



Racism in Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*

Harianto Andri ⁽¹⁾

Yohanes Tuaderu ⁽²⁾

john@stba-prayoga.ac.id

Sekolah Tinggi Bahasa Asing Prayoga

Abstract

This article presents Harper Lee's concern on racism reflected in the novel *To Kill A Mockingbird*. This research aims to scrutinize the view point of the main character – Scout – about racism. There are two problems to discuss: *first*, the society's influence to the development of racism, and *second*, the social relation between Whites and Blacks. The discussion is begun with the description of the social conflict in America in 1930s at a glance using habitus theory and symbolic violence by Pierre Bourdieu. Habitus theory is used to analyze the influence of society to the emergence of racism, and the symbolic violence is used to highlight the social relation of whites and blacks. The analysis is conducted by applying library research method to collect information and data related to the discussion. After finishing the research, the writers find that the social condition in 1930s supported the growth of racism in Southern part of the USA. The great depression in economic field also made racism grew faster. Consequently, the blacks became the victims of white prejudice and discrimination.



I. Introduction

Racism is the concept of separating humans ascribed to racial group by either law or action. Racism can also lead to the elimination of other race, the division of a nation, and the enslavement of certain race. In modern time, there are laws against racism which at the same time promote brotherhood and equality among human beings. However the practices related to racism still happen anywhere all around the globe.

To Kill A Mockingbird is a popular novel written by a prominent literary author - Nelle Harper Lee – which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1960. This novel sounds several themes such as innocence, bravery, prejudice, and racism. Among all of the themes, racism is very well explored in *To Kill A Mockingbird* presenting the

Blacks are highly discriminated that causes their life becomes so hard in those days. Lee employs each character to expose the practice of racism and to show how they correspond with the story line of *To Kill A Mockingbird*. Setting of the novel is Alabama in 1930s which was the year when Great Depression occurred. In this era, there are a lot of people lost their lands, their homes and even their dignities. People had to look for jobs because unemployment kept growing. The condition gave big social-economic effect to Americans both Blacks and Whites in some aspects. The Whites' position seemed better than the Blacks. The problem occurred when race prestige caused the Blacks experienced injustice in political view point and brought them to suffer more than the Whites.



II. Review of Related Literature

To uncover the research questions on the effect of society toward the development of racism and the social relation between the Blacks and the Whites, the writers apply the theory of habitus and symbolic violence postulated by a French sociologist - Pierre Bourdieu.

2.1 Habitus

Bourdieu view of power is in the context of the theory of society, where power is culturally and symbolically created, and is constantly re-legitimized through the interaction of agents and structures. The main way for this to happen is through what he states as habitus or socialized norm or the tendency that guides way of thinking and behavior. Bourdieu (1984:170) states:

The habitus is not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure: the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world itself and the products of internalization of the division

into social classes.
(Bourdieu, 1984: 170)

This means that habitus grows in society through a natural, very long, internalized and acculturated social process in society into a structured habit of its own. Habitus is made through a social process, not an individual that leads to an eternal pattern and is transferred from one context to another, but which also shifts in relation to the particular context and over time. Habitus is not permanent. It may change under unexpected situations in long historical periods.

2.2 Symbolic Violence

According to Bourdieu (1977:171), symbolic capital such as self-esteem, dignity, and attention is a crucial source of power. Symbolic capital is any capital species viewed through a socially-implanted classification scheme. When a symbolic capitalist uses this strength, it will deal with an agent who has weaker powers, and therefore the agent seeks to change his actions as symbolic violence.



Symbolic violence is essentially the imposition of categories of thought and perception of dominated social agents, who then regard the social order as something just. It is the incorporation of the unconscious structure, which tends to repeat the structures of actions of the dominant party. The dominant party then views the position of the dominant party as the right one. Symbolic violence is in some sense far more powerful than physical violence, because symbolic violence is inherent in every form of action and structure of individual cognition, and impose the specter of legitimacy on the social order.

Bourdieu (1977:159) suggested a notion of doxa as the culmination of his understanding about symbolic capital. Doxa is the view of a ruler that is considered as a view of the whole society. Society no longer has a critical attitude to the view of the authorities. The ruler's view is usually simple, popular, and very easily digested by the his people. Doxa shows how rulers can achieve,

defend, and develop their power by employing symbols that successfully enter the mastered mind, thus losing people's critical attitude to the ruler. The controlled party sees the same as the ruler. They are oppressed, but never feel really oppressed because they live in doxa.

III. Research Method

Primary data for the study is Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*. The secondary data are collected through library research i.e., books and online sources related to the issue of racism and all theories that support the analysis. To analyze the data the writers employ qualitative method because this research locates the study within particular settings which provide opportunities for exploring all social variables dealing with racism and the life of the Blacks and the Whites.

