Reconfiguring Masculinity in the Racialized South: A Critical Reading of *To Kill A Mockingbird*

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Abstract

Masculinity is often associated as a rigid construct, characterized by dominance, physical strength, and emotional restraint. Rooted in patriarchal ideals, it has long dictated authority over both the public and private spheres, reinforcing hierarchies of gender and power. In the racially segregated American South of the 1930s, where Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is set, this hierarchy of masculinities is further complicated by race, class, and the socio-political upheavals of the era.

The Great Depression, one of the most unforgettable events in history, had left many white men economically disenfranchised, intensifying racial tensions as they sought to establish their identity in a rapidly transforming social landscape. It had left the American economy severely devastated, leading to massive unemployment particularly among the working class white men whose traditional roles as providers and protectors were profoundly threatened. This economic instability did not just foster despair—it also intensified anxieties around power, status, and identity. As white men lost jobs and social standing, many responded by clinging

more tightly to patriarchal and racial hierarchies, seeking to reassert dominance in other spheres, particularly over Black communities.

Meanwhile, white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan maintained a violent grip on racial hierarchies, using fear and intimidation as tools to fortify white male dominance. Their ideology, rooted in toxic masculinity and racial purity, perpetuated a violent model of manhood rooted in aggression, control, and white male supremacy. Their legacy of racial terror shaped the ways in which masculinity was understood and performed: white manhood was elevated as the standard, while Black masculinity was demonized and systematically suppressed.

Within this volatile setting, *To Kill a Mockingbird* explores masculinity as both a tool of oppression and a site of vulnerability, revealing it as a fluid and contested space shaped by the structures of power and prejudice.

Atticus Finch: A Counter-Hegemonic Masculinity

Atticus Finch stands as a counter-hegemonic figure, redefining masculinity through moral integrity, intellect, and empathy rather than dominance and aggression. Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony', as applied to masculinity by R.W. Connell, suggests that society exalts a particular form of male identity—one that maintains patriarchal legitimacy and social hierarchy. Connell describes 'hegemonic masculinity' as:

> "The configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women." (Connell 77)

Atticus subverts this dominant model of masculinity by rejecting violence and coercion, instead embracing a version of manhood rooted in wisdom, justice, and compassion. His role as a single parent to Scout and Jem is particularly significant in this regard. In a society where men were expected to be detached providers rather than nurturing figures, Atticus takes an active role in his children's upbringing, teaching them moral lessons that emphasize empathy and fairness. His decision to employ Calpurnia, a Black woman, to help raise his children is another deviation from conventional masculinity. Unlike many white families who viewed Black women workers as inferior, Atticus treats Calpurnia with deep respect and even resists Alexandra's suggestion of her dismissal.

His defense of Tom Robinson further solidifies his counter-hegemonic stance. In taking the case, Atticus knowingly subjects himself and his family to hostility, yet he refuses to compromise his principles. Upon Scout's questioning, "Do you defend niggers, Atticus?" (Lee 83), Atticus responds with calm conviction, reaffirming his role as a lawyer, "Of course I do. Don't say nigger, Scout. That's common." (Lee 83) His reply not only illustrates his moral clarity but also showcases a strong commitment towards his profession. His disapproval of Scout using the word 'nigger' highlights his effort to elevate his children's morality and teach them respect. When Scout further questions, "Are we going to win it?" (Lee 84) his response' "No, Honey" (Lee 84) becomes a painful acknowledgement of the systemic racial injustice in the town and American South at large. Despite knowing the fact that he will not win the case, Atticus takes it on because he feels it to be his duty. He challenges Maycomb's racist structures by insisting that justice should not be biased towards any group, telling the jury,

> "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, the stupid

man, the equal of an Einstein, and the ignorant man the equal of any college president. That institution, gentlemen, is a court." (Lee 226)

Atticus's defense of Tom Robinson is not just a legal obligation but an unwavering commitment to morality and intellectual authority. As Steven Lubet remarks, "Through his deft, courtly, and persistent cross examination, Atticus made it apparent to everyone that Tom Robinson was being scapegoated for a crime that had even not occurred" (1340). Lubet argues how Atticus stands as a "moral archetype" (1340), dismantling Ewell's testimonies and exposing the hollowness of the charges against Tom.

