

# Review Article: *Go Set A Watchman*: A Shoddy First Draft or a Literary Masterpiece

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One of the most awaited books of our times, Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman* (a title derived from Isaiah 21:6); managed to stir up many debates around its genesis when it was published last year after five and a half decades since the author's magnum opus *To Kill A Mocking Bird* appeared. Apparently, *Go Set A Watchman* was written before the book that made Harper Lee one of the most important figures of modern American Literature. In fact, her iconic novel was born when her editor T. Hohoff after reading the manuscript of *Watchman* suggested her to rewrite her work focusing more on the childhood of the central protagonist.

Though both the works are set in the fictional Maycomb County, have Jean Louise Finch at the heart of its narrative and grapple with the issue of racial segregation; they stand independent of each other. *Mockingbird* is narrated in the first-person by young and feisty Jean Louise (called Scout by everyone) trying to make sense of the world around her in which racism has dug its feet really deep, whereas *Watchman* is a third-person narrative, in which the little girl of *Mockingbird* have grown into a twenty six year old woman briefly back in the same partisan world that she left behind to live in the "big city", New York. Young Scout's vision of the racist society of Maycomb County in the first published novel is critical but still "rendered with sympathy."<sup>ii</sup> But her picture of the same world at twenty six is of a hateful, divisive society that will go to any length to safeguard the existing social layout that privileges the white. This shift in the central protagonist's perspective which radically alters the contours of the narrative in *Watchman*; has earned the book severe criticism from some quarters who saw the shift as a radical departure from the original narrative.

But it is not the depiction of Maycomb County but that of Atticus Finch that has attracted the most bitter complaints. The very fact that the book that the whole world today knows as *How To Kill a Mocking bird* was entitled as *Atticus Finch* initially; underlines the importance of his character to the plot. Atticus, seen as a person whose views on race were way ahead of his time in *Mocking bird*; is portrayed as a southern racist in the recently published novel causing disillusionment among several readers especially among those who grew up admiring him as a champion of racial equality. The disillusionment of the reader is also shared by his only daughter Jean Louise Finch who notes with utter disgust that the anti-racist lawyer now participates in public meetings to fight the supreme court's attempts to enforce integrated education and equal voting rights in the south. Incensed by this betrayal like the readers she cries out:

Don't you give me any more double-talk! You are a nice, sweet, old gentleman, and I'll never believe a word you say to me again. I despise you and everything you stand for.<sup>iii</sup>

The disillusionment of Jean Louise as well as the readers is understandable but to look at the novel as a dramatic reversal of what it stood for and to label the characterisation of Atticus Finch as inconsistent like many reviews of the novel do; is rather erroneous. Mendenhall points out that the optimistic and hagiographic conception of Atticus in the first published novel, supported by the unforgettable, impressive images of a big, benevolent, bespectacled Gregory Peck in the movie based on the novel; has always been belied by subtleties of the text.<sup>iv</sup> Atticus's treatment of their coloured domestic help Calpurnia can be seen as condescending at times. Also he did not voluntarily decide to defend Tom Robinson, the black boy who was accused of raping a white girl; in the court. The case was assigned to him.

The knowledge that Atticus too is a flawed man which is mildly hinted at in *Mockingbird*; comes to the surface more clearly in the other novel. This can be partly attributed to the fact that *Mockingbird* was narrated from the point of view of a little girl, too young to be critical of her father who she adored. As her uncle points out in the final pages of *Watchman* -

As you grew up, when you were grown, totally unknown to yourself, you confused your father with God. You never saw him as a man with a man's heart, and a man's failings- I'll grant you it may have been hard to see, he makes so few mistakes, but he makes them like all of us.<sup>v</sup>

When some readers encounter an Atticus who is different from the person they knew through the narrative of young Scout in *Mockingbird* they react with shock just as they would have upon eventually finding out something shocking about someone they knew. So what looks like "abrupt redefinition of a famed fictional character"<sup>vi</sup> to some in *Watchman* is rather the result of the author probing deeper into the character of Atticus and delineating the contradictions and complexities within him. Just dismissing him as a racist is not enough. One has to attempt to understand these contradictions and complexities as they are the products of the time and society in which he lived. In any case, history is witness to the fact that Atticus Finch is not the only one who embodies contradictions. Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator of the black people is known to have expressed his belief on the superiority of the white race at several occasions. He even went to the extent of disapproving of interracial relationship.<sup>vii</sup> Gandhi before he became a champion of the cause of the untouchables; firmly believed in the legitimacy of the caste system.<sup>viii</sup>

So do we need to condone Atticus's racism as it is a reflection of the times he lived in? Certainly not. Undoubtedly we need to be critical of his attitude. But Atticus should be treated as a man and "not as an improbable demigod of our eager imagination."<sup>ix</sup> We cannot possibly appreciate Lee's artistic genius in acquainting the readers with the dark side of a much loved character unless we give up our uncritical glorification of him.

But despite of its greatness *Watchman* could not have achieved the popularity that *Mockingbird* did, had it been the one published in the year 1960. Not because it is any inferior but simply because this complex book could not have caught the mood of the Civil Rights Movement in a manner in which *Mockingbird* did. *Mockingbird* appeared in the middle of the movement and almost instantly came to be seen as a part of the

consolidated struggle against racism. The recently published book despite of having racism as its central theme may not have had the similar impact for its subtleties are too fine, complexities too intense to be the mouthpiece of any movement.

It will not be an exaggeration to claim that appearance of *Watchman* has forced us to radically reconceptualise our existing notion of an author and her work. But the process of reconceptualisation has not been same for all. For some it was like a journey from *Songs of Innocence* to *Songs of Experience*.<sup>x</sup> While for some others it involved shock and disillusionment. These varied reactions do not imply that the merit of the work is questionable instead they show us the extent to which Lee's work hold sway over the imagination of the reader.

Some weeks before *Watchman* was released a gunmen killed nine African American men in the historic Charleston church. Racially inspired crime against blacks remain rampant in the United States of America even after its first African American President, Barack Obama has completely seven years in office. The blacks still find themselves discriminated against in various walks of life. Clearly, lessons on racial equality that *Mockingbird* contained were not learnt well and we needed a book like *Watchman* to shake us out of our complacency and make us reflect once again upon our social system that is still premised upon marginalisation of many. Books alone maynot be able to change the world but they can surely guide the direction of change.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Lee, H. (2015). *Go Set A Watchman*. London : William Heinamann.

<sup>ii</sup> McCrum, R. (2015, July 19 ). *Go Set A Watchman by Harper Lee review - A Literary Curiosity* [ Review of the book *Go Set A Watchman* ]. The Guardian. Retrieved from <http://http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/19/go-set-watchman-harper-lee-review-literary-curiosity>

<sup>iii</sup> Lee, H. (2015). *Go Set A Watchman*. London : William Heinamann.

<sup>iv</sup> Mendenhall, A. (2015). Children Once, Not Forever: Harper Lee's Go Set a Watchman and Growing Up. *Ind. LJ Supp.*, 91, 6.

<sup>v</sup> Lee, H. (2015). *Go Set A Watchman*. London : William Heinamann.

<sup>vi</sup> Sacks, S. (2015, July 10). In Harper Lee's 'Go Set a Watchman' Atticus Finch Defends Jim Crow [ Review of the book *Go Set A Watchman*. Retrieved from <http://www.wsj.com/articles/dark-days-in-maycomb-to-kill-a-mockingbird-1436564966>

<sup>vii</sup> Lincoln, A. (1989). *ABRAHAM LINCOLN: SPEECHES AND WRITINGS 1859-1865*. New York : Library of America.

<sup>viii</sup> Dutt, S. (2006). *India In A Globalized World*. New York : Manchester University Press.

<sup>ix</sup> Mendenhall, A. (2015). Children Once, Not Forever: Harper Lee's Go Set a Watchman and Growing Up. *Ind. LJ Supp.*, 91, 6.

<sup>x</sup> Mendenhall, A. (2015). Children Once, Not Forever: Harper Lee's Go Set a Watchman and Growing Up. *Ind. LJ Supp.*, 91, 6.

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