

Original Paper

The Triad of “Othering”: A Postcolonial Analysis of *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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Abstract

To Kill a Mockingbird exposes the operational logic of systemic oppression within 1930s Southern US society through the judicial injustice suffered by the Black man, Tom Robinson. Utilizing the “Othering” theory from postcolonial studies as its core framework, this paper systematically analyzes the mechanisms of exclusion and their interactions across the triple dimensions of gender, class, and race depicted in the novel. Gender “Othering” manifests in Mayella Ewell’s patriarchal discipline and Scout’s identity anxiety, revealing the marginalization of women within the courtroom space. Class “Othering” is demonstrated through the “white trash” stigma attached to the Ewell family and the economic exclusion faced by the Cunninghams, showcasing the symbolic expulsion of impoverished groups. Racial “Othering” is embodied in the judicial system’s presumption of Tom Robinson’s guilt, exposing the structural violence of white supremacy. The analysis demonstrates how these three dimensions reinforce the social hierarchy through intersecting oppressions, confirming the fundamental nature of power: maintaining hegemony by constructing a “Self-Other” binary. This examination not only deepens the deconstruction of the novel’s power mechanisms but also provides historical reference points for contemporary struggles within identity politics.

Keywords

Othering, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee, postcolonialism

1. Introduction

The early 20th-century United States was rife with conflicts of interest among diverse groups, including historically entrenched racial tensions, culturally triggered gender conflicts, and social structural contradictions arising from capitalist economic development.

To Kill a Mockingbird (1960), by American author Harper Lee (1926-2016), is a novel centered on Southern US racial conflict within this historical context. Through the judicial injustice of Tom

Robinson, a Black man falsely accused of raping a white woman, the novel reveals the distortion and destruction of marginalized group interests within a white-centric society. Although the lawyer Atticus Finch's meticulous defense logically dismantles the prosecution's case, it fails to overcome the racial prejudice deeply rooted in the jury and broader societal consciousness, ultimately leading to Tom's death by lynching. This tragedy not only exposes structural discrimination within the Southern US judicial system but also reflects the essential logic by which power discourse maintains social hierarchy through the construction of a Self-Other binary. This paper employs the "Othering" theory from postcolonial studies as its core framework to systematically analyze the mechanisms of exclusion along gender, class, and racial dimensions within the novel, providing theoretical reference points for understanding the historical roots of contemporary identity politics.

As an American literary classic, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has long sustained scholarly attention. Domestic research often focuses on the bildungsroman theme through child narration or the moral metaphors within its symbolic system; international scholarship tends to emphasize analyzing the dilemmas of justice from jurisprudential perspectives or interpreting racial narratives through ethical criticism. However, existing studies have not sufficiently utilized the "Othering" framework of postcolonial theory to conduct a systematic, integrated analysis of the survival dilemmas faced by marginalized groups in the text. This academic gap limits the deep deconstruction of the novel's power discourse mechanisms and weakens its potential for dialogue with contemporary identity politics issues. Therefore, this paper aims to fill this gap, re-examining the systemic mechanisms of exclusion within the novel using "Othering" theory as an analytical tool.

The theory of "Othering" originates with Edward Said's *Orientalism*, whose core argument posits that dominant groups consolidate their own power legitimacy by constructing subordinate cultural subjects as the "Other" through discursive practices (Said, 1978). Homi K. Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" further highlights the fluidity of "Other" identity within colonial discourse (Bhabha, 1994); Kimberlé Crenshaw's "intersectionality theory" expands the denotation of "Other", revealing the interwoven nature of racial, gender, and class oppression⁰. Drawing on these theoretical tools, this paper summarizes the mechanisms of "Othering" in *To Kill a Mockingbird* into three dimensions: the racial "Othering" represented by Tom Robinson, the gender "Othering" epitomized by Scout Finch, and the class "Othering" symbolized by the Ewell family.