Even after the jury convicts Tom and dismisses Atticus' logical arguments that reveal the truth surrounding Mayella Ewell's rape, he leaves the courtroom without looking up, showcasing his utter disappointment and inner turmoil. The Black community's silent gesture of standing as he exits, reflects their recognition and appreciation of his effort to fight against injustice, even in face of systemic racism. Robert O. Stephens describes, "Atticus Finch is the embodiment of the law. He lives within the tradition of classically oriented American lawyers of the nineteenth century who advocated law as a rigorous discipline based on natural law" (218). The statement highlights Atticus' belief in the law as a moral and disciplined practice, rooted in justice and reason, rather than a tool for enforcing societal biases.

His response to Bob Ewell's threats also highlights his rejection to comply with the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. When Ewell spits in his face, instead of retaliating with violence, Atticus calmly walks away, teaching his children that real strength lies in self-restraint rather than physical aggression. He even rationalizes Ewell's behavior, suggesting, "if spitting in my face and threatening me saved Mayella Ewell one extra beating, that's something I'll gladly

take" (Lee 241). In a society where male honor is often defended through physical retaliation, Atticus's refusal to engage in violence challenges traditional notions of masculinity.

His quiet strength is further seen in his interactions with Mrs. Dubose, an elderly woman who hurls insults at him and his children. While Jem reacts with anger, destroying her flowers, Atticus urges him to make amends by reading to her daily. This act is not just a lesson in discipline but also an acknowledgment of the struggles Mrs. Dubose faces. After her death, Atticus explains to Jem and Scout that she was fighting a morphine addiction, saying, "She was the bravest person I ever knew" (Lee 124).

Through these actions, Atticus Finch embodies an alternative model of masculinity—one that rejects dominance, embraces moral courage, and values empathy over power. His role as a father, lawyer, and citizen underscores his defiance of hegemonic masculinity, making him a figure who not only challenges the conventional understanding of masculinity but also redefines what it truly means to be a man.

Bob Ewell: The Embodiment of Toxic Masculinity

While Atticus embodies moral, intellectual, and compassionate masculinity, Bob Ewell represents toxic masculinity rooted in insecurity, violence, and the desperate assertion of power. He represents a deeply insecure form of masculinity, one that is shaped by his precarious socio-economic position and his need to assert power in a world where he holds little power. This sense of instability is not only reflected in his behaviour but also in the living conditions. The Ewells are depicted as a family entrenched in poverty and moral decay, living on the fringes of Maycomb society. Their dwelling, described as a dilapidated cabin situated behind the town

garbage dump, becomes a symbol of neglect and degradation, mirroring the marginality of Ewells' identity and authority:

> "Maycomb's Ewells lived behind the town garbage dump in what was once a Negro cabin. The cabin's plank walls were supplemented with sheets of corrugated iron, its roof shingled with tin cans hammered flat, so only its general shape suggested its original design: square, with four tiny rooms opening on to a shotgun hall, the cabin rested uneasily upon four irregular lumps of limestone. Its windows were merely open spaces in the walls, which in the summertime were covered with greasy strips of cheese-cloth to keep out the varmints that feasted on Maycomb's refuse." (Lee 188)

As the patriarch of Maycomb's most impoverished white family, he occupies a contradictory space—socially disgraced yet still privileged by his whiteness. Despite their disgraceful living conditions and the profound neglect they face, "No economic fluctuations changed their status – people like the Ewells lived as guests of the county in prosperity as well as in the depths of a depression" (Lee 187), emphasising the stagnation of their position in the social pyramid.

