**TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD**
**HARPER LEE'S TRAGIC VIEW**

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is quite an ambiguous title, the infinitive leaving a wide scope for a number of adverbial queries—how, when, where, and, of course, why—all leading to intriguing speculation and suspense. One is left guessing whether it is a crime-thriller or a book on bird-hunting. Look at it any way, the title hurts the reader’s sensibility and creates an impression that something beautiful is being bruised and broken. It is only after he plunges into the narrative and is swept off into its current that he starts gathering the significance of the title. After buying the gift of an air gun for his little son, Atticus said: “I would rather you shot at tin cans in the backyard, but I know you will go after birds...but remember, it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird”. And when Scout asks Miss Maudie about it, for that was the only time when she ever heard father say it was a sin to do something, she replied saying:

Your father is 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 is a sin to kill a mockingbird.

And as the words ‘it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird’ keep on echoing into our ears, we are apt to see on their wings the mockingbirds that will sing all day and even at night without seeming to take time to hunt for worms or insects. At once the moral undertones of the story acquire symbolical expression; and the myth of the mockingbird is seen right at the thematic centre of the story. The streets of Maycomb were deserted, the doors and windows were instantaneously shut, the moment Calpurnia sent round the word about the dog, gone mad in February not in August. The dog “was advancing at a snail’s pace, but he was not playing or sniffing at foliage; he seemed dedicated to one course and motivated by an invisible force that was inching him towards us.” There was hush all over.
"Nothing is more deadly than a deserted waiting street. The trees were silent, the mockingbirds were silent". During the moments of peril such as these even the mockingbirds do not sing! That the little girl should see in the dog's march to death some motivation of "an invisible force" is as significant as her being struck by the silence of the mockingbirds, and we have several such moments of eloquent silence in the novel. But what is more disturbing is the behaviour of the neighbours, who open their "windows one by one" only after the danger was over. Atticus could protect them against a Mad dog; he could not protect the innocent victim against their madness! As the Atticus children along with their friend Dill waver at the portals of the Radley House on their way to solve the Boo mystery, we hear the solitary singer:

High above us in the darkness a solitary mocker poured out his repertoire in blissful unawareness of whose tree he sat in, plunging from the shrill kee, kee of the sunflower bird to the irascible qua-ack of a bluejar, to the sad lament of Poor Will, Poor Will, Poor Will.

And when they shoot Tom Robinson, while lost in his unavailing effort to scale the wall in quest of freedom, Mc Underwood, the editor of The Montgomery Advertiser "likened Tom's death to the senseless slaughter of songbirds by hunters and children". As we find the mockingbird fluttering and singing time and again, the whole of Maycomb seems to be turning into wilderness full of senseless slaughter. The mockingbird motif as effective as ubiquitous and a continual reminder of the thematic crux comes alive in the novel with all its associations of innocence, joy, and beauty.

The mockingbird myth is there in American literature and folklore. In Walt Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking", we have a tender tale of mockingbirds, the tale of love and longing and loss. The poet, while wandering on the sea-shore, recaptures the childhood memories of the tragic drama of the mockingbirds 'two feather'd guests from Alabama'.
Two together!
Winds blow south, or winds blow north,
Day come white, or night come black,
Home, or rivers and mountains from home,
Singing all time, minding no time,
While we two keep together—

