issue of the 20th century, has been started from the early era of human communication. As Lois Tyson says, "Racism refers to the unequal power relations that grow from the sociopolitical domination of one race by another and that result in systematic discriminatory practices (for example, segregation, domination, and persecution)" [1, pp. 360]. Thus, people of nonwhite skin color have been under the Whites' oppression because they were known as uncivilized and inferior by Whites due to their difference in skin color. Among the nonwhite people, Blacks always were in the worse condition because further to being inferior and uncivilized, they were considered as savages and the subjects of any criminals by white Western societies. In another words, according to George M. Fredrickson, "The term 'racism' is often used in a loose and un-reflective way to describe the hostile or negative feelings of one ethnic group or 'people' toward another and the actions resulting from such attitudes"[2, pp. 1]. In fact, enslaving the Blacks instead of the Whites as their servants was at the root of white supremacist attitudes and policies to internalize inferiority over Blacks, especially African Americans. In this regard, Whites made the belief that "human races were not just different from one another, but that some were superior to others" [3, pp. XI].

One of the serious problems of racism which Blacks are wrestling with is the problem of discrimination and prejudice which is the cause of injustice toward them. According to Brewer and Brown's *Handbook of social psychology* (1998), "Prejudice is an attitude directed toward people because they are members of a specific social group" [qtd. In 4, pp. 11]. Furthermore D. W. Sue in his *Overcoming our racism: The journey to liberation* (2003), defines discrimination and says that it "consists of treating people differently from others based primarily on membership in a social group" [qtd. In 4, pp. 12]. Therefore, African Americans are the victims of prejudice because they are members of Black groups called Negroes. The reason that Blacks are under the pressure of discrimination and prejudice is that; according to the norms of White societies Blacks are uncivilized, savages, and lowbrow because they are different in the skin color so they should be segregated from Whites to protect Whites from the danger of Blacks.

Since the beginning of the 20th century researches on race and racism begun and W. E. B. Du Bois, a pioneer in early empirical research on race and ethnicity in USA, released his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903) under the issue of racism in order to eliminate racial discrimination. He accepted the fact that human beings are divided into races but he rejected that one race is superior to the other.

1. Du Bois and his attitudes toward racial discrimination

W.E. B. Du. Bois, born in 1868, was an author, editor, sociologist, and Pan-Africanist who devoted all along his life to refute the supremacy of Whites over Blacks and eliminate racial discrimination. Du Bois, himself an African American, felt the pain of discrimination in his childhood when a girl, a tall newcomer, refused his card during the play of exchanging visiting-

cards due to his different skin color. Du Bois says, "Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil" [5, pp. 8]. As Du Bois asserts "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line" [5, pp. 15]. He believes that slavery is the cause of prejudice and discrimination toward Blacks. In his Philadelphia Negro he speaks about the economic and housing discrimination of Blacks and the Whites' oppression toward them. African Americans are segregated from Whites behind a wall of segregation so that their true nature and humanity cannot be seen by Whites. Therefore, regardless of African Americans' services, they are the subjects of any criminal because only distorted image of them can be seen by Whites due to the vast veil which conceals their humanity and good nature.

Accordingly, in *To Kill a Mockingbird* the trace of discrimination and prejudice can be perceived obviously in the life of Negroes. Afro Americans in this story, segregated from the Whites' society and considering as the inferior groups, are serving Whites. Likewise, in the case of Tom Robison, an innocent Negro accused of raping a white girl, racial injustice and lynching can be a matter of fact. Moreover, Like Du Bois' efforts in eliminating discrimination, Lee's tendency to abolition of discrimination and racial prejudice and injustice is clearly perceivable. Lee has tried to propagate the message of anti-racism to the world by bringing color-blind characters in seeing the color of race.

2. Color-blindness in Racism

As Chief Justice John Roberts says, "The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race, is to stop discriminating on the basis of race" [qtd. in 6, pp.33]. In other words, in order to obliterate racism, discrimination toward the diversity of the skin colors ought to be stopped. In this regard, color-blindness is an appropriate conception which can be used in racial issues. Color-blindness, indeed, makes no classifications, categorizations, or distinctions based upon race. Therefore, it can be a perception ability in seeing different races with a "transparent eyeball", a notion that Ralph Waldo Emerson referred to, which does not see the skin colors but humanity and good features and all the people are equal in its view. In this regard, Lee Brown asserts that transparent eyes are physically blind, she points out, "the pupils of the saints are made transparent and they can see the uncreated light directly and with a sight which reveals in essence" [7, pp. 127], like Atticus' in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. As the supporters of Color-blind practices believes, treating people equally, especially people of different races, leads to a more equal society. In addition, discrimination and its consequences, like segregation, injustice, and prejudice, will be stopped in an equal society, which does not look differently at diverse skin colors of its members.

