



Social condition of Southern America in the 1930s as reflected in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960)

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Abstract

Background: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, written by Harper Lee, tells the story of a girl named Scout Finch who lives with her father Atticus Finch, and a brother named Jeremy Finch. The novel was published in 1960. The story is set in Alabama in the 1930s, the year of the Great Depression. African-Americans were also considered inferior to whites. This leads to racial discrimination where African-Americans are always restricted by unjust laws. Even though slavery ended in the spring of 1865, racial discrimination was not eradicated eventually.

Methods: The animals were As this research aims to elaborate on the social condition of Southern America in the 1930s as reflected in Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960). Therefore, this study uses a qualitative method with the appliance of genetic structuralism by Lucien Goldmann to obtain the information which can be found in the novel. Genetic structuralism is a combination of intrinsic elements (in the novel) and extrinsic elements (reality). Based on genetic structuralism, the literary work is a significant structure (Goldmann, 1981). Genetic structuralism attempts to find structure in the novel and structure in society. The data was collected from the novel written by Harper Lee, *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960). The data had been framed from the point of contention by identifying certain events and narratives considered to be the depiction of the social condition of Southern America in the 1930s in the novel.

Results: The results showed the social condition is influenced by Great Depression in the 1930s. Furthermore, it is also affected by the ancient belief inherent in society that black people are slaves and have the lowest rank.

Conclusion: This study shows that White prejudices control their actions and persecute them to harm blacks. Most people judge something based on physical performance. White people believe that darkness is synonymous with evil and mischief.

Keywords: Southern America, great depression, racism, genetic structuralism, to kill a mockingbird, harper lee

1. Introduction

The United States is known as one of the countries that have historically dealt with racial issues. Before that, the race issue in America began in the 18th century when the tradition of slavery emerged. Before the American Revolution, slavery existed in all colonies (Wright, 2017) [21]. The ideals of the Revolution and the limited profitability of slavery in the North led to its abandonment in the Northern States in the last quarter of the 18th century (Anriadi, *et al.*, 2021) [3]. At the same time, slavery in the South increased as southern tobacco and cotton farmers continued to demand cheap labor. By 1850, 92 percent of all black Americans were concentrated in the South, and of that group, roughly 95 percent, were slaves.

Slavery itself led to white oppression of African-Americans. Slaveholders believed that an individual's thoughts and actions were determined by their racial heritage (Bradley, 2010) [4]. African-Americans were also considered inferior to whites. This leads to racial discrimination where African-Americans are always restricted by unjust laws. Even though slavery has ended in the spring of 1865, racial discrimination was not eradicated eventually. Racial discrimination continued year after year.

Racism arises from a mindset that views that people are distinguished based on their origins. This stigma then

encourages racial communities that feel superior to dominating other racial communities (Soudien, 2015; Fernando, 1984) [18, 8]. As a result of this unfair treatment, African-Americans experienced problems and difficulties in managing their lives, which were not only felt at work or in their social status, but also suffered from various forms of racism, both in the form of prejudice and in the form of discrimination and rejection. More broadly, racism is generated from the "normalization" of a relation of domination. This idea is frequently espoused by authors who see an intimate relation between racism, colonialism, imperialism (De Benoist, 1999) [7].

Novels as literary works are able to reflect the social conditions of society in detail and realistically. Literature presents life and life consists of a social reality (Arifin, 2019) [1]. Literary works are also associated as a form of imitation of the subjective world of humans so that it can be concluded that literature is a reflection of human life. One form of literary work is a novel (Rahman & Weda, 2018) [13]. The novel reflects the way people think in dealing with problems in their environment (Umardjo and Saini, 1986) [16]. The existence of a novel cannot be separated from the background of the author regarding education, knowledge, personal experience, religion and others so that a literary work it produces has its own characteristics (Razzaq, 2013; Sukmawaty, *et al.*, 2022) [15, 19]. Novels are

fiction because they are the result of fantasy or something that doesn't really exist. Besides novels, there are also romances and short stories (Waluyo, 2002) ^[20]. Novel comes from the Latin novellas which was later revealed to be novies, which means new. This new word is associated with the fact that novels are a type of fiction that appears later in comparison to short stories and romances.