‘till of a sudden, may-be killed’, the she-bird’ did not ever appear again.’ The mockingbird myth is most powerfully used by Whitman, who travels back and forth on the waves of childhood memories causing a mist of tears through which ‘a man, yet by these tears a little boy again’, sings a reminiscence. The mockingbird symbol in the novel acquires a profound moral significance. For, unlike the world of tender love and longing of Walt Whitman’s Alabama birds, Harper Lee’s Alabama presents a bleak picture of a narrow world torn by hatred, injustice, violence, and cruelty, and we lament to see ‘what man has made of man’. It brings out forcefully the condition of Negro subculture in the white world where a Negro, as dark as a mockingbird, is accepted largely as a servant or at best as an entertainer. But apart from the symbolical identity, To Kill a Mockingbird has astonishing technical kinship with “Out of the Cradle ENDlessly Rocking”. Both Whitman and Harper Lee recollect childhood memories after enough years have gone by. In both, the poem and the novel, we see a horizontal parabolic pattern. After years, the narrator goes back unto the past swimming across a flood of memories, and then comes back floating on words towards the present moment and beyond. The way childhood memories impinge on adult consciousness turning “a man, yet by these tears a little boy again” gives a new dimension to the autobiographical mode, and heightens dramatically the reported impressions by the fact that what happens to the artist’s consciousness is more important than the actual happening itself. In the novel, Harper Lee instals herself avowedly as the narrator, and depicts not only the external world of action but the internal world of character also. It is certainly not an innovation, Chaucer had done so in his Canterbury tales. “The characterised ‘I’ is
substituted for the loose general ‘I’ of the author, the loss of freedom is more than repaid by the more salient effect of the picture... the use of the first person is no doubt a source of relief to the novelist in the matter of composition. It composes of its own accord.”

Here is a novel that seems to be composing of its own accord, Harper Lee has a remarkable gift of story-telling. Her art is visual, and with cinematographic fluidity and subtlety we see a scene melting into another scene without jolts of transition. Like Browning’s poet Harper Lee is a “Maker-see”. She unfolds the wide panorama of Maycomb life in a way that we, the readers, too, get transported into that world within the world and watch helplessly though not quite hopeless the bleak shadows of the adult world darkening the children’s dream world.

_to Kill a Mockingbird_ is autobiographical not merely in its mode of expression but also in quite a personal sense. If David Copperfield is Charles Dickens and Stephen Dedalus in _A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man_ is James Joyce, Jean Louise Finch (Scout) is unmistakably Harper Lee. If we examine the internal evidence, we can easily infer that in 1935 while Hitler was persecuting Jews in Germany and Tom Robinson was being tried in Maycomb, Jean Finch Scout, the narrator was ‘not yet nine’; perhaps she was born, like her creator, in 1926. The identification between the narrator and the novelist is _apparent_. The novel with its autobiographical mode strikes a psychological balance between past, present, and future. The writer projects herself into the story as Scout in the present. What she narrates is the past. And as the past is being unfolded the reader wonders how, the writer in retrospect will lead on to the future, which is a continual mystery. This evokes in the novel considerable suspense. We follow the trial of Tom Robinson and the ostracising of the Finch family, holding our breath. But unlike David Copperfield, who casts a backward glance over a long travelled road or Dedalus Stephen who grows from childhood to youth and to manhood seeking aesthetic vision.
and development in exile, Scout Finch concentrates on a single phase, a moment of crisis in which childhood innocence was shattered by terrifying experiences of the adult world.

It is a memory tale told by a little girl Jean Louise Finch called Scout in the novel. She becomes a mirror of experience and we see reflected in her eyes the Maycomb world. Her memories recollected in imaginative tranquility become a dramatised action and the fiction gets an extraordinary gloss of veracity. A white girl's accusation of her rape by a Negro causes a huge upheaval that rocks the very old and tired town of Maycomb. It all began the summer when Scout was six and her brother Jem ten. We find the Finch family caught in the storm of the white, popular reaction, but braving it all with remarkable steadfastness, courage and fortitude. The two motherless children and their father face the ordeal so heroically that it lifts the story from the probable melodramatic and sentimental doldrums and makes *To Kill a Mockingbird* a heroic tale told in a lyric way. Apart from the mockingbird symbol which is pervasive, we have several other symbols. When it snows in Maycomb, after years and years, the country school declares a holiday, and we see the Finch children trying to make a snow-man. But there is more mud than snow:

"Jem, I ain't ever heard of a nigger snowman", I said.
"He won't be black long", he grunted.