T. J. Wise regarding Color-blindness says, "The racial ideology that posits the best way to end discrimination is by treating individuals as equally as possible, without regard to race, culture, or ethnicity. It focuses on commonalities between people, such as their shared humanity" [8]. Therefore, the notion of Color-blindness can be a good solution to eliminate racism, discrimination, injustice, and prejudice, because it leads to see no difference between Whites and Blacks.

3. The power of being color-blind in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

To Kill a Mockingbird, written by Nelle Harper Lee in 1960, can be considered as an anti-racial novel which condemns racial prejudice, discrimination, and injustice. Lee set the novel in 1930's, during the Great Depression in America, and beautifully depicted the life of a fanatic and racist society in a fictional town named Maycomb in Alabama, a south area in America. She, by fictionalizing the Scottsboro Trial, tried to eliminate racial discrimination and prejudice through a righteous character named Atticus who is a color-blind character toward race and skin color and undertakes the advocacy of a black culprit named Tom Robinson, who is innocently accused of raping a white girl. In addition, Lee brings three children in her novel and introduces them as the only creatures who cry when injustice happens [11, pp. 244]. Two of these three children, Scott and Jem, are the bairns of Atticus and the third one is their friend, Dill.

Laurie Champion in her article "When You Finally See Them: The Unconquered Eye in *To Kill a Mockingbird*" says that *To Kill a Mockingbird* "is primarily a story about perception, the ability to

see clearly” [9, pp. 237]. She asserts that Atticus, who is nearly blind in his physical left eye and wears glasses, has the insight to see clearly. In fact, she believes that lack of sight brings insight. Thus, Color-blindness, which is a metaphoric conception in this regard, can be considered as a lack of sight that brings wisdom and insight for the person and makes him/her able to see all the people of different colors as the same. Therefore, it is a way to abolish discrimination and its negative effects on people of colored skin.

Harper Lee in *To Kill a Mockingbird* pictures a poor, outwardly fanatic, and surely racist society in which people are not equal. Discrimination, prejudice, and injustice is ingrained in them and the isolation of townspeople has made the town in stasis, which has estranged them from each other. In the neighborhood of this community live the segregated Negroes alienated from Whites behind a vast veil. Thus, this group of Afro-Americans are twice under the pressure of discrimination for they are poor and they are Blacks. Du Bois refers to segregation that has affected all aspects of Black’s life and says,

They go to separate churches, they live in separate sections, they are strictly separated in all public gatherings, they travel separately, and they are beginning to read different papers and books. To most libraries, lectures, concerts, and museums, Negroes are either not admitted at all, or on terms peculiarly galling to the pride of the very classes who might otherwise be attracted [10, pp. 124].

To Kill a Mockingbird revolves around Atticus and his two children, Scott and Jem, and is narrated through the eyes of Scott, a six years old tomboy. Atticus is elected to undertake the advocacy of a Negro, Tom Robinson, accused of raping a young girl, Mayella Ewell. When Scott asks him that why he defend a Negro, Atticus replies,

For a number of reasons... The main one is, if I didn’t I couldn’t hold up my head in town, I couldn’t represent this county in the legislature, I couldn’t even tell you or Jem not to do something again. ... Scott, simply by the nature of the work, every lawyer gets at least one case in his lifetime that affects him personally. This one’s mine, I guess [11, pp. 86].

Atticus, in fact, is Harper Lee’s representative for abolishing racial discrimination. Throughout the story, what can be seen obviously is the prejudice toward Blacks done by the white townspeople. Negroes are the subjects of any criminal regardless of their utilities. For example, when Scott, Jem, and Dill go to the Radley’s yard to stealthily take a glance at Boo, an isolated character, Mr. Radley sees a shadow of Jem and shoots, then people prejudice that “Mr. Radley shot at a Negro in his collard patch” [11, pp. 60]. In fact, Maycomb’s racist people in the story accuse “Blacks” for any criminal happened around them and see them as inferior and trashes. They have segregated Negroes from their society in a place near the town garbage dump, out of the town, under racial oppression, and deprived them from education. Thus, it can be argued that, racism

makes it more difficult for black men to earn a living or spend their earnings as they will; it gives them poorer school facilities and restricted contact with cultured classes; and it becomes, throughout the land, a cause and excuse for discontent, lawlessness, laziness, and injustice [qtd. in 12, pp. 205].