IV. Discussion and Findings

Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* is the story that narrated by a young girl who, at the



beginning of the novel, is six years old. Though her name is Jean Louise, she goes by her nickname, Scout. The novel takes place in the small town of Maycomb, Alabama. Scout's father, Atticus, is her sole guardian as her mother died at a very young age.

The term 'racism' in this novel – that is mentioned very blatantly – is in the trial of Tom Robinson. Although Tom is innocent, but because of his skin's color is black and all the others in courtroom (the witness, the jury, and the victim) are white, he was falsely accused.

The writers use the theories of habitus and symbolic violence of Pierre Bourdieu to analyze the novel. According to the theories, racism is caused by habitus that is formed dealing with the social condition and norms that happen around the society. There are two main issues to be analyzed: the *first* is the effect of the society and norms on one's behavior that resulting in racial discrimination; and the *second* is the life of white and the blacks. In analyzing the first

issue, the writers use the theory of habitus. Meanwhile the second issue is analyzed by using the symbolic violence theory.

3.1 The Effect of Society toward the Development of Racism

In analyzing racism issue reflected in *To Kill A Mockingbird*, it is important to know the life of the two races: the White and the Black. The main character in the novel is a white girl. The distinction between the Blacks and the Whites become a strong motive that cause the presence of tendency against racial issues. The characters in *To Kill A Mockingbird* can be divided into black and white characters who live together in a small town.

To Kill A Mockingbird reflects racism that is constructed in real society with the most victims are the Blacks. Atticus becomes a hero for a black man named Tom Robinson who is accused of raping Mayella Ewell – a white woman – merely because he works so hard to prove that Tom is not guilty in that



case. Atticus wants to convince the audience in the courtroom that accusing anyone of no guilt – both the Blacks and the Whites – is an injustice. He portrays Harper Lee's father – a lawyer of many black clients.

Before analyzing the life of the Blacks and the Whites, it is important to know that all of people in Maycomb County – both the Blacks and the Whites – encounter the same condition of life because the impact of Great Depression era. Their life is messy because they lost their homes, their lands, their jobs, and money. In some aspect the crisis hit them harder than before as it is described in the following quotation:

There was no hurry, for there was nowhere to go, nothing to buy and no money to buy it with; nothing to see outside the boundaries of Maycomb County. (Lee, 1960: 3)

The statements above shows the condition in Maycomb which does not only happen to the Whites but also hit to the Blacks. The words “*nothing to see outside the*

boundaries of Maycomb County” reflects the difficulties encountered by people in Maycomb County. The words “*nothing to buy and no money to buy it with*” means that their economic transaction is really disturbed in Great Depression era because there are no goods and services to sell. Even if there are goods sold in the market, people have no purchase power to buy them. No money means they can go nowhere. It happens to the whole Southern part of the US at that time.

In habitus theory, Bourdieu said that habitus is not the result of free will, or is determined by structure, but is created by a kind of interaction between time: the disposition both of which is shaped by past events and structures, and the present form of practice and structure and also, the very condition of our perception. It is shown by the quotation below:

There's four kind of folks in the world. There's the ordinary kind like us and the neighbors, there's the kind like the Cunninghams out in



the woods, the kind like Ewells down at the dump, and the negroes. (Lee 1960: 120)

The quotation shows that the residents of Maycomb consist of various types of people. From the sentence “*there’s the kind like the Cunninghams out in the woods*” informs that some families come from village or woods that live far away from town. The majority people who live there are farmers. The sentence “*the kind like Ewells down at the dump and the negroes*” means that white families (Ewells) who live in town but do not work live side by side with the Blacks, but the Blacks are minority. The Ewells become important habitants in the city at that time. The quotation “*at the dump, and the negroes*” also indicates that the Blacks exist as low class people in the society. In Great Depression era, low class is considered the most suitable people to work hard as labourer. Therefore, this habit is shaped by past events and also the present form of practice and structures.

Habitus is a community habit that creates a structured tendency to think, feel and act in a determinant way. In the story, the Whites view the Black as low class and uncivilized people. They look at the appearances because the Blacks have dark skin, big body, and are not reasonable to be high class as white. This tendency of thinking and action is reflected in the quotation below:

Cry about the simple hell people give other other people without even thinking. Cry about the hell white people give colored folks, without even stopping to think that they’re people, too. (Lee, 1960: 107)

From the statement above, it shows how the Whites think about and act toward the Blacks. Through the sentence “*Cry about the hell white people give colored folks*” above, Scout explains that the Blacks are also human who have rights to live peacefully. The Blacks are only innocent people and the Whites may not hurt them. Although Scout is a white girl, she cannot change the society’s way of thinking. The



Whites in 1930s wished to live without another kind of race. The words “*without even stopping to think that they’re people, too*” means that the White concluded that the Blacks are bad based on their prejudice. They did not realize that the Blacks never disturb the life of the Whites. Whites’ mind and act is shaped by habitus that is created from the society and norm at that time.