Bob Ewell's masculinity is defined not by honor or integrity but by a desperate need to assert dominance over those he perceives as weaker, particularly Black individuals and women. His violence against his own daughter, his false accusation against Tom Robinson, and his eventual attack on Scout and Jem, all stem from this fragile masculinity. Ewell's hyper-aggression serves as a compensatory mechanism. His family is considered "the disgrace of Maycomb for three generations" (Lee 33), a reputation that isolates him from both the town's

elite and working-class whites. Unlike Atticus, whose authority comes from intellect and moral standing, Ewell lacks social capital and relies on violence to assert his control.

His physical abuse of Mayella is vividly explored throughout the novel, reinforcing the idea that his masculinity is expressed through domination rather than protection. This aligns with Connell's concept of 'protest masculinity' which is described as, "a marginalized masculinity, which picks up themes of hegemonic masculinity in the society at large but reworks them in a context of poverty" (114), reinforcing the idea that men on the fringes of social power exaggerate traditionally 'masculine' traits—aggression, dominance, and emotional suppression—to compensate for their insecurity. Ewell's racism is also central to his performance of masculinity. His accusation against Tom Robinson is not just an act of racial violence but also an attempt to reassert his superiority. Connell's assertion that "violence becomes important in gender politics among men" (83) is relevant here, as Ewell weaponizes both racial and gendered violence to compensate for his own shortcomings. As a poor white man in a racially stratified society, he lacks the economic or intellectual power that would afford him respect. Instead, he turns to aggression as a means of asserting dominance, using Tom Robinson as a scapegoat to elevate his own position. When Atticus exposes the Ewell family's lies in court, Bob reacts with indignation, recognizing that his position of dominance is under threat when he "stopped Atticus on the post-office corner, spat in his face, and told him he'd get him if it took the rest of his life." (Lee 239). His words, "Too proud to fight, you nigger-lovin' bastard" (Lee 240) reveal his insecurity and his belief that masculinity is proven through assaultive behaviour, a stark contrast to Atticus's belief in restraint and moral courage.

Boo Radley: Masculinity and Social Ostracization

Arthur "Boo" Radley is not just a recluse but a figure constructed by Maycomb's collective imagination, existing at the intersection of fear, myth, and societal discipline. His character subverts traditional masculine ideals, as he neither asserts dominance nor participates in public life, thus becoming an object of ostracization and speculation. In a society where masculinity is defined by power, control, and social participation, Boo's silence and reclusiveness are perceived as transgressive, reinforcing his marginalization. His story exemplifies how rigid gender expectations police and alienate men who do not conform, turning them into "the other"—a concept Rebecca H. Best explores through Foucault theory of panopticism.

Best discusses how Maycomb operates as a panoptic society "not as totalitarian as Foucault's society under the Panopticon, the rural Alabama town is nevertheless marked by strict class and race boundaries, and social position mandates power" (542). This metaphorical surveillance structure ensures that the constant gaze of societal judgment compels individuals to conform to rigid norms of race, class, and gender. This silent but omnipresent surveillance ensures that those who deviate—like Boo—are positioned as sites of deviance and objects of scrutiny. The town constructs an elaborate mythology around him, transforming him into a figure of terror. Jem Finch, for instance, describes Boo with grotesque embellishment:

> "Boo was about six-and-a-half feet tall, judging from his tracks; he dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch, that's why his hands were bloodstained- if you ate an animal raw, you could never wash the blood off. There was a long jagged scar that ran across his face; what teeth he had were yellow and rotten; his eyes popped, and he drooled most of the time." (Lee 14)

This absurd description reveals how Maycomb disciplines those who do not fit within its predefined roles, turning Boo into a spectacle of deviance. His forced invisibility functions as both punishment and cautionary tale, reinforcing societal control through fear.

