

To Kill a Mockingbird (1962)

Directed by Robert Mulligan

Cont'd...

Part II

The children run to greet Atticus as the clock strikes 5:00. Dill asks Scout why she calls her father Atticus. Scout's reply is that she follows Jem in calling her father by his first name and she has no answer to why Jem does so. It is a plot device to underline (1) that Atticus is unconventional in every sphere of his life who even treat his children as his equals and disregards customs and traditions that have been perpetuated in the name of courtesy and proper conduct which by extension applies to the Black community of Maycomb, Alabama who were supposed to behave in a certain manner and (2) that Atticus despite being caring is removed as a father in the absence of which Scout looks up to Jem and emulates him. Jem with all his child-like glory is protective, sheltering and watchful of his younger sister Scout and plays a father for her. He disengages her from scuffles at school, teaches her to be kind and considerate to the poor and protects her from Bob Ewell. On their way to meet Atticus Jem warns the other two to be careful of one Miss Dubose who hides a confederate pistol in her lap and can kill a person as soon as she look at him. This exaggerated menace of Miss Dubose is the product of a childish apprehensiveness of the unknown which fails to locate a motiv behind the kill. It suggests that in order to understand the motivations of person it is important to step in his shoes. Miss Dubose is thus the microcosm of the Black community which is a victim of prejudice and stereotype.

Turn Over...

Miss Dubose is offended at Scout who out of habit greets her as an equal by saying "Hey, Miss Dubose" instead of "Good afternoon, Miss Dubose". It shows that excessive formality in relationships is sure to breed disdain and disregard for the other. On hearing the rants of Miss Dubose about the lack of manners in Scout, Atticus approaches Miss Dubose and engages her in a friendly talk. He compliments her over her flowers and it instantly melts her fury and she acknowledges Atticus' gracious behaviour by reciprocating sweetly. Here Jem learns an important lesson, "He gets her interested in something nice so she forgets to be mean."

Later in the film Jem imitates Atticus' approach towards Miss Dubose in inviting Walter to his home for dinner.

After the encounter with Miss Dubose, Dill is seen challenging Jem to trespass the Radley property. Dill here becomes a symbol of human curiosity which propels a man to venture into the unknown and therefore scary. Jem in a series of events goes on to touch the front door of Radley's house. The children return unscathed after the incident. It suggests that what is unknown is not necessarily ominous. Jem's boasting after his act of courage impresses upon the audience that courage and enterprise have their own rewards which cannot be cherished until in the absence of human endeavor and one such journey is the attempt to go beyond the narrow boundaries of race and class the reward of which is a peaceful and prosperous co-existence.

Dill then proposes that they visit the courthouse to see the "bat-infested" room in which Boo was locked up, the chains and the "instruments of torture". After they reach the courthouse, Dill is lifted by Jem and Scout to have a peep inside the courtroom. Dill narrates everything happening inside. There is a judge who looks like he is asleep, a coloured man, Atticus, a whole lot of men sitting together on one side, one man yelling at the coloured man and the coloured man being taken away.

Dill's child-like description is telling. The first sentence of the description, "Not much is happening" suggests that the issues that led to the accusation of the coloured man can easily be tackled given the society is ready to move beyond its ill-founded assumptions about the 'Other'. The sleeping judge indicates that law holds little currency in matters that are led by ideologies into which individuals are conditioned. A whole lot of men sitting together against the black/coloured man suggests how society unites to punish and condemn the transgressor individual. Atticus standing near the coloured man implies that only reason combined with courage to challenge the customary can rescue innocence. The coloured man being taken away implies how innocence rejecting to be nullified by prevalent norms is damned to an alienated existence.

Outside the courtroom Bob Ewell confronts Atticus Finch. Atticus refuses to be reazoned by Bob and leaves. Bob's subsequent monologue, "You got children of your own" reflects Bob's genuine concern for the safety of his community. It is significant that in spite of everything menacing that Bob seemingly intended

to do, his motivations were although seeped in abject racism where were inspired by his anxieties and apprehensions. Atticus' excusing himself from Bob highlights the need for sensitization of the privileged which can preempt such untoward and ugly incidents from happening in future. It also underlines that a hope of redemption is already present and it only needs to be tapped and acknowledged to shape an egalitarian society.