2. Gender "Othering": Identity Anxiety under Patriarchal Discipline

The binary opposition between "Self" and "Other" materializes into a pervasive gender politics within the daily fabric of Maycomb's closed and conservative community ecology. According to "Othering" theory, the "Self" group must construct a differentiated "Other" to confirm identity boundaries. In an entrenched patriarchal society, this mechanism manifests as follows: the "Self" group, centered absolutely on white males, systematically constructs women as subordinate, passive "Others" by

disciplining their speech, behavior, attire, and even emotional expression, thereby maintaining their own power advantage.

Living under the dual shackles of poverty and patriarchy, Mayella Ewell's tragedy acutely reflects the cruel duality of gender "Othering". As a direct participant in white racial "Othering", this young woman, abused by her father and trapped in a dilapidated shack, uses her false accusation against Tom not only as a tool to uphold the white supremacist racial order but also in a desperate attempt to assert her own value by trampling someone more vulnerable. Simultaneously, she herself becomes an "aberrant Other" within the gender order because she fails to meet patriarchy's strict demands for a "lady" lacking elegant deportment and unable to fulfill the decorative role within the family. In court, her fierce resistance to titles like "Miss" or "Ma'am" exposes the society's dual humiliation of her appearance and class: her rough hands, shaped by years of hard manual labor, and her "unfeminine" figure, resulting from malnutrition and overwork, completely exclude her from the orthodox gender order. This disciplinary mechanism precisely confirms Simone de Beauvoir's classic assertion in *The Second Sex*: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir, 2012). Mayella's body and behavior ultimately become a "negative exemplar" of failed patriarchal discipline, a living specimen used by the entire community to warn other women against "transgression".

The growth dilemma of Scout, who is naturally wild and resistant to discipline, profoundly reveals how the forced imposition of gender roles systematically suppresses individual subjectivity. Aunt Alexandra, as a staunch defender of the patriarchal order, not only forces Scout to abandon her overalls for cumbersome dresses and learn "feminine skills" like embroidery but also strictly regulates her speech and behavior—forbidding her from roughhousing with boys and demanding she speak softly. This is, in essence, a series of behavioral norms designed to confine women to the private domestic sphere, reinforcing the ossified notion that "women should be subordinate to the family and serve men." Scout's question, uttered with pure childhood confusion—"Why do I have to be a lady?"—is not only a defense of individual freedom but also a direct challenge to the very foundation of gender "Othering". This resonates with the independently spirited Miss Maudie. This lifelong unmarried woman, who dares to sip spirits in the afternoon and speaks bluntly to religious hypocrites, faces perennial censure and isolation from the community's conservatives due to her various "transgressive" behaviors: the town's ladies privately remark she "doesn't act like a woman," and the men deem her "lacking in upbringing". This phenomenon precisely illustrates that any independent female lifestyle deviating from the patriarchal family structure is perceived as a threat to the existing power order and consequently labeled "abnormal".

The novel further intensifies the symbolic meaning of gender "Othering" through precise spatial codes: during Tom Robinson's trial, women are strictly confined to the courtroom's second-floor gallery. This deliberate physical segregation is not merely spatial division but a metaphor for women's marginal position within the judicial power system—they are permitted to "observe" the operation of power but

are utterly disqualified from participating in the verdict, ultimately reduced to “spectators” rather than “subjects” of the power machinery. Mayella’s tragedy is the extreme product of intersecting gender and racial oppression: this woman with no status within her patriarchal family attempts to regain “purity” recognition in white society by accusing a Black man, yet ultimately, unable to integrate into any mainstream order, becomes a sacrifice to dual “Othering”. Her fate precisely confirms the core argument of Crenshaw’s intersectionality theory—the oppression endured by marginalized groups stems from the overlapping interaction and resonance of multiple power structures such as race, gender, and class.