Atticus Finch is the only person in the town who has his own humanity principles and treats all the people as equal, even Blacks. He teaches his daughter that, “if you can learn a simple trick, Scott, 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” [11, pp. 33]. Actually, Atticus sees differently. He knows how to look at the people without discrimination and prejudice. He is a lawyer, a man of justice, who does not differentiate between people, especially Whites and Blacks, and in his view, the only distinction between all kinds of people with any skin color is their level of humanity. Indeed, Atticus is “color-blind”. “Atticus possesses just such a transparent eye__ physically blind yet able to focus on meaning beyond literal sight” [9, pp. 239]. As it was mentioned before, Atticus wears glasses and is nearly *blind* in his *left* eye. As Scott recalls in the story, Atticus “wore glasses. He was nearly blind in his left eye, and said left eyes were the tribal curse of the Finches. Whenever

he wanted to see something well, he turned his head and looked from his right eye" [11, pp. 102]. According to Brown, "Emersonian eyeball [...] lacks the interior opacity requisite for vision" [7, pp. 128]. In fact, what makes Atticus color-blind in the case of racism is his lack of physical sight, which terminates the concept of racial discrimination for him. Accordingly, the fact that "whenever he wanted to see something well, he turned his head and looked from his right eye" proves Atticus' righteousness. On the contrast, the *right* eye of Mayella Ewell, who accuses the black Tom, is figuratively bruised, which shows her lack of right insight.

Moral perception of Atticus Finch can be derived from several scenes in the story. On Christmas day, Atticus gave his children two air-rifles but he didn't teach them to shoot and Uncle Jack instructed them in the rudiments thereof. One day Atticus said to Jem, "I'd rather you shot at tin cans in the back yard, but I know you'll go after birds. Shoot all the blue jays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird" [11, pp. 103]. Scott mentions, "that was the only time I ever heard Atticus say it was a sin to do something" [11, pp. 103], so she asks Miss Maudie, their good neighbor, about it and she replies,

Your father's right. Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird [11, pp. 103].

In other scene, when a rabid dog was coming near the houses, Atticus shots it because it was a real danger for the townspeople. "Atticus pushed his glasses to his forehead; they slipped down, and he dropped them in the street. In the silence, I heard them crack. Atticus rubbed his eyes and chin; we saw him blink hard" [11, pp. 110]. It should be noticed that Atticus takes off his glasses to see clearly with his own moral insight. He believes that killing innocent mockingbirds is a sin, but he shots the rabid dog because he knows it as a threat. In fact, in Atticus' view, mockingbirds are the innocent creatures which are not deserved to be killed when they do not do anything wrong. Similarly, Tom Robinson plays such a role as a mockingbird who is innocently accused of raping Mayella Ewell and is killed finally. Tom was a Negro who because of his sympathy toward Mayella's loneliness accepts to help her and bust up a chiffarobe for her, unaware of Mayella's conspiracy against him. Although Atticus, as Tom's attorney, manifests Mayella's lie to everyone and all the people, especially jury and the Judge, believes in Tom's innocence, he becomes convicted of the crime at last. It can be claimed that no one can see the "right" except Atticus who has moral perception. Moreover, when Tom is convicted, children (Jem, Scott, and Dill), who are watching the trial get nervous, even Dill cries. Dill cries because he cannot tolerate the way in which Tom as a Black is spoken with. He defines the reason of his crying and says, "It ain't right, somehow it ain't right to do 'em [Negroes] that way. Hasn't anybody got any business talkin' like that—it just makes me sick" [11, pp. 227]. In fact, Dill's dialogue and crying shows that he is also color-blind who does not see any difference between Whites and Blacks.

Atticus and his two children are living with a Negro maid named Calpurnia, who has the role of a mother for Scott and Jem. In Maycomb, all the Negroes are treated badly as servants but Atticus does not treat Cal in such a way. Even, Atticus has taught his children to respect Cal and he has entrusted his children's training to her. In addition, Atticus' moral behavior has caused his children to be color-blind in seeing Whites and Blacks, too. Thus, they has accepted Calpurnia as one of their family members so that Atticus tells Scott, "We couldn't operate a single day without Cal" [11, pp. 28] that means they are 'dependent' on her, who is a Negro. A Sunday, Cal brings Scott and Jem along with herself to the Negroes' church. The way that Jem and Scott treat there shows their color-blindness in seeing the skin color of Black peoples around them in the Black church. Scott sees them as what they are and as respectable and venerable people; "The warm bittersweet smell of clean Negro welcomed us as we entered the churchyard—Hearts of Love hairdressing mingled with asafetida, snuff, Hoyt's Cologne, Brown's Mule, peppermint, and lilac talcum" [11, pp. 135]. Although Scott starts narrating the differences and similarities between Whites' church and Black's church deeds, her brother and she never discriminate between Blacks and themselves, even she points to the Negroes' politeness as soon as they see her and Jem.

