

The Theme of Alienation in *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

A. Praveen Samuel

Research Scholar,

Department of English,

Scott Christian College,

Nagercoil..

Abstract

Literature is a written work of art that goes beyond the realm of nations and gets united by themes, motifs and so on. Harper Lee, one of the greatest in American Literature has won the 1961 Pulitzer Prize for her novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This paper is a study of alienation in the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Alienation happens not only when someone willingly chooses to be isolated from the society but also when several situations push them to be isolated without any go. Though the novel mainly deals with societal issues such as racism, alienation also plays an important role in order to shape the novel. Each character embodies a distinct facet of alienation, revealing the pervasive nature of societal divisions in the narrative. Some characters willingly choose to be alienated while the others are pushed to be alienated. This research paper clearly studies about the impact of alienation and its relevance to understand human behaviour and societal structures.

Keywords: Racism, Alienation, Harper Lee, isolation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature refers to written or spoken words that have artistic and intellectual value. It encompasses a wide range of creative expressions, including novels, poems, plays, essays and more. Through the use of language, literature explores human experiences, emotions and ideas, often offering insights into various cultures, historical periods, and philosophical concepts. It serves as a means of storytelling, self-expression, and reflection, inviting readers to engage with diverse narratives that can evoke empathy, provoke thought, and leave lasting impressions. Literature is a multifaceted realm of written expression that

encompasses a vast array of genres, styles and themes. At its core, literature serves as a mirror reflecting the complexities of human existence, offering insights into the human condition, emotions, and experiences across time and cultures. One of literature's primary functions is to entertain. Through compelling narratives, captivating characters, and intricate plots, literature transports readers to imaginary worlds, allowing them to escape the confines of reality and immerse themselves in different lives and realities. Whether it's the epic adventures of heroes battling mythical beasts or the tender love stories of star-crossed lovers, literature captivates readers by stirring their imagination and eliciting emotional responses. American literature relating to Harper Lee predominantly revolves around her seminal work, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Published in 1960, the novel explores themes of racial injustice, alienation, moral growth, and empathy in the American South during the 1930s. It remains one of the most influential and widely studied works in American literature.

To Kill a Mockingbird is narrated by Scout Finch, a young girl growing up in the fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama. The story revolves around her father, Atticus Finch, a lawyer who defends Tom Robinson, a black man falsely accused of raping a white woman. Through Scout's eyes, Lee provides a nuanced exploration of racism, prejudice, and the complexities of moral conscience. The novel's enduring popularity and critical acclaim have led to extensive analysis and discussion within American literary circles. Scholars and readers have examined its portrayal of race relations in the South, its treatment of social issues, and its exploration of morality and justice. Harper Lee's own life and background also contribute to the rich tapestry of American literature. Born in Monroeville, Alabama, in 1926, Lee drew inspiration from her own experiences growing up in the segregated South. Despite *To Kill a Mockingbird* being her only published novel for decades, Lee's impact on American literature is profound.

In 2015, Harper Lee's unpublished manuscript, *Go Set a Watchman* was released, sparking further discussion and analysis. While it generated controversy for its portrayal of Atticus Finch as a racist, the publication of *Go Set a Watchman* provided additional insights into Lee's writing process and her evolving perspective on race and society. Overall, Harper Lee's contribution to American literature through *To Kill a Mockingbird* is significant not only for its literary merit but also for its enduring relevance in addressing themes of justice, alienation, empathy, and the human condition. The novel continues to resonate with readers of all ages, cementing Lee's place in the pantheon of American literary giants.

The Theme of Alienation in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

In Harper Lee's renowned novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the theme of alienation is presented through various characters and situations. Alienation is a feeling of being disconnected or isolated from one's surroundings, community, or even oneself. Throughout the novel, Lee demonstrates the consequences of alienation, the factors that contribute to it, and ultimately the ways in which it can be overcome.

One character who experiences alienation is Boo Radley, a mysterious and reclusive neighbor who is rarely seen outside his house. As a result of his seclusion, the residents of Maycomb speculate about his existence and create wild rumours about his character. Boo becomes an outcast, unable to fit into society due to the isolation imposed upon him by his family. His alienation is enhanced by the fear and prejudice of the townspeople, who demonize him as a sinister figure. However, as the story progresses, we learn that Boo harbours a kind-hearted nature, saving Scout and Jem from danger. This encounter challenges the residents' preconceived notions about Boo, demonstrating the harm caused by alienation and prejudice.