To Kill a Mockingbird, written by Harper Lee, tells the story of a girl named Scout Finch who lives with her father Atticus Finch and brother named Jeremy Finch. Atticus is a white lawyer with his black client named Tom Robinson who was accused of raping a white woman. The novel was published in 1960. The story is set in Alabama in the 1930s, the year of the Great Depression. At the time of the global economic crisis, many people lost their land, their homes and their dignity. People have to look for many jobs because unemployment continues to rise. The problem arises when the prestige of race has made one of them being wronged from an every point of view which resulted in many blacks are poorer than whites (Sastrawati, 2015) ^[17].

The author found it is interesting to explore the social conditions of Southern America in the 1930s as reflected in Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*, since the novel takes setting in the 1930s where great depression also happened as well as the racial issue in the southern America. The reason above draws the writer to analyze the novel through the theory of genetic structuralism which the writer hopes will give the reader a further depiction of the social condition in Southern America in the 1930s through the novel.

2. Literature Background

The setting of the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* was 1930, when racism was very close to human life. Racism was a status issue here in the 1930s, the era that can be characterized as the Great Depression, the most traumatic era in American history (Sastrawati, 2015) ^[17]. At that time, many problems changed the lives of Americans economically, politically and socially. When the Great Depression hit, Europeans and Africans were living in the United States. Long ago, Africans were slaves. They were bought by white people to help them work on the farm. Whites needed a lot of people to support their produce in agriculture because whites from Europe were a new population in the United States (Rahman, 2018) ^[14].

Whereas whites were used to living well and never worked hard. That was why the whites needed more power from other men and they chose the blacks to do their business between America and Europe. Whites thought Africans were stronger than them. Blacks could work as hard as monsters.

In addition, collaboration between whites and other whites were formed. The racist condition covered people's life in the Great Depression era. The difficulties in the economic aspect supported the growth of racism well. Racism came with the Great Depression era because black people in America were still considered underclass because of their history. This means that when people were under economic pressure, they needed many laborers to grow their surplus crops. Blacks did not have their own land, so blacks had always been laborers and worked

for whites, although they were no longer slaves like they were long ago. The situation strongly suggested in white people's minds that black was not the same as them, black was bad, black was dirty, black was low-class and so on (bad opinion). In the midst of economic decline, racism was growing rapidly along with the needs of people, especially whites. Most workers in South America were black. The severity of racism became visible when they had specific codes for everyone there which was called as 'black code' as mentioned before.

Indeed, a law in the Great Depression era had the power to compel every person in Southern America to obey it. The condition was reminiscent of the political situation at the time. In the 1930s, people obeyed the law that the government made long ago. They did not create new roles for people to live in peace. Only the governmental and legal system before the 1930s applied. There was no difference in judgment when people in Southern America were punished for their crimes. Some factors like class and race became persecutors to uphold justice. When the defendant's trial was presented, the jurors were rural, relatively poor farmers and had a limited knowledge, all white (Sastrawati, 2015) ^[17]. Their attitude toward the breed influenced every decision they made. Although at that time the United States system of government was democracy and every people could deliver what they set out to do, there was a shift in society. The issue of race influenced the mindset of people in South America.

Nugraha, *et al.*, 2020 ^[12] entitled *Analysis of Jean Louise Scout's Personality Development in Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird (1960) And Go Set a Watchman (2015)*. Lee, *How to Kill a Mockingbird and Go Set a Watchman*, viewed from the emotional, cognitive, moral, and religious aspects, this uses the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan. Furthermore, this type of research is qualitative and the research data are taken from two novel elements such as words, phrases, sentences, quotes, monologues, and dialogues while the supporting data are collected from books, journals, theses as preliminary studies and relevant essays. The results of this study indicate that in reviewing a literary work there are three elements that are interrelated and cannot be separated from one another. Authors write social phenomena into literary works because they are a reflection of society and provide moral values to readers or society. This research uses a sociological approach. Another finding was found that as a member of society, an individual cannot be separated from the traditions of his community where they must behave well to become good members of society as well as in the family.

Djuana and Jaya (2020) ^[5] entitled *Harper Lee's Extrinsic Elements to Kill Mockingbirds*. This study aims to determine the extrinsic elements and their effects contained in the novel *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. This research method is literature, namely data that is described qualitatively. Furthermore, this study uses the theory of Wellek & Warren, *The Theory of Literature* (1956). Based on the analysis, it was found that there are four extrinsic elements in the story, namely (1) the author's biography which indirectly affects the story, (2) the social element can be divided into two aspects: personality and cultural aspects, (3) the psychology of the author, and (4)

Historical aspects. It can be said that racism is one of the important factors in this story.

Hu and Zhou (2019) ^[10] entitled *The Root of Sin: An Analysis on the Social and Economic Situation Reflected from To Kill a Mockingbird*. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is set in the nineteen thirties, this novel depicts the years of the Great Depression between lines and words, which was one of the most severe economic recessions in history, continuing for several years from 1929 to 1939, this book contains a critique of the analysis of racism, feminism and the symbolic meaning contained therein. This book is not a documentary novel, but it is not difficult for the reader to trace some of the economic and social clues of the time and even their influence on the characters and plot of the story. Furthermore, this research tries to analyze and explore the possible reasons for Tom Robinson's poor life and his false accusations in terms of racism and economics, to show the root of the inevitable fate of misery, offer new lines of interpretation and interest in reading novels.

3. Objective of the research

The objective this research are 1) to found the social conditions of Southern America in the 1930s as reflected in Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*, 2) to explore the social conditions of Southern America in the 1930s as reflected in Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*, because this novel takes the setting in the 1930s where there is also a great depression and racial issues in South America.

4. Methodology

4.1 Animal care and protocol

As this research aims to elaborate the social condition of Southern America in the 1930s as reflected in Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960). Therefore, this study uses a qualitative method with the appliance of genetic structuralism by Lucien Goldmann to obtain the information which can be found in the novel.

Genetic structuralism is a combination of intrinsic elements (in the novel) and extrinsic elements (reality). Based on genetic structuralism, the literary work is a significant structure (Goldmann, 1981) ^[9]. Genetic structuralism attempts to find structure in the novel and structure in society.

In genetic structuralism there is a relationship between a structure of literary work and a structure of society. Sometimes the literary work differs from the society, but both have the same structure. The structure cannot be separated from the worldview, which is the worldview as a whole of idea, feeling and aspiration associated with the member of the group. Hence, one group is distinct from another social group (Faruk, 2012) ^[6]. For genetic structuralism, the vision of the world is an environment, style, and mindset of a social group that distinguishes it from another social class.

The data was collected from the novel written by Harper Lee, *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960). The data had been framed from the point of contention by identifying certain events and narratives considered to be the depiction of social condition of Southern America in the 1930s in the novel.

The research is limited to discussing and analyzing how the social condition of Southern America in the 1930s reflected in the novel. The procedure for analyzing the novel was conducted by paying attention to the text of the novel. After that, the writer tried to interpret and analyze some selected quote which has been taking from the novel.

5. Findings and Discussion

The novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* explores racism which built into society. The story addresses the discrimination in life between blacks and whites. The novel shows that the victim of the story is black. This means that what black people do is always wrong from a white perspective. The one who says color isn't always wrong is Atticus. Atticus is a lawyer of an African American man named Tom Robinson who is accused of raping a white woman named Mayella Ewell. Atticus acts as a representative of Lee's father. Actually, the novel describes Lee's life. There are many characters with different characteristics. They describe how racism is brought into daily life during this time. Lee wrote that the novel is set in Maycomb County, a fictional town which is referred to Monroeville, Alabama, Harper Lee's hometown. Alabama is placed Southern United States. In this novel, Lee does not use her real name as a character in the story, instead using the name Scout Finch as the main character, who also serves as the narrator in the novel. Lee was four years old at the time. She opposes injustice, violence and evil in history. Injustice features the character of a black Tom Robinson which was accused of raping a white woman. Juries sentenced him to death without evaluating the fact that Tom was innocence.