When they saw Jem and me with Calpurnia, the men stepped back and took off their hats; the women crossed their arms at their waists, weekday gestures of respectful attention. They parted and made a small pathway to the church door for us [11, pp. 135].

Pursuant to the above information, Atticus' children has learned from their father the way of treating people no matter whether they are White or Black. Atticus has taught them to be color-blind in communicating with different skin colored people and never discriminate people. He undertakes the advocacy of Tom because he knew that it was his responsibility to take a step in abolishing prejudice in a racist and fanatic society and at least teach his own children to never attention to the skin color of people. Indeed, Atticus tried to awake townspeople's consciousness to see clearly with an Emersonian "transparent eyeball" and be color-blind in the case of racism. Although the jury convicted Tom just because of his valueless words as a Black against a White girl, Atticus manifested Tom's innocence and racial injustice done toward him.

Conclusion

African Americans were always under the pressure of discrimination, prejudice, and racial injustice due to their different skin color and were treated as the inferior race throughout the history. They were segregated from the Whites' society behind a vast veil because they were known as the lowbrow and uncivilized people. W. E. B. Du Bois was a Black critic who devoted his life to fighting against racism and refuting the superiority of the Whites over the Blacks. In the collection of his essays regarding racism, *The souls of Black Folks*, written in 1903, he considers racial segregation as a vast veil which has concealed the humanity of African Americans and prevented the good nature of them to be seen by the white world, which has caused them to be considered as the subjects of any criminal happened in the White's milieu regardless of their innocence. Du Bois believes that African Americans who are forced to live behind the veil, which is created by the Whites, are faced with many problems like discrimination, prejudice, racial inequality and injustice.

Accordingly, one of the solution of these racial issues, especially discrimination, is the power of being color-blind in the case of racism. Color-blindness, indeed, is the ability of seeing with an Emersonian "transparent eyeball", which causes man to see right. It is an ideology which avoids people of colored skin to be seen differently and unequal to Whites. Therefore, in this regard, Harper Lee's masterpiece, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, can be a good case in point.

To Kill a Mockingbird (1960) is the story of a color-blind lawyer, Atticus, and his children who does not see any difference between Whites and Blacks, and the skin color, indeed, does not matter to them anyway. Atticus defends an innocent Negro and tries to obliterate discrimination, prejudice, racial injustice and inequality in Maycomb. In fact, he through his power of being color-blind has the ability to see clearly, which based on the Emersonian "transparent eyeball" is the result of his lack of physical sight that brings insight and wisdom. Therefore, using W. E. B. Du Bois' thoughts regarding prejudice, discrimination, and racial injustice, in this article it has been tried to investigate Atticus and three children's color-blindness toward racism in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

References

- [1] L. Tyson, *Critical Theory Today*, New York, Routledge, 2006.
- [2] G. M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2002.
- [3] J. H. Moore, *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2008.
- [4] B. E. Whitley & M. E. Kite, *The Psychology of Prejudice and Discrimination*, 2nd ed., Wadsworth Cengage Learning, USA, 2009.
- [5] W. E. B. Du Bois, *Oxford world's classics, The Souls of Black Folks*, (Ed.) Edwards Brent, New York: Oxford UP, 2007.
- [6] A. Stuart Wells, *Both Sides Now: The Story of School Desegregation's Graduates*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

-
- [7] Lee Rust Brown, Emersonian Transparency, + Emerson, Ralph, Waldo, Raritan- A Quarterly Review. 9:3 (1990) 127-144.
 - [8] T. J. Wise, Colorblind: the rise of post-racial politics and the retreat from racial equity, San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2010.
 - [9] L. Champion, When You Finally See Them: The Unconquered Eye in “To Kill a Mockingbird”, The Southern Quarterly 37, no. 2, Reprinted by the permission of The University of Southern Mississippi, (1999) 237- 253.
 - [10] W. E. B. Dubois, Oxford world's classics, The Souls of Black Folks, Ed. Edwards Brent, New York: Oxford UP, 2007.
 - [11] H. Lee, To Kill a Mockingbird, J. B. Lippincott Company, New York, 2010.
 - [12] M. B. Katz, and T. J. Sugrue, The Context of The Philadelphia Negro: The City, the Settlement House Movement, and the Rise of the Social Sciences, Modern Critical Views, W .E. B. Dubois, (Ed.) Bloom, Harold: Chelsa House, 2001.