Tom Robinson, a black man falsely accused of rape, also experiences alienation due to his race. Despite being innocent, Tom is convicted based solely on the colour of his skin and the testimony of the white accuser. This racial prejudice highlights the societal alienation that the African-American community faces in Maycomb. Tom's trial further exposes the extent of the townspeople's bigotry and their willingness to alienate an innocent man based on his race. The injustice inflicted upon Tom ultimately results in his physical alienation, as he is killed while attempting to escape prison. Tom's tragic fate exemplifies the destructive consequences of societal alienation and discrimination.

Furthermore, Scout, the narrator and protagonist, experiences a different form of alienation as she struggles to conform to societal expectations of femininity. Scout constantly struggles to fit into the gender roles that her community deems appropriate for girls, which alienates her from other girls her age. She often finds solace in the company of her older brother, Jem, and their friend, Dill, who accept her for who she is. Scout's alienation is overcome through the guidance of her father, Atticus, who encourages her to challenge societal norms and embrace her individuality. By defying the gender expectations imposed upon her, Scout ultimately finds her place and identity within her community. Alienation can create divisions and conflicts within society. It can result in individuals feeling disconnected from one another and lacking a sense of social cohesion. This can manifest as increased loneliness, social isolation, and a decline in community or collective action. Alienation may lead to strained relationships, as individuals may

struggle to connect with others on a meaningful level. This can cause breakdowns in communication, empathy, and trust, resulting in conflicts, misunderstandings, and fractured social bonds. Alienation can lead to decreased participation in various social institutions and activities. Individuals who feel disconnected from society might withdraw from civic engagements, community events, and collective decision-making processes. This can weaken democratic processes and hinder social progress. Alienation can have negative implications for the economy. When individuals feel disconnected or unsupported in their workplace, it may result in lower productivity, increased absenteeism, and high turnover rates. This can potentially impact economic growth and stability. Alienation is often associated with feelings of anxiety, depression, and overall mental distress. Prolonged experiences of alienation can lead to a decline in psychological well-being for individuals, which can, in turn, impact their ability to function effectively in society. Alienation can exacerbate social inequalities and injustices. Marginalized groups or individuals who feel alienated may be further marginalized and excluded from opportunities, resources, and power. This can reinforce existing social hierarchies and contribute to systemic discrimination and oppression. Alienation can foster a sense of individualism, where individuals prioritize their own needs and desires over collective well-being. This can result in a lack of solidarity, reduced empathy, and a decline in collective action aimed at addressing social issues or advancing societal progress.

It's important to note that the specific changes caused by alienation can vary across different societies, contexts, and individuals. Alienation can have complex and multifaceted effects, impacting various aspects of social, economic, and cultural life. Overall, the theme of alienation in *To Kill a Mockingbird* intertwines with various aspects of the novel, presenting different forms of isolation among its characters. Through Boo Radley, Tom Robinson, and Scout, Harper Lee explores the consequences and origins of alienation in society. She highlights the detrimental effects of prejudice, racism, and societal expectations, ultimately challenging the readers to consider the importance of empathy, understanding, and acceptance in overcoming alienation.

II. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, *To Kill a Mockingbird* presents a powerful commentary on the consequences of societal alienation. The novel suggests that only by challenging and breaking down these barriers can individuals hope to foster understanding, compassion, and justice. The theme of alienation serves as a poignant reminder of the on-going struggle against prejudice and the importance of empathy in building a more inclusive society. Universally and globally there is a misconception that an

individual when alienation, subjects himself to grief, sorrow, and despondency. At times an individual is forcefully pushed towards an alienated temperament, and at times alienation is the individual's choice. This misconception of alienation acclaiming a sense of recurring sorrow and grief can in itself be alienated through the notion that alienation inspires and ensures emotional intelligence and strength to overcome the psychological bondages of the human mind. The above characters in this novel alienate the myth of misconception behind the literary theory of alienation. Similarly, these characters break the ambiguity behind the psychological choice of alienation. Alienation is not totally isolation; it also inspires exaltation, liberation and emancipation.

III. REFERENCES

1. Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York :Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006
2. Lee, Harper.. *Go Set a Watchman*. New York, NY :Harper, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 2015.
3. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird>