

"The Case against To Kill a Mockingbird"

Critic: Isaac Saney

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Criticism about: To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee (1926-), also known as: (Nelle) Harper Lee, Nelle Harper Lee, Harper Nell Lee, Nell Harper Lee

Nationality: American

[(essay date July-September 2003) In the following essay, Saney discusses the media's response to the 1996 banning of To Kill a Mockingbird from the standard curricula of public schools in Nova Scotia.]

For many years the Black Educators' Association and parents, amongst others, have lobbied the Nova Scotia Department of Education and school boards to remove various books from the school curriculum and school use. Similar initiatives have taken place in New Brunswick and other provinces across Canada. Pressure from the community forced the Department of Education to face up to its social responsibility to provide enlightened education and teaching materials and address the issue of restricting racist materials in the province's classrooms, in the same way that pressure had forced the government to abandon its legislated policy of segregated schooling for the African Nova Scotian population, a policy only formally ended in the 1950s. In 1996, after intensive community pressure, three works--To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee; In the Heat of the Night by John Dudley Ball; and Underground to Canada by Barbara Smucker--were taken off the authorised list of texts recommended by the Department of Education. They can no longer be purchased from the provincial government.

Six years later, in March 2002, the African-Nova Scotian ad hoc advisory committee (a committee of parents and educators) of the Tri-County district, which runs schools in southwestern Nova Scotia, recommended that the three works should be removed from school use altogether. Many educators consider these demands as minimal and as barely beginning to address the serious inequalities which continue to pervade the education system. Members of the Black Educators' Association (BEA) again seconded this specific recommendation. In the words of BEA director Gerry Clarke, a former school principal: 'It's demeaning and offensive to those students who have to put up with this.' Indeed, a 2000 report on To Kill a Mockingbird laid out the community's concerns:

In this novel, African-Canadian students are presented with language that portrays all the stereotypical generalizations that demean them as a people. While the White student and White teacher may misconstrue it as language of an earlier era or the way it was, this language is still widely used

today and the book serves as a tool to reinforce its usage even further ... The terminology in this novel subjects students to humiliating experiences that rob them of their self-respect and the respect of their peers. The word 'Nigger' is used 48 times [in] the novel ... There are many available books which reflect the past history of African-Canadians or Americans without subjecting African-Canadian learners to this type of degradation ... We believe that the English Language Arts curriculum in Nova Scotia must enable all students to feel comfortable with ideas, feelings and experiences presented without fear of humiliation ... To Kill a Mockingbird is clearly a book that no longer meets these goals and therefore must no longer be used for classroom instruction.¹

The recommendation to remove the books was initially agreed to by the Tri-County School Board which ordered the works removed from school use in Shelburne, Yarmouth and Digby counties. However, pandemonium broke loose all over the printed press, radio and television media, nationally and internationally. In the main Canadian and provincial newspapers, some twenty-eight articles appeared. When the educators explained that the works used abusive and racist language and perpetuated demeaning stereotypical images and generalisations, emphasising that the books did not meet the needs of 'all students', the Canadian monopoly-controlled news media immediately took what had been said out of context and declared that the Black community had embraced 'book banning' and 'censorship'. Opposition to the books, especially To Kill a Mockingbird, was likened to 'the gathering shadow of oppression'.² Thus, the media gave far more coverage to this distortion than to the substance of the Black community's recommendations.

The National Post went so far as to survey such leading American literary figures as Chicago Mayor Richard Daley on the merits of To Kill a Mockingbird, citing its use in city-wide reading contests 'as springboards for citywide discussions' for its 'message of acceptance [of] people of other races than your own'. It then argued, how could Nova Scotia have a different policy to the United States, asserting that '[t]here are more blacks in Chicago than there are people in Nova Scotia'.³ An accompanying editorial declared that racism was a matter of the past and blamed 'the anti-racism industry' for obscuring the 'historical content in which overt racism once thrived'.⁴ National Post columnist Robert Fulford likewise converted the recommendation that the book not be used by teachers in the classroom into a call to ban the 'much-loved book' and fulminated how those who had been oppressed were now calling for 'censorship' 'for the sole reason that they [the books] contain this intolerable word ("Nigger")'. Referring to comments by the BEA's Brenda Clarke, he declared: 'Beware of those who believe they can manage the self-esteem of others by denying them books. She demonstrates that the impulse to censor never dies, it just changes targets.'⁵ The Globe and Mail in its editorial, published on the same day and under the identical title as the National Post's, termed Harper Lee's book a 'wonderful teaching tool' and also called for Canadians to emulate Chicago, which 'felt it would encourage greater racial understanding'.⁶ Consequently, after the media frenzy and the intervention of the minister of education, Jane Purves, the Tri-County school board changed its stand on 30 May 2002 in a 6-2 vote.

The arguments advanced by the Black community were consistently presented in a non-serious, even risible, light so as to give the impression that the Black educators and parents are ignorant of the merits of literature, mere emotional whiners and complainers, belonging to a hot-headed fringe.

For example, after the decision was made to keep the books in the curriculum, the Halifax Daily News in an editorial was 'relieved cooler heads have prevailed', reproducing the racist notions of inherent Black emotionality versus the rationality of white society.⁷

To Kill a Mockingbird

Editorialists were especially incensed that *To Kill a Mockingbird* had come under criticism. The book was lauded as a classic, a paragon of anti-racist literature and, therefore, untouchable and sacrosanct.⁸ The Black community was chided for being overly sensitive to the use of racial slurs and for its failure appreciate the context and message of the novel. What was ignored was that the use of racist epithets or negative and debased imagery is not the only basis upon which to determine the racist or anti-racist character of a book. Jane Kansas, a columnist for the Halifax Daily News, typified the prevailing mindset. She, along with other partisans of the book, invoked the lecture Miss Maudie Atkinson delivers to Atticus Finch's daughter, Scout, on why it is 'a sin to kill a mockingbird'. This 'homily' was extolled as the most eloquent literary anti-racist statement.⁹ Indeed, the lines define the book:

'Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird.'

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However, Kansas and others failed to explore the obvious meaning behind these words. Is not the mockingbird a metaphor for the entire African American population? Do these lines, as the partisans of the book assert, embody the loftiest ideals and sentiments? Harper Lee's motives notwithstanding, they are not a paean to the intrinsic equality and humanity of all peoples, nor do they acknowledge that Blacks are endowed with the same worth and rights as whites. What these lines say is that Black people are useful and harmless creatures--akin to decorous pets--that should not be treated brutally. This is reminiscent of the thinking that pervaded certain sectors of the abolition movement against slavery which did not extol the equality of Africans, but paralleled the propaganda of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, arguing that just as one should not treat one's horse, ox or dog cruelly, one should not treat one's Black cruelly.¹¹ By foisting this mockingbird image on African Americans, the novel does not challenge the insidious conception of superior versus inferior 'races', the notion of those meant to rule versus those meant to be ruled. What it attacks are the worst--particularly violent--excesses of the racist social order, leaving the racist social order itself intact. In short, as Malcolm X would probably have said, it presents the outlook of the 'enlightened' versus the 'unenlightened' slave owner, who wishes to preserve the value of his human property, the beasts of burden, to labour for his benefit, enjoyment and profit.

Central to the view that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a solid and inherently anti-racist work is the role of Atticus Finch, the white lawyer who defends Tom Robinson, the Black man wrongly accused of raping a white woman. Indeed, Atticus goes so far as to save Tom from a lynching.¹² However, this act has no historical foundation. The acclaimed exhibition *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, sponsored by the Roth-Horowitz Gallery

and the New York Historical Society, documented more than 600 incidents of lynching. This landmark exposition and study established that 'lynchers tended to be ordinary people and respectable people, few of whom had any difficulties justifying their atrocities in the name of maintaining the social and racial order and the purity of the Anglo-Saxon race'.¹³ In two years of investigation, the exhibit researchers found no evidence of intervention by a white person to stop even a single lynching.

Perhaps the most egregious characteristic of the novel is the denial of the historical agency of Black people. They are robbed of their role as subjects of history, reduced to mere objects who are passive hapless victims; mere spectators and bystanders in the struggle against their own oppression and exploitation. There's the rub! The novel and its supporters deny that Black people have been the central actors in their movement for liberation and justice, from widespread African resistance to, and revolts against, slavery and colonialism to the twentieth century's mass movements challenging segregation, discrimination and imperialism. Yet, *To Kill a Mockingbird* confounds the relationship between whites of conscience and the struggles of the Black community. The novel is set in the 1930s and portrays Blacks as somnolent, awaiting someone from outside to take up and fight for the cause of justice. It is as if the Scottsboro case--in which nine young Black men travelling on a freight train in search of work were wrongfully convicted of raping two white women who were riding the same freight train--never happened. The trial was a 'legal lynching carried through with the cooperation of the courts and the law enforcement agencies'.¹⁴ All but one were sentenced to death; the jury was hung on whether the ninth one should be sentenced to life imprisonment or death. The germane point is that a maelstrom of activity swept through African American communities, both North and South. They organised, agitated, petitioned and marched in support of and to free the nine young men. *To Kill a Mockingbird* gives no inkling of this mass protest and instead creates the indelible impression that the entire Black community existed in a complete state of paralysis. It was African North Americans who took up the task of confronting and organising against racism, who through weal and woe, trial and tribulation, carried on--and still carry on the battle for equal rights and dignity. Those whites who did, and do, make significant contributions gave, and give, their solidarity in response.

However, this necessary historical contextualisation for dealing adequately with the book rarely occurs in the classroom. Thus, the images and messages of *To Kill a Mockingbird* are given new life, despite the reality that--as in the case of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*--these motifs have long since outlived any positive and progressive purpose and are not only useless for today's task of building a society based on true equality, but, indeed, are a detriment and a retrogressive block. Furthermore, there has been considerable resistance to the incorporation of available literature reflecting both the African American and African Nova Scotian experience. Repeated suggestions have been made to include in the curriculum, for example, *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison; *Native Son* by Richard Wright; *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston; *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*; *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison; *Whydah Falls* by George Elliot Clarke and *Consecrated Ground* by George Boyd. The last two authors are award-winning Black Nova Scotians. Indeed, Clarke was the 2002 recipient of Canada's most prestigious literary prize, the Governor General's Award.

Conclusion

The hardworking and humble educators and parents, selfless volunteer contributors of their time and energies, who made these recommendations honestly and honourably, had to contend with the stigma of being called 'benign censors' as they were shamelessly branded. Their well-reasoned and reasonable opposition, based on a clear and sound understanding of history and education, was caricatured and demeaned. The dominant media, within and without Nova Scotia, affirmed that the degrading portrayal of an entire people, the continual depiction of servitude and the negation of historical agency are the hallmarks of classic literature. What prevailed were the outdated ideas of the nineteenth century, affinity and devotion to paternalistic conceptions of society; a reflection of the imbalance of power and marginalisation embedded in the status quo.

In short, the media's response amounted to a defence of 'freedom' for racist literature. The issue cannot be reduced to a matter of technical arguments and justifications or the advocating of a parallel 'anti-racist' curriculum. The racists today masquerade as 'anti-racists', the opponents of 'hate literature'. The media's editorialising against all 'censorship' and 'banning' includes vigorous hostility to the censorship and banning of racism. Its advocacy of freedom of speech includes freedom of speech for racists and fascists. There cannot be the slightest mystery about how racism works, particularly its intertwining with the state. Neither fully curable nor manageable in the present social order, racism cannot be tackled at leisure; it must be combated in all its forms, without pause. However, in this struggle educators and writers must not forget that they are not dealing with an honourable media; that dirty and ruthless political warfare is being waged over the question of racism on the front of literature and ideology.

Notes

1. 'A proposal regarding the usage of the novel: *To Kill a Mockingbird*' (Halifax, African-Canadian Services Division, Nova Scotia Department of Education and the Race Relations Coordinators in Nova Scotia, English program division of the Education Department, February 4, 2000).
2. Jane Kansas, 'Censors Would Kill *Mockingbird's* Song'. *Daily News* (5 May 2002).
3. Anne Marie Owens, 'U.S. Embraces Novel N.S. Group Wants to Ban', *National Post* (7 May 2002).
4. 'To Ban a *Mockingbird*', *National Post* (7 May 2002).
5. Robert Fulford, 'We Have to Believe Reason Beats Racism', *National Post* (11 May 2002).
6. 'To Ban a *Mockingbird*'. *Globe & Mail* (7 May 2002).
7. 'Cooler Heads Prevail over Ban', *Daily News* (9 May 2002).
8. 'Novel Dilemma'. *Chronicle Herald* (12 May 2002).
9. Jane Kansas, op. cit.
10. Harper Lee. *To Kill a Mockingbird* (London, Pan, 1981), p. 96.

11. See comment by Richard Hart in the documentary 'The Black Image: Representations of Africans in Europe throughout History' (London, Association for Curriculum Development, 1990).

12. Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 154: 8.

13. See James Allen and Leon F. Litwack, *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (Santa Fe, NM, Twin Palms. 2000).

14. Harry Haywood. *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago, Liberator Press, 1978).

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Source Database: Contemporary Literary Criticism