3. Class “Othering”: Group Marginalization in Capitalist Expansion

Class “Othering” in the novel manifests as follows: the wealth disparity brought about by capitalist economic development in the American South leads elite groups possessing material wealth (land, capital) to identify themselves as “civilized subjects”, constructing impoverished groups as “Others” in need of “civilizing” and “disciplining”. This “Othering” does not exist solely across racial boundaries; class differences within the white community also generate systemic exclusion and discrimination.

The living conditions of the Ewell family, despised by the entire community, are highly representative. Although white, their shack bordering the town dump, drafty and dilapidated, filled with mountains of scrap and garbage, serves as a vivid metaphor for class stigmatization—mainstream society labels them “white trash”. This label points not only to their poverty but also insinuates that they are “social refuse” discarded by the capitalist civilizing process: Bob Ewell’s children are chronically truant, roaming the streets; the family survives on government relief and scavenging. This “non-productive” lifestyle is seen as a negation of the capitalist value of “hard work leading to prosperity”. Bob’s own alcoholism, violent tendencies, and chronic unemployment are simplistically attributed by townspeople to “personal moral depravity”, rather than the structural predicament of poor whites losing their livelihoods after the collapse of the Southern plantation economy. This cognitive logic essentially individualizes poverty as “Other” obscuring capitalism’s systemic exploitation of the underclass.

The Cunningham family, clinging to dignity, exposes the reality of impoverished whites being excluded from the monetary economy. Their primitive method of settling debts with farm produce indicates that this tenant-farming family is not fully integrated into the mainstream monetary system. This economic marginality renders them “semi-Others”—not entirely stripped of their whiteness, yet perpetually fixed at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This marginality extends to education: the Cunningham children are mocked at school for their ragged clothes and lack of supplies; the teacher’s indifference to their poverty is an implicit expression of class prejudice, further confirming their subordinate status to the “civilized subject”. Atticus’s act of defending the Cunninghams pro bono, while seemingly an elite “act of kindness”, actually implies that the rights protection of poor whites relies on the “charity” of a few elites rather than systemic fairness.

The plight of the unconventional Dolphus Raymond profoundly reveals the exclusive logic of class “Othering”: this wealthy white landowner, who chooses to live with Black people and refuses to participate in white elite hypocrisy, is stigmatized by the entire community as a “degenerate” and “lunatic”—merchants refuse to trade with him, and the preacher insinuates in sermons that he has “abandoned God”. The underlying reality is that his behavior challenges the dual order of class and race that dictates “whites should be superior to Blacks”. This exclusion clearly proves that any conduct deviating from the interests and values of the dominant group, regardless of its morality, risks being labeled “aberrant”. Class “Othering” thus becomes a “safety valve” for maintaining the social hierarchy.

4. Racial “Othering”: Systemic Discrimination under Judicial Violence

Racial “Othering” constitutes the novel’s most central and acute conflict dimension. White society, through prolonged discursive construction and historical narratives, shapes Black people as “intellectually inferior”, “morally corrupt”, and “dangerous Others” to legitimize the system of racial segregation. This mechanism is laid bare in the Tom Robinson case.

Tom’s “Othering” begins with the pre-assigned coding of his racial identity. When Mayella accuses him of assault, the town’s white population almost instinctively accepts this narrative—evidence and logic become unnecessary; guilt is assigned based solely on his identity as “Black”. A mob of white men attempts to lynch him during his arrest, shouting “Nigger oughta hang”, completely ignoring Tom’s terrified pleas. Children at school mimic the case with “kill the nigger” games; this childish imitation precisely reflects how the racial prejudices of the adult world have been internalized as collective unconsciousness. This cognitive logic is isomorphic with the “Orientalism” mechanism described by Said: the white “Self” consolidates its own “civilized” and “rational” identity by constructing the Black person as a “savage” and “untrustworthy” Other. Atticus, steadfastly upholding justice, directly targets the absurdity of this prejudice in his courtroom defense: “The state has not produced one iota of medical evidence... It has relied instead upon the testimony of two witnesses... and on the assumption... that all Negroes lie, that all Negroes are basically immoral beings”. This statement is not only a defense of the specific case but a public challenge to the entire system of racial “Othering”.