Before analyzing the racism, it is important to understand the situation occurs at the time. Maycomb County society, including blacks and whites, feel the same way of life due to the impact of the Great Depression. They live in a hard time because they have lost their occupation, land, and money. This can be inferred by the quotation below:

“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).

The quotation above depicts the condition in Maycomb, which happens to all of the society whether they are white or black. Maycomb County residents are aware of the difficulties. Its transactions and activities are disrupted for a while when the Great Depression occurs. Maycomb is home to many people. They do not understand what their life will be every day. Everyone is in misery. When they are cashless, they will pay with goods to replace money. They do the activities because money is limited. People stay in their homes because they have nowhere to go but to the village and stay alive in painful conditions. In addition, one of the most affected by the great depression are those who are engaged in agriculture, as the quotation below:

the back yard. Later, a sack of hickory nuts appeared on the back steps. With Christmas came a crate of smilax and holly. That spring when we found a crokersack full of turnip greens, Atticus said Mr. Cunningham had more than paid him.

"Why does he pay you like that?" I asked.

"Because that's the only way he can pay me. He has no money."

"Are we poor, Atticus?"

Atticus nodded. "We are indeed."

Jem's nose wrinkled. "Are we as poor as the Cunninghams?"

"Not exactly. The Cunninghams are country folks, farmers, and the crash hit them hardest." Lee, (1960).

As a result of the global economic crisis, many farmers have lost their land and are no longer able to work. At this time, the largest land is used for growing crops and producing agricultural products to survive. That is why farmers are hit hardest. The whites process their country with the power of the blacks. During the Great Depression, farmers and ranchers worked hard for money.

However, the poverty suffered by the farmers has a major impact in other aspects as well, as agriculture is the major sector affecting Maycomb's economic conditions. Other occupations such as doctors, dentists and lawyers are paid with agricultural products. Therefore, the Great Depression affects many jobs that are available at the time before the economy's big problem hit. The event happens to the lives of black people and white people. Moreover, the difficulty is exacerbated by racial issues that make people's lives more complicated.

Segregation has even touched the religious aspects of society in southern America. They separate the white church and the black church, what is even more surprising, when black people are not using their church for worship, the whites will gather there and gamble.

"First Purchase African M.E. Church was in the Quarters outside the southern town limits, across the old sawmill tracks. It was an ancient paint-peeled frame building, the only church in Maycomb with a steeple and bell, called First Purchase because it was paid for from the first earnings of freed slaves. Negroes worshiped in it on Sundays and white men gambled in it on weekdays" Lee, (1960).

The quote shows that both whites and blacks have their own time and different purpose to use the same church, blacks use the church for worship, on other days, whites use the church as a place to gamble. Furthermore, it seems that there is stigma attached to the Maycomb community. They live based on what has been ingrained in their minds for a long time that differences are very commonplace and so is the attitude of mutual hatred between them.

"I mean in Maycomb County. The thing about it is, our kind of folks don't like the Cunninghams, the Cunninghams don't like the Ewells, and the Ewells hate and despise the colored folks." Lee, (1960).

It is clear from the quote that the people who live in Maycomb are made up of different types of people. In the story, Cunningham is a family that comes from a village or a forest that lives far from the village. Most of the people who live there are farmers. The Ewells are a white family who live in the city but do not work and they are neighbors with blacks, and they hate the situation. When they realize their differences, there will be upheaval which blacks will always be victims.

6. Conclusion

This research aims to explore the social condition of Southern America in the 1930 as reflected in Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960). The result of the analysis shows that in the novel, Lee explains how racism has been built into society. Throughout the novel, Lee describes the condition of black people who are repeatedly being hurt by white people. Although Lee is white, she shows readers that a crime committed by a white man who was accused of a black man and everyone believed just because of the color of the skin. White prejudices control their actions and persecute them to harm blacks. Most people judge something based on physical performance. White people believe that darkness is synonymous with evil and mischief.

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