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### The True Mockingbird

“To Kill a Mockingbird” is the quintessential story that documents various aspects of a society fraught with racism. The book chronicles the story of Atticus Finch and his children, who are living in Maycomb, Alabama. The story revolves around the abused and oppressed figure of Arthur “Boo” Ridley, Jem Finch, Scout Finch and their adventures one summer when they try to know Boo Ridley, half-fearing his reputation as an aggressive and deranged man (Lee). Boo is their first experience of an individual whom Atticus calls a "mockingbird"- an innocent who has been tainted by cruelty and ruthlessness. As a black, poor man is wrongly accused and then convicted of raping a young white woman, the town of Maycomb is faced with conundrums they have long ignored. Tom Robinson, the man accused of rape, is another one of the novel's mockingbirds who have been destined for persecution and injustice (Lee). Tom stands as an enduring symbol of simplicity, goodness, and innocence as he awaits his trial and the ensuing fate sealed by innocuous and potent racism that has seeped through generations of white men and women. Through the case and the impacts it has on Atticus’s children, Harper Lee portrays a mockingbird as a being whose innocence and goodness is destroyed by currents of harsh injustices, inequalities, and acts of discrimination

When Maya Angelou wrote her autobiography aptly titled “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings”, she addresses the same issues caused by a fatal intersection of racism, inequality, socioeconomic status, and personal crisis. Hers is a tale of one tragedy after another befalling her

younger self as she tries to make her way through her existence against all odds. Angelou narrates how she and her brother had to be shipped to their paternal grandmother in the wake of their parent's divorce (Angelou). For the two black children, shifting to the South would be one of the most poignant decisions taken from them. The implicit and explicit racism Angelou observes as a young girl leads her to form a skewed version of identity for herself. This sense of identity is based on Angelou's internalized racism as she cannot stop seeing herself as "inferior" to all the white children due to the colour of her skin and the social stigmas attached to it. She also feels inferior to other black children as she has always felt abandoned and unwanted, causing her to devalue herself (Angelou). Angelou faces a series of tragedies and challenges that have led to her portrayal to be similar to the definition of a mockingbird as put forth by Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Although Tom Robinson is also a mockingbird, Maya Angelou can be understood to be the personified imagery of Lee's mockingbird.

Maya Angelou is someone who is the epitome of innocence that gets violated time and again. To begin with, her carefree childhood is interrupted by the divorce of her parents. As a child from a broken family, Angelou is sent to live with her paternal grandmother, where she feels like she can never be good enough (Adhikary). Her self-concept has not been given a chance to develop healthily owing to her environment, which adds another layer of complexity to her identity and the inadequacy of this identity in her eyes. Now, she has to accept that in addition to being an unwanted daughter, she is "black". Here, the intersection of racism with personal crisis begins as the single most powerful force in Angelou's life (Adhikary). As she wades through the challenges life has already thrown at her, she is uprooted yet again from the place she has come to call home when she is taken to live with her mother. It is here that her mother's romantic partner sexually abuses and then rapes her (Adhikary). The fact that her

mother has drifted into a toxic relationship with a man who does not seem aware of his own identity is explained by research on the intersectionality that posits that black women remain more at risk for poverty and abuse as compared to white women.

The age of innocence left over by her experience of race in the South ends as Angelou finds herself in a court battle to convict the man who violated her. When this man gets murdered by Angelou's family members, she blames the loss of life and brutality of this act on herself as she believes her refusal to declare that he had sexually assaulted her before raping her led to his eventual demise (Adhikary). At this point, the mockingbird's innocent cries have begun to reverberate through the narrative. It finds its way into the future that unfolds for Angelou. It is reflected in the dearth of good fortune and optimism for the child who is no longer a child as she has seen too much and faced matters too grave for her age. Angelou is a mockingbird in the truest sense as she offers insight into the life of an unadulterated young mind that is altered in a matter of years and months. Angelou goes on to be uprooted yet again as she is sent to live with her paternal grandmother once again, this time with her mother (Adhikary). When she is reunited with her mother, she finds a father figure in her husband only to find herself being taken by her biological father. While with him, she faces abuse at the hands of her father's girlfriend. It is after this final straw that she gains control of her life. The story narrates Angelou's refusal to let her parents know of her pregnancy for eight months as she graduates from high school (Adhikary). Her future can still be anticipated to always be in the shadow of her past. Angelou's fate, it seems, has been sealed by people and forces other than herself.

Though Tom Robinson is a mockingbird as he faces a challenge to his innocence when he is accused of having raped a woman he has never laid hands on. Tom Robinson is a simple man who does not know how to get himself extricated from the situation he did nothing to put

himself in. He is neither cunning nor learned. The fact that he knows too little to even save his skin is a testament to the culture of racism he has internalized (Macaluso). He has been living as someone inferior for so long that this is how he defines himself. Faced with dire consequences if he gets convicted and not knowing that the entire society stands against him merely due to the colour of his skin makes him fit the criteria for a mockingbird. He has been taken out of his harmless bubble of existence into historical acts of discrimination at the hands of those who have given a verdict against him without ever giving him a chance (Macaluso). However, Tom's innocence is not that of a child, nor is his predicament as profoundly violating and destructive for his soul as is apparent in Angelou's autobiography. Racism has penetrated deeper into Angelou's being than that of Tom Robinson. Robinson has been falsely accused, but Angelou has been made to pay the penalty for crimes she never committed (Macaluso). Angelou is a more apt mockingbird than Robinson.

To conclude, *Mockingbird* is portrayed as a being whose innocence and goodness is destroyed by currents of harsh injustices and inequalities. Both Robinson and Angelou represent oppression and a tainted innocence. Robinson pays the price of being black by having to face a farcical trial that convicted him as soon as he had been accused, perhaps even before, as society had always been ready to point fingers at him. His colour is the reason he has never been allowed to even be thought of as innocent. He is vile simply because he is a "Nigger". Angelou, like a little girl, faces heart-wrenching setbacks because she belongs to a race that is vulnerable and marginalized. Every setback, for her, leads to another one. For Angelou, there is no saviour aside from herself. She has been around people who seem as helpless in the face of merciless waves of racism and bias as she is. For Robinson, Finch is someone to count on, while there is no such figure for Maya Angelou. She is faced with nameless enemies, and this fact makes her turn

against herself, all the deprivation being blamed on her very own nature. Robinson does not have to face enemies he cannot behold, nor does he feel the anguish of having to blame himself as he does not know who else to point out. The trauma, for Angelou, runs in her blood and becomes a part of who she is.

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