

To Kill a Mocking Bird (1962)

Directed by Robert Mulligan

For M. A. Sem II, CC-5, Unit: 4

'To Kill a Mocking Bird' is an American legal drama film based on the eponymous novel by Harper Lee published in 1960. Released in 1962, the film gained a mythical stature in popular culture worldwide owing to its depiction of a lawyer of probity defending an innocent victim of public bias. A recent addition to the genre is the Hindi film *Mulk* (2018) directed by Anubhav Sinha.

To Kill a Mocking Bird entails the issues of gender, single parenting, mob mentality, sexuality and poverty on a subtle and mellowed note but explicitly addresses the problem of racial prejudice and ensuing demonization and dehumanization of the racial 'other'. The film resonates with an undercurrent of the inability of the criminal justice system to contain bigotry.

The film opens with a credit sequence in which an old cigar box is featured being opened with fair hands not matching with the humming of a little girl in the background. The cigar box, grown-ups hands and a child's voice combine to create an air of nostalgia. The box contains endearing childhood trifles like soap doll figures, a dilapidated watch, crayons, marbles, a safety pin, a pencil and a medal. The girls voice gains more coherence and a childlike

colouring on a lined paper produces the title of the film. A black and white marble is seen recumbent upon a pair of crayons which when removed, the marble rolls down to hit a black marble. The crayons here act as boundaries of preconceived notions and stereotypes which when removed would certainly lead to co-existence of the two races depicted by marbles. A bird is seen being drawn with a crayon accompanied with the humming of a child. After the drawing is finished, the paper is torn through the bird.

And here the credit score ends.

The credit score is telling in many ways and foreshadows the major themes of the film. Given the title of the film, the bird drawn with the crayons is a mockingbird. The accompaniment of a child's humming establishes it as a symbol of innocence. The paper being torn symbolizes the loss of innocence. The lined paper is a symbol of social mores within which an individual has to situate him/herself failing which disaster is sure to happen. A child operating upon a lined paper evoke the rigidity of these mores from which even innocent children are not spared. A girl's humming foreshadows gender issues like a woman's right to inheritance of property or in Scout and expression of sexuality in Mayella Ewell.

The scene after the credit score, descends on a relaxed and

unhurried fictional suburb of Maycomb, Alabama. A voice over informs the audience that it was 1932 and that she was six years old that summer. The 1930s were a period of worldwide economic crisis known as The Great Depression when global employment drastically declined pushing the masses to abject poverty and the United States of America was one of the most severely hit nations by the phenomenon. The lady in the voice over says, "There was no hurry, for there was nowhere to go and nothing to buy; no money to buy it with."

The bearing of the economic crisis is instantly seen with the arrival of Mr. Cunningham, a country folk who is trying to pay Mr. Atticus Finch (Gregory Peck), a lawyer by giving him hickory nuts and collards for his services. Atticus says, "The crash hit them the hardest."

Economic poverty among the masses is established from the beginning of the film to imply the contemporary understanding of racial discrimination when it was believed that poverty leads to, or at least aggravates, social ills like bigotry and racism. All the middle-class characters of the film are shown to exhibit not even a shred of overt racial bias.

When Mr. Cunningham leaves, Atticus asks Scout (Mary Badham), his daughter to call her brother Jem (Philip Alford) for breakfast. Jem has retreated to the treehouse and refuses to climb down before his father agrees to play football with him. Atticus rejects his proposal saying that he is too old and Jem starts complaining about his father to Miss Maudie,

a neighbour. Maudie advises the siblings to count their blessings. Here Maudie is referring to the presence of a bread-winner in their family who can still arrange for their daily necessities. Suggestions to poverty are present as ^{an} undercurrent throughout the film.

But before Maudie's advice could sink in a new character appears who introduces himself as Charles Baker Harris, a seven years old boy whom folks call Dill and whose mamma used to work for a photographer in Meridian. The use of the past tense "worked" implies her present unemployment. He had come to spend two weeks with his Aunt Stephanie, another neighbour of the Finch's. Scout says that their mama's dead but they got a daddy. She asks Dill (John Megna) about his daddy and he says that he didn't have one. Scout asks if he is dead to which Dill replies in negative. Scout asserts that if he isn't dead, Dill must have got one. At this point, Jem interferes as an elder brother and asks Scout to hush. Here Calpurnia (Estelle Evans), a black domestic help of Finch household arrives. Scout introduces him/her to Dill. In the meanwhile Dill was ready for an answer about his father. His daddy "owns the L&N Railroad." It is evident keeping in mind his mother's humble standing that he is telling a lie. But the incident entails a poignant observation. Whenever a child feels disoriented, his imagination always comes to the rescue.

Connecting Dill's description of his father to Maudie's advice to children it can be understood that the innocent world, the make-belief world of a child carries no bitterness for

the past and no apprehension for the future. It is the ideal world of enjoying the present. In the absence of a real father, Dill creates one for himself and that too the richest he can think of. It is sad that this innocence has to leave a child when he confronts the ugly real world outside the safety of his home.

Jem stops Dill mid-sentence to show him "the meanest man that ever took a breath of life". The man is Mr. Nathan Radley. He has a boy named Boo, implying a ghost / an ominous spirit. Boo, according to Jem, is about six and a half feet tall and devours raw squirrels and cats and stalks children in the thick of night. Jem's details are not a figment of his imagination like Dill's father but for put forth in all seriousness and later corroborated with Aunt Stephanie's description of Boo trying to kill his father.

The terrifying descriptions about the Radley family would fall flat as the story would unfold itself and thus would provide a perspective about the difference in imaginations of a child and an adult. Whereas the imagination of a child like Dill is therapeutic in nature and fills irreplaceable voids, the imagination of adults shapes itself as rumour and circulates in the vicinity to alienate and segregate.

(To be continued...)