Thus, the discrimination between the Whites and the Blacks has already happened since long time ago and it became a habit for them. Both the Whites and the Blacks live their life bound by that habit. Since a habit creates a tendency to think in community, it is not easy to be changed. In the story it can be seen by how the Whites view blacks.

Well how do you know we ain't Negroes?

"That's what I thought," said Jem, "but around here once you have a drop of Negro blood, that makes you all black." (Lee, 1960: 78, 81)

From the statements above, it can be seen how society divides people based on races. The words “*once you have a drop of Negro blood, that makes you all black*” indicates that the society in Maycomb have a habit to think that once you have a little of black blood flows in you, that makes you black forever. The quotation “*how do you know we ain't Negroes?*” points out the dissimilarity point of view from the majority people in society. The majority of the Whites keep their own opinion in appraising thing. It means the White stands behind their idea to judge something. While the Finches are also whites, but they are only minority. They cannot change the habit in their own community.

3.2 The Life of the Whites and the Blacks in Southern America

In this sub chapter the writers explain the life of the Whites and the Blacks in Maycomb County in 1930s. This is to show the racial issues between the Whites and the Blacks existing in society as the result of habitus. The differences



between the Whites' action and the Blacks' suffering are part of the symbolic capital. In the story, it can be seen through the white juries and black man named Tom.

According to Bourdieu (1977:171), symbolic violence is essentially the imposition of categories of thought and perception of dominated social agents who then regard the social order as something just. Therefore, according this theory, the white juries act as dominated social agents that regarded as justice in the society. While, Tom Robinson, the black man, is regarded as weaker agent. The quotation below proves this idea:

Now, don't you be so confident, Mr. Jem, I ain't ever seen any jury decide in favor of a colored man over a white man.

A jury never looks at a defendant it has convicted, and when this jury came in, not one of them look at Tom Robinson

Judge Taylor was poling the jury: "Guilty... Guilty... Guilty... Guilty..." (Lee 1960: 111,112)

From the quotation, it can be concluded that the Blacks are always wrong before the eyes of white juries in whatever cases in American court system. Every black defendant knows this fact. Thus, they must be ready to face the punishment because all juries will decide them "guilty". The statement "*I ain't ever seen any jury decide in favor of a colored man over a white man*" shows that the juries are not fair. The black man is always sentenced to death if they do raping with white woman. "*A jury never looks at a defendant it has convicted*" means that it is not necessary for the juries to look at the person or the evidence because the defendant is a black man. That is one of codes in Southern society that all juries must be from the Whites who has dominant power over the Blacks. The juries also come from relatively poor farmer from countryside. People from countryside are the most difficult people to change. They follow the old tradition and support racism to grow fast. Although a lawyer may prove that a black defendant is not guilty, but in fact



white juries will decide him guilty. The white society cannot accept the reality a black man can be a free man if he does not really do any crime. They choose their race and never construct justice for innocent people. The Blacks as the weaker agents in this story are always become the victims of the injustice. Race prestige becomes a mirror of every problem that happens between the Blacks and the Whites. This means, the problem is solved based on the racial background. Since long time ago, the case of the Blacks opposed the Whites was always won by the Whites even though slavery was already abolished. The Whites always try to make their life better than the Blacks to prove that they are superior. Even in the effort to gain their maximum prosperity, the Whites exploited the Blacks.

In *To Kill A Mockingbird*, the Whites as the dominant social group always view their own race as the best race. This kind of point of view creates what-so-called symbolic violence that is far more powerful

than physical violence. Symbolic violence is inherent in every form of action and structure of individual cognition, and imposes the specter of legitimacy on the social order. The Whites has every power to take advantage of the Blacks to protect themselves in society. This power is apparent to the structure of individual cognition and legitimacy on social order as pictured in the following quotation:

They couldn't be fair if they tried. In our courts, when it's a white man's word against a black man's, the white man always wins. They're ugly, but those are the facts of life. (Lee 1960: 117)

The statements obviously show that the Whites always take the advantages of blacks in Maycomb. The words "*They couldn't be fair if they tried*" proves that the practice of racism really exists in society. The Whites take advantages of their race prestige to get power and protect them from the matter that is done by themselves. The statements "*when it's a white man's word against a*



black man's, the white man always wins” is a kind of power abuse because the Whites have the power of individual cognition and legitimacy social order. The Whites as dominant party can perform symbolic violence on the Blacks – the minority group in the society. They utilize the weaknesses of the Blacks to cover their mistakes from the norm penalty. The effect of this way of thinking brings the black to be sentenced to death by the judge.