And he tries to cover it with some snow-flakes making it white. But at night Miss Maudie's house is on fire, and Scout watches "our absolute Morphodite go black and crumble." The snowman turning alternately white and black suggests how frail and skindeep is the colour. Besides, Miss Maudie's flowers, too, caught in the flames, symbolise the innocence in the grip of fire. And as we see the yellow flames leaping up in a snowy, dark night we have the symbols of the white snow and the coloured flames standing for cold hatred and fiery wrath that might lead to the crack of the world as visualised by Robert Frost in his poem, "Fire and Ice". Symbolism lends a poetic touch to the novel that depicts not only the exterior
world of action but also the interior world of character. For, here the novelist registers the impact of the central action not so much on the protagonist as on the others. Both Boo Radley, locked in his own home for fifteen long years for some trifling adolescent pranks so that his father could find the vanity fair of the society congenial, and Tom Robinson sentenced to death for rape he never committed are kept as invisible as the crimes they never committed. Two such innocent victimisations paralleled with each other intensify the tragic view of the world and recall the terrifying prognosis: “So shall the world go on: to good men malignant, to bad men benign.” What happens to the innocent victims, who are largely shut out from us like the beasts in a cage, is really not as important as the way it stirs the world around. The novel that opens with the theme of persecution taking us back to the ancestor Simon Finch, who sailed across the Atlantic to escape religious persecution in England, keeps the victims generally off the stage, invisible while the prolonged tensions between the protagonist minority and the antagonist majority shake the small world of Maycomb with an ever increasing emotional and moral disturbance. In this oblique handling of the central theme we have, what Virginia Woolf describes as ‘a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope’. It is an effective artistic device. All this is presented through the fascinating though disturbing flash-backs, and the continual backthrust intensifies the unforgettableness of the narrator’s experience.

Maycomb is a microcosm, and the novelist’s creative fecundity has peopled it well. We have a cross-section of humanity: men and women, young and old, good and bad, white and black. To Kill a Mockingbird presents a memorable portrait gallery. Generally it is the evil characters that are better portrayed than good, Satan rather than God. But Harper Lee’s emotional and moral bias seems to put her more at ease with good people than bad. Wicked characters tend to be hazy whereas the good characters stand out prominently throbbing with life. Bob Ewell and his allies are just paper-figures. Again, the women in the novel are better delineated than men with
the probable exception of Atticus. But her highest achievement in characterisation is manifest in children who at once spring to life. Unlike her grown-up characters who easily tend to be caricatures seen in the concave and convex mirrors, these children are wonderfully true to life. We have some most unforgettable vignettes: Here they are, trying to make Boo come out of the Sombre Radley House:

Jem said, "Lemme think a minute...it's a sort of like making a turtle come out..."
"How's that?" asked Dill.
"Strike a match under him."... Dill said stricking a match under a turtle was hateful.
"Ain't hateful, just persuades him—," Jem growled.
"How do you know a match don't hurt him?"
"Turtles can't feel, stupid," said Jem.
"Were you ever a turtle, huh?"
"My stars, Dill! Now lemme think..."

Or think of Dill getting sick of the trial and breaking down. It is Mr. Reymond, the man "who perpetrated fraud against himself by drinking coca-cola in a whiskey bag who says:

"Let him get a little older, and he won't get sick and cry. Maybe things will strike him as being—not quite right, say, but he won't cry, not when he gets a few years on him."

And we have the sad juxtaposition of the two worlds. We have children—Jem, Scout, Dill, and the whole lot of them with an insatiable sense of wonder and curiosity. It is they who are bewildered by the ways of the grown-up world and confronted with the most disturbing problems like 'What exactly is a Nigger-lover Atticus'? 'What is rape, Cal'? When Tom Robinson is adjudged to be guilty, it is their young hearts that we see bleeding:

I shut my eyes. Judge Taylor was polling the jury:
"Guilty...guilty...guilty...guilty..." I pecked at Jem: his hands were white from gripping the balcony rail, and his shoulders jerked as if each "guilty" was a separate stab between them.
And here is Atticus, the defence counsel, the hero of the trial-scene but for whom the trial should have seemed as if out of Kafka's world. At least the phantasmal jury and the accusers all seem to have been people who should not have surprised even Joseph K. The trial was over, but not so the heartquakes of the young.