Unlike other men in the novel—Atticus Finch, Bob Ewell, or Tom Robinson—Boo does not publicly engage in labor, socializing, or aggression. His passive existence contrasts sharply with Bob Ewell's violent assertion of toxic masculinity and even with Atticus's controlled but authoritative presence. The town's "gaze" monitors masculinity, rewarding dominance while punishing deviation. Boo's refusal—or inability—to conform makes him an anomaly, one whose very existence is a perceived threat to the town's rigid order.

Yet, despite being rendered an 'other,' Boo's ultimate act of protection disrupts these perceptions. When he rescues Jem and Scout from Bob Ewell's attack, he inverts the town's narrative about him. Rather than a monster, he is revealed as a quiet guardian evident from the gifts he places in the knothole for both Jem and Scout. Scout's realization, "Atticus, he was real nice…" (Lee 309) dismantles the myths that the Maycomb society has constructed. However, even in his heroism, Boo does not seek recognition, reinforcing a masculinity rooted in quiet strength rather than performance. His existence beyond the town's social structures, outside the panoptic gaze, makes him both an anomaly and a subversive force. His ostracization highlights how Maycomb enforces social conformity through surveillance and myth-making. His role as an 'other' underpins the novel's critique of the mechanisms of power that shape masculinity, defining strength through dominance and vilifying those who fail to adhere. Boo's story redefines masculinity, shifting it away from control and aggression toward quiet endurance, compassion, and resistance against imposed narratives.

Tom Robinson: The Racialization of Masculinity and the Paradox of Black Manhood

Tom Robinson exemplifies the concept of 'racialized masculinity,' wherein Black manhood is constantly shaped and constrained by the oppressive structures of white supremacy. His character is constructed through the white gaze, which simultaneously emasculates and criminalizes him, positioning him as both weak and hypermasculine. As Connell notes, "The interplay of gender with other structures such as class and race creates further relationships between masculinities" (80). In the white-supremacist context of Maycomb, masculinity is not simply about gender but also about power, with race functioning as a determinant of whether masculinity is framed as legitimate or deviant. Tom's experiences exemplify how Black masculinity is systematically devalued, reduced to an object of fear, and used as a tool to uphold white hegemony.

Tom is a victim of the paradox of Black manhood—he is perceived as both a threat and as powerless. White society weaponizes his identity against him, exploiting racist stereotypes of Black male hypersexuality while simultaneously denying him any form of masculine agency. Mayella Ewell's false accusation of rape is rooted in the racist fear of the Black male body as predatory, a trope deeply ingrained in the American South. Atticus Finch, in his defense of Tom, exposes the absurdity of this perception, stating: "She was white, and she tempted a Negro. She did something that in our society is unspeakable: she kissed a black man" (Lee 225). Here, Atticus highlights how Tom's mere existence as a Black man makes him guilty in the eyes of a racist society, regardless of his actual innocence.

Furthermore, Tom is denied agency over his own body and fate, reducing him to a passive figure incapable of self-defense. This simple admission underscores his lack of power in

the face of a society where Black men are presumed guilty by default. The all-white jury does not require concrete evidence to convict him as their belief in his guilt is cemented by Maycomb's racist structures. The fact that the jury took only ten minutes to convict him reflects how white supremacy functions as an unspoken law. Atticus Finch's compelling defense is evident through,

> "The state has not produced one iota of medical evidence to the effect that the crime Tom Robinson is charged with ever took place. It has relied instead upon the testimony of two witnesses whose evidence has not only been called into serious question on cross-examination, but has been flatly contradicted by the defendant. The defendant is not guilty, but somebody in this court-room is." (Lee 224)

The jury's swift decision reveals that the verdict was predetermined. The jury's decision was less about weighing facts and more about reinforcing the rigid norms that uphold white masculinity at the expense of Black lives.