The jury’s deliberation process utterly exposes the institutional power of racial “Othering”. Despite Atticus conclusively proving through irrefutable evidence that Tom’s left arm disability made the alleged violent act physically impossible, the all-white, all-male jury unanimously convicts him. This verdict is not based on fact or law but stems from the collective unconscious of the entire white society to “maintain white supremacy”—as the novel states: “In our courts, when it’s a white man’s word against a Black man’s, the white man always wins.” The judicial system here becomes the “legal tool” of racial “Othering”. Outside the courtroom, the cheers of the white crowd contrast sharply with the silence of the Black spectators – a reaction that is a public performance of racial power relations.

After Tom's death, the ordeal faced by his wife, Helen, further reveals the quotidian and pervasive nature of racial "Othering". This widowed Black woman not only suffers malicious obstruction and verbal abuse from whites on her way to work but is even denied the right to earn a living normally: her employer's relatives deliberately harass her, forcing her to take long detours; stores in town refuse to sell her necessities. More cruelly, her children are taunted at school as "lynching bait" and "young'uns of a nigger rapist", with the teacher's tacit approval constituting complicity in racial discrimination. All this demonstrates that racial discrimination permeates not only formal settings like the courtroom but also the minutiae of daily life—food, clothing, housing, and transportation – constituting what Foucault termed "disciplinary power": through continuous micro-violence, Black people are perpetually fixed in the position of the "Other", stripped of the possibility and courage to resist.

5. Conclusion

The narrative of triple "Othering" in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is never merely an isolated depiction of a Southern town; it is a profound allegory for the logic of power operation in human societies. The "Othering" of gender, class, and race, while appearing as distinct dimensions of oppression, share the same violent core: reinforcing the identity and monopolizing the power of the "Self" group by manufacturing "difference" and "marginality". Mayella's struggle, Tom's wrongful death, and the Ewell family's degradation are essentially sacrifices to this mechanism—whether attempting to assimilate into the mainstream order or asserting their own existence, they are ultimately consumed by the noose of multiple power structures.

However, Harper Lee's pen does not rest solely on despairing indictment. Atticus's courtroom declaration—"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... That institution... is a court"—Scout's naive question, "Why do I have to be a lady?", and Miss Maudie's sober insight—"Sometimes the Bible in the hand of one man is worse than a whiskey bottle in the hand of... your father. There are just some kind of men who... are so busy worrying about the next world they've never learned to live in this one"—constitute a gentle resistance against the logic of "Othering". These voices reveal an eternal proposition: the "Other" is never an innate "aberration" but a label forcibly imposed by power discourse. The power to break these labels lies precisely in the recognition of "common humanity"—recognizing Mayella's vulnerability and pathos, Tom's kindness and dignity, and the structural poverty underpinning the Ewells' plight. This recognition, in essence, refuses to dissect human complexity with a single dimension.

Ultimately, the novel points towards a fundamental negation of "Othering" thinking. When Scout stands on Boo Radley's porch looking back at the town, she suddenly understands the true meaning of standing "in his shoes"—not cheap sympathy, but the dissolution of the Self-Other binary opposition.

In a present where racism, sexism, and class stratification persist in various forms, Harper Lee's narrative remains profoundly resonant: the advancement of human civilization has never been about disciplining and banishing the "Other", but about shattering the veils of layered labels, enabling every life to shed the shackles of "Otherness" and be recognized under the sun as a complete "person". This, perhaps, is the ultimate significance of literature: it illuminates the darkness of reality with fictional stories, reminding us that the courage and conscience to resist "Othering" are forever the most precious "mockingbirds" within humanity.

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