"Atticus—" said Jem bleakly,
He turned the door way. "What, son?"
"How could they do it, how could they?"
"I don't know, but they did it. They've done it before and they did it tonight and they'll do it again, and when they do it—seems that only children will weep. Goodnight."

Atticus is the protagonist, reticent, dignified, and distant. When the entire white world seems to have lost its head, it is he who remains sane and firm. He is a wonderful combination of strength and tenderness. He is a stoic and can withstand the ostracisation and persecution with almost superhuman fortitude. He is a widower but treats his motherless children with so much affection and understanding that they call him "Atticus." They are about his only friends in a world in which he is lonely. It is in the trial scene that we see Atticus at his best, exposing the falsehood and meanness of the white world intent on destroying an innocent Negro. If Jean Scout the daughter keeps the wheel of the story turning, Atticus is the axle. He is a man who seems to have been made to approximate to Newman's idea of a gentleman. He never inflicts pain on others, but strives to relieve them of it even at the cost of his own and his children's suffering. It is a highly idealised characters. He stands up like a lighthouse, so firm, so noble, so magnanimous.

But the children and Atticus with a few other probable exceptions like Calpurnia and Sheriff Tate and the victims are about the only normal folk in the novel. These Maycomb women are quite funny. They are the comic characters in a
tragic world although they play the chorus in the novel. Here is Aunt Alexandra.

She was not fat, but solid, and she chose protective garments that drew up her bosom to giddy heights, inchéd in her waist, flared out her rear, and managed to suggest that Aunt Alexandra's was once an hour-glass figure. From any angle it was formidable.

And we have "Miss Stephanie Crawford, that English channel of gossip", Miss Dubose who was horrible. "Her face was horrible. Her face was the color of a dirty pillow-case, and the corners of her mouth glistened." But Calpurnia, the nurse, who reminds us of Dilsey in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and Miss Maudie are the only two women who have beneath their tough exterior abundant humanity. Calpurnia, who leads a double-life, takes Jem and Scout to the Negro church the way Dilsey takes Benjy to the Easter service in Faulkner. Here we are in the church; the novelist has almost actually taken us in:

The warm bitter sweet smell of clean Negro welcomed us as we entered the church yard - Hearts of Love hair dressing mingled with asafoetid, Snuffy Hoyt's Cologne, Brown's Mule, peppermint, and lilac talcum.

But there is a counter-point. Lula, a Negro, protests against the visit of the white children; and Calpurnia retorts "It's the same God, ain't it?" Calpurnia has brought up these motherless children. It is the persons like Atticus and Calpurnia who try to bridge the chasm dividing the whites from the blacks. But it is in Miss Maudie that we have a most remarkable woman. When her house is burnt up, she replies to Jem with infectious optimism: "Always wanted a smaller house, Jem Finch...Just think, I'll have more room for my azaleas now." When the whole Maycomb is madly excited over Tom's trial without ever realising that it was not so much Tom as the white world on trial, Miss Maudie does not lose her head: "I am not, 'tis morbid watching a poor devil on trial for his life. Look
at all those folks, it's like a Roman carnival'. When children put all sorts of queer questions about Arthur Radley she replies pat:

"Stephanie Crawford even told me once she woke up in the middle of the night and found him looking in the window at her. I said what did you do, Stephanie, move over in the bed and make room for him? That shut her up awhile."

She tells the Finch children

"You are too young to understand it...but sometimes the Bible in the hand of one man is worse than a whiskey bottle in the hand—oh, of your father."

And here is the crux of the matter—the dichotomy between appearance and reality. Both Arthur Radley and Tom Robinson, who are punished for the crimes they never committed, are the representatives of all innocent victims. In fact, Radley stitching Jem's pants torn during the children's pranks against Boo himself, leaving gifts for the children in the tree hole, throwing a blanket round Scout while she stood shivering in a dark, cold night watching the house on fire, and finally saving children's lives from the fatal attack of Bob Ewell is more human than most of the Maycomb folk. He is not the bloodthirsty devil as cherished in the popular fantasy. And so is Tom, who was driven only by compassion to respond to Myella's request for help. She had assaulted him. There was no rape. But in the court Bob Ewell shamelessly "stood up and pointed his finger at Tom Robinson"—I see that black nigger youder ruttin' on my Mayella". Ewell and evil are almost homophones. They are filthy parasites, a blot on the society. This shows how culture has nothing to do with colour. The novelist's moral and emotional identification with the whole problem is so great that the verdict of the trial upsets her, too. For a moment she seems to be losing her grip on the story. The characters are on the brink of losing their own identity and the novelist, in her righteous anger, is on the brink of reducing them to the mere mouthpieces. For even the children stunned
by the judgement fumble for words, and for a while the narrative is in the danger of getting lost in the doldrums of discussion—dull, heavy, futile. This can be understood in the context of her having patterned the story after the model of a morality play with a distinct line of demarcation between good and evil, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly. Like Ewell Cunningham, too, betrays his character through connotation. The Finch, the family name of Atticus, means a songbird like the mockingbird. It is the Finch Family that pits itself against evil in defence of good. Jem and Scout are the names that do not fail to evoke the sense of value and selfless service, whereas Jean, which is the variation of Joan distantly clicks in our memory that angelical girl, Joan of Arc, battling for a great cause.

_To Kill a Mockingbird_ is a regional novel. Like Jane Austen, who does not care to go beyond the district of Bath or Thomas Hardy who hardly, if ever, takes his story out of the confines of Wessexshire, Harper Lee sticks to Maycomb in Alabama. The small world assumes a microcosmic dimension and expands into immensity holding an epic canvas against which is enacted a movingly human drama of the jostling worlds—of children and adults, of innocence and experience, of kindne and cruelty, of love and hatred, of humour and pathos, and above all of appearance and reality—all taking the reader to the root of human behaviour. Time does not have a stop in Harper Lee's world, but it moves on lazily. The cycle of seasons keeps on turning with the ever returning summer, and life in Maycomb, 'a tired old town' flows on in its splendour and ugliness, joys and sorrows. Harper Lee, in her firm determination to keep away from the contemporary trend of experimentation without ever succumbing to the lure of following the footsteps of the novelists like Hemingway and Faulkner, returns to the nineteenth century tradition of the well-made novel with immense facility. If she at all betrays any influence, it is from the past rather than the present—Jane Austen's morality and regionalism, Mark Twain's blending of humour and pathos in the jostling worlds, Dickens's humanitarianism and characterisation, Harriet Stowe's sentimental concern for the coloured folk. If by
modernism we mean whatever that is anti-traditional, Harper Lee is not a modern though contemporary novelist. The contemporary of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is incidental, its universality essential. She tells the story with astonishing zest and yet leisurliness characteristic of the past age. For instance, about a century divides *To Kill a Mockingbird* from Harriet Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* but there is no fundamental difference either about the content or the technique of the novel. In both we see an astonishing streak of sentimentality, an irresistible love of the melodrama and the same age-old pity for the underdog. But Harper Lee has an unusual intensity of imagination which creates a world more living than the one in which we live, so very solid, so easily recognizable. It looks all so effortless, so very unconfined. But it is painful to see the way the harsh realities impinge mercilessly on the juvenile world of innocence. Harper Lee has an intense ethical bias and there is about the novel a definite moral fervour.