That night Jem and Dill decide to trespass the Radley property to have a look at Boo Radley. Scout follows them complaining that she is scared to which Jem retorts angrily, "I swear, Scout, you act more like a girl all the time." Jem's dialogue raises important issues : (1) coming out of a little boy, the dialogue suggests that children are raised in patriarchy (2) emotions like fear are exclusively associated with women notwithstanding earlier incidences where Dill on hearing Boo Radley's ominous story exclaims, "My Lord, Aunt Stephanie! You almost gave me a heart attack!" or Jem's passing the Radley's house "Always running" and (3) it projects the feminine capacity of unconditioned love and concern where Scout despite being afraid does not leave Jem's back and follows him to the Radley's. Jem alone ventures ^{to} the porch ^{and} attempts to have a look inside the house. Just then an ominous shadow of a man appears and its ^{one of} hand reaches for Jem. The children shut their eyes in utter fright. But then the shadow disappears leaving Jem unharmed and the children run for their lives.

On the way back home Jem's pants tangle in a barbed wire. Once they reach home safely, Jem decides to return to get his pants back. Scout waits for her brother anxiously counting. As her count reaches fourteen, a gun shot is heard in the background an evidently scared Scout sees Jem entering the house along with his pants. Later in the film Jem reveals to Scout that his pants have been mended and he found them neatly folded hanging on the fence. Given the scenario, it is impossible to mend a torn fabric in a time period of a few minutes. The incidence thus transcends beyond the literal to signify that the possibility of amends is close at hand, the only key missing is an endeavor to reach out to the marginalized.

On hearing the gun shot an anxious crowd gathers outside and Miss Dubose demands an explanation to which Atticus says that Mr. Radley fired the shot to warn a prowler in his collard patch. Staphanie is thankful to Mr. Radley who has frightened the thief for good. The goodness in Radleys is projected for the first time in the film through Staphanie's gratitude.

Dill returns to Mississippi and Jem and Scout get ready to go to school. On her first day at school Scout picks a fight with her classmate Walter who is the son of Mr. Cunningham, the farmer who was seen earlier in the film trying to pay Atticus for his services with ~~begetments~~ hickory nuts and collards. Jem disengages the fight and invites Walter over for dinner. At the dinner table Walter behaves uncouthly and is insulted by Scout. Calpurnia calls Scout to the kitchen and reprimands her for her behaviour. The dinner table sequence is suggestive in many ways.

It poignantly portrays a child from a poor household for whom the Finch dinner table is a blessing when compared to the peasant food his family can afford. Food is a source of nourishment and Walker's uncivil table manners reflect that ^{an} individual cannot be expected to behave in a particular way when the premises from which he belongs is different. Scout is schooled for her rough behaviour by a Black maid, Calpurnia which suggests that virtue and morality are not exclusive to the well-off. Poor too can teach lessons in decency. Scout's unresponsiveness to Calpurnia's schooling depict the snob that the elite childishly exhibit against the poor. Atticus hints at the title of the film on the dinner table when he recounts his father's advice in which he tells him not to kill a Mockingbird. Mockingbirds neither eat people's garden nor nest in the corn cribs but only make music for people to enjoy. The mockingbirds thus become a symbol of innocence and purity and killing them amounts to sin.

Scout resigns to a swing outside the house after being reprimanded by Calpurnia for her behaviour. Atticus approaches her and she relates the events of her first day at school and criticizes her teacher. Atticus consoles her and teaches her the importance of compromise: "an agreement reached by mutual consent". He says that before making opinions about a person it is important to understand his point of view and to "climb inside of his skin and walk around in it." It encapsulates the larger themes of prejudice, gullibility and demonization of the 'Other'.

Calpurnia, Jem and Scout spot a mad dog in the neighbourhood charging at them. Calpurnia takes the children inside and informs Atticus of the dog over telephone. Atticus arrives with Sheriff Heck Tate who says that he cannot shoot the dog precisely. He hands over the rifle to Atticus who after struggling a while with his fumbling glasses makes a clean shot and kills the dog. The rabid dog here becomes a symbol of fanaticism and zealotry that is soon to engulf the neighbourhood and reason and sense of justice in Atticus become the only hope for survival as only he could kill the crazed dog. Atticus' initial struggle at aiming suggests that even he is not free from prejudice as is seen in his refusal to reason with Bob Ewell. Atticus fails to understand that institutions cannot guarantee the safety that community can and his refusal to address the community represented by Bob Ewell leads not only to Tom Robinson's death who does not share Atticus' confidence in the system of justice but also jeopardises the safety of his own children when Bob Ewell attacks them to avenge his lost respect in the town.

To be continued...