Additionally, Tom's trial is not merely about determining his innocence; it serves as a mechanism to uphold the supremacy of white masculinity by sacrificing Black masculinity to sustain the racial hierarchy. Mike Donaldson highlights this systemic exclusion by asserting that hegemonic masculinity "often excludes working-class and black men" (646), emphasizing that masculinity is not a universal construct but one deeply shaped by intersecting structures of power. As a poor Black man in 1930s Alabama, Tom Robinson is denied access to hegemonic masculinity due to both his race and socioeconomic positioning. Unlike white men such as

Atticus Finch, whose morality and strength are unquestioned, Tom's masculinity is constantly scrutinized, shaped not by his own actions but by the racist stereotypes imposed upon him.

His physical disability further complicates his position within the gendered order. His "rubber-like left hand" (Lee 209) challenges traditional notions of strength and virility, stripping him of the physical dominance often associated with masculinity. More than a personal affliction, his crippled arm becomes a symbol of his broader powerlessness—a reflection of his inability to fight back against a legal system designed to suppress the agency and voices of Black men. His physical description outlines this theme: "a black-velvet Negro, not shiny, but soft-black velvet. The whites of his eyes shone in his face, and when he spoke we saw flashes of his teeth. If he had been whole, he would have been a fine specimen of a man" (Lee 212). The contrast between "soft-black velvet" and the racist stereotype of Black men as hyper-aggressive is striking, presenting Tom as non-threatening. Yet the phrase "if he had been whole" is deeply revealing—it suggests that his worth as a man is contingent on physical completeness, reinforcing the ways in which hegemonic masculinity devalues Black men who do not adhere to its stringent norms. The idea of body, as Judith Butler explains: "The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well" (26), highlights the inherent vulnerability of human body. Tom's body–black, masculine, and physically impaired—becomes poignant in the way he is perceived and penalized in a white society. Despite having a crippled left arm, which makes the crime he is accused of improbable, his Blackness becomes an element of threat, making his body subjected to scrutiny. His body thus makes him visible—not in a way that grants him personhood and identity but in a way through which the town and its people subject their fear and prejudices.

Tom's fate underscores the broader reality that Black masculinity, regardless of character or capability, remains at the mercy of white societal constructs. Tom being shot while escaping reflects how white society violently polices Black masculinity. The excessive force used against him underscores how Black men are perceived as expendable, their deaths framed as a necessary act to maintain racial and gender hierarchies. His character exemplifies how hegemonic masculinity functions not only to uphold male dominance over women but also to ensure the subjugation of marginalized masculinities, particularly those of Black men in racist social structures. Through his tragic demise, Lee exposes the deep-seated contradictions of racialized masculinity, revealing how it is constructed, feared, and ultimately destroyed within a system designed to maintain white supremacist values.

Conclusion

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* transcends its narrative of racial injustice to offer a more nuanced portrayal of masculinity as a socially constructed and contested identity. Set in a society with deeply entrenched racial hierarchies, the narrative exposes the instability of hegemonic masculinity and its relation with power, race, and class. Through characters like Atticus Finch, Bob Ewell, Boo Radley, and Tom Robinson, Lee unravels the ways in which masculinity operates as both a tool of oppression and a site of struggle. Atticus embodies an alternative form of masculinity rooted in moral integrity and intellectual authority, contrasting with Ewell's toxic behaviour and violent attitude. Tom Robinson becomes a tragic figure, victimized by a system that criminalizes Black masculinity. Lee's narrative, therefore, highlights how masculinity is not an inherent or monolithic trait but a performance shaped by historical and socio-political factors. The Jim Crow era's rigid racial codes dictated not only the behavior of Black men but also the anxieties of white masculinity, particularly among the economically

marginalized. The fragile pride of men like Bob Ewell stems from the fear of losing status, revealing how masculinity, rather than being an unchallenged authority, is constantly negotiated and policed within societal frameworks. Even Atticus, the novel's moral compass, operates within these confines. Moreover, the character of Boo Radley, largely constructed through the assumptions of the society, further reinforces how deviations from conventional gender norms are constantly monitored by the society. By exposing the fractured reality of hegemonic masculinity, the novel reveals how gender identity is deeply intertwined with social surveillance and systemic control.

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