The novelist, in an unmistakable way, has viewed one of the most fundamental human problems with the essentially Christian terms of reference, and we see emerging from the novel a definite moral pattern embodying a scale of values. As we notice the instinctive humanizing of the world of things, we are also impressed by the way Harper Lee can reconcile art and morality. For *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not a work of propaganda, it is a work of art, not without a tragic view of life. The novelist has been able to combine humour and pathos in an astonishing way. But comedy and tragedy are, in the final analysis, two sides of the same coin. The novel bubbling with life and overflowing with human emotions is not without a tragic pattern involving a contest between good and evil. Atticus in his failure to defend the Negro victim, eventually hunted down while scaling the wall in quest of freedom, the innocent victim and Arthu Boo, who is endowed with tender human emotions and compassion, but nearly buried alive in the Radley House, which is a veritable sepulchre, simply because his father loved to wallow in the vanity fair, and the suffering
Finch children, they all intensify the sense of waste involved in the eternal conflict. "The hero of a tragedy", observes Freud in *Totem and Taboo*, "had to suffer; this is today still the essential content of a tragedy. By that norm *To Kill a Mockingbird* could be seen to hover on the frontier of a near-tragedy. The tragic mode is no longer a monopoly of the theatre. Like the epic that precedes it, the novel that succeeds it, too, can easily order itself into a comic or a tragic pattern. Particularly after the seventeenth century tragedy seems to be steadily drifting towards the pocket theatre. *To Kill a Mockingbird* has the unity of place and action that satisfy an Aristotle although there is no authority of the invisible here as in a Greek tragedy. With Atticus and his family at the narrative centre standing like a rock in a troubled sea of cruelty, hatred and injustice we have an imitation of an action which is noble and of a certain magnitude. And the story, that is closed off on the melancholy note of the failure of good, is also not without its poetic justice through the nemesis that destroys the villain out to kill the Finch children. Here is the exploration, or at least an honest attempt at the exploration, of the whole truth which is lost in the polarities of life. But Harper Lee who lets us hear in the novel the 'still, sad music of humanity' is immensely sentimental. Her love for melodrama is inexhaustible. Hence, although her view of human life is tragic the treatment is sentimental, even melodramatic. However, though not a tragedy, it is since *Uncle Tom's Cabin* one of the most effective expressions of the voice of protest against the injustice to the Negro in the white world. Without militant championship of the 'native sons' writing in a spirit of commitment here is a woman novelist transmuting the raw material of the Negro predicament aesthetically. Like Jane Austen, Harper Lee is a moralist, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* almost approximates to Lionel Trilling view on the novel:

For our time the most effective agent of the moral imagination has been the novel of the last two hundred years. It was never, either aesthetically or morally, a perfect form... But its greatness and its practical
usefulness lay in its unremitting work of involving the reader himself in the moral life, inviting him to put his own motives under examination, suggesting that reality is not as his conventional education has led him to see it. It taught us, as no other genre ever did, the extent of human variety and the value of this variety. It was the literary form to which emotions of understanding and forgiveness were indigenous, as if by the definition of the form itself.

(The Liberal Imagination: London 1951, p. 222)

As we read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a thesis novel, we notice an unfailing moral order arising out of the flux of experience which is the evolution of human consciousness elaborated through the structure of events, without ever raising the age old problem of art and morality. There is a complete cohesion of art and morality. And therein lies the novelist's success. She is a remarkable story-teller. The reader just glides through the novel abounding in humour and pathos, hopes and fears, love and hate, humanity and brutality—all affording him a memorable human experience of journeying through sunshine and rain at once. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is indeed a criticism of life and that, too, a most disturbing criticism, but we hardly feel any tension between the novelist's creativity and social criticism and its small world ingers in our memory as an unforgettable experience while Maycomb county—*'Ad Astra Per Aspera*: from mud to the stars'*—stretches itself beyond our everyday horizon as an old familiar world.