Symbolic violence finally creates what is called as doxa according to Bourdieu (1977:159). Doxa is the view of a ruler that is considered as the view of the whole society. In the story, the Whites are the rulers in society. The Blacks who live in the same society with the Whites have no choice but to follow things determined by the Whites. In this situation, discrimination becomes so easily to happen. It is no matter the white is poor or rich, honorable or not, from the city or countryside, when they get into trouble with blacks they will win.

The evil assumption- that all Negroes lie, that all negroes are basically immoral beings, that all negro man are not to be trusted around our women, an assumption one associates with minds of their caliber. (Lee 1960: 108, 109)

The quotation above shows what is meant by Bourdieu as doxa. The words “*an assumption one associates with minds of their caliber*” means that the wrong assumption of the social leader of the Whites influences the whole view of the society to blacks. It is a view about the Whites that affects the whole society to think the same. The mistake that is done by the Whites can be changed to be the Black's crime. The society believes every reason that the Blacks are wrong. Blacks cannot do anything to get the justice because they are trapped in the concept of doxa among the Whites. Another proof of the presence of doxa is also found in the sentence, “... *all Negroes lie, that all negroes are basically immoral beings, that all negro man are not to be trusted around our women*”. This statements



reflect bad opinions in the Whites' opinion that the Blacks are trash, liar, dangerous, and immoral.

According to Bourdieu (1977:159) doxa also shows how rulers can achieve, defend, and develop their power by playing symbols that successfully enter the mastered mind, thus losing their critical attitude to the ruler. In the story, the Whites as the ruler defend their power by playing symbols and blame blacks for their mistakes.

Atticus, are we going to win it ?

No, honey.

Then why ?

Simply because we were licked a hundred years before we started is no reason for us not to try to win," Atticus said. (Lee, 1960: 41)

The statements above show that all the efforts are useless if it concerns with the life of the Blacks. The word "No" shows that the Blacks do not have right to get justice. The quotation "*we were licked a hundred years before we started*" means that the Whites think they are more civilized, more honorable, and have

higher class position than the Blacks. Hence, they defend their race to keep their name good whether the way is right or wrong. They lose their critical attitude to judge right or wrong. They would do anything to defend their power. The effect of this situation is the practice of treating the Blacks in injustice way. There is no way to defeat the power of the Whites.

The majority people in society in 1930s were the Whites who lived mostly in countryside. Countryside people are known as social groups who were difficult to accept new concept or knowledge to reform something bad or wrong. The situation makes the life of the Blacks become more difficult because they have to face the condition that never end to happen. Many black people become fear to meet the Whites. On the other hand, some of the Blacks try to do right thing in society if they still want to live side by side with the Whites.



CONCLUSION

To Kill a Mockingbird depicts the social condition in which racism becomes the most trending issue in the Southern society in Great Depression era. This article discusses about the effect of society toward the racism development. Lee reflects how far racism is constructed in the society and how the life condition of the Blacks is really damaged. Although Lee is a white woman, she shows to the readers about the trouble caused by the Whites in the court trial has truly violated the the spirit of equality and brotherhood among all mankind. The White's prejudices control their action and pursue them to hurt the Blacks.

There are two conclusions that the writers may draw from this research. **First**, the growth of racism in the USA is closely related to the Great Depression that caused the decrease of purchase power which made the gap of the poor and the rich wider and wider. Racism already existed long before 1930s (the time setting of the novel). It is a long and

natural process that has become a tradition for the people in Southern America to treat other people based on racial background. The tradition becomes a habit for the Whites to oppress the Blacks. In Maycomb county, the Blacks are minority group in society. **Second**, the life of the Whites and the Blacks in Maycomb County and the social relation they developed ascribed to race gives the Whites an opportunity to exercise their power on the Blacks. The power is blinded by their own race prestige. This is shown in the characterization made by Lee on the juries. It is described that all juries are the Whites. Tom is a black man accused of doing rape to a white woman. He becomes a scapegoat for other mistakes done by the Whites. The society which is mostly white believe that Blacks are always wrong. They view the Black with such bad opinions. These are resulting in blacks become the victim of the racism



REFERENCES

Baldick, Chris. (2001). *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. United States : Oxford University Press

Bourdieu, Pierre. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: University Press.

..... (1984). *Distinction : a social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Lee, Harper. (1960). *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York: McIntosh and Otis, Inc.

Wellek, René, and Warren, Austin. (1956) *Theory of Literature, 3rd edn*. New York: Harcourt Brace.