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**SEQUEL OR PREQUEL: THE BLACK, WHITE AND GREY OF
HARPER LEE'S NOVELS**

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Abstract:

The critical reception of American author Harper Lee's much-anticipated novel Go Set a Watchman has been marked by a series of controversies and acrimonious debates, ranging from concerns of elder abuse, infringement of copyright laws, suspicious circumstances of publication, and large-scale reader disappointment. Initial reviews treated the novel as a sequel for two concrete reasons; firstly because of the date of its official public release (July 2015) and secondly because the novel's fictional time is nearly two decades after that of its predecessor, To Kill a Mockingbird. Subsequent reviews have tried to show her latest published work as being really an unedited and rough version of what later became the classic To Kill a Mockingbird, pointing out hitherto unperceived links between the two novels. The paper traces the troubled terrain of the history of the critical reception of Harper Lee's work and attempts to assess the problems and perceptions that arise from viewing her second novel from both positions, i.e. as a sequel and as a prequel. While much critical attention has focussed on authorial rights (not excluding gender aspects thereof), and the possible 'intention' of Harper Lee in allowing the publication of Go Set a Watchman, the crux of the debates centre on the disturbing image of the iconic lawyer-figure Atticus Finch, depicted in the second novel as an unapologetic racist who apparently believes in the protection of white supremacy. The contours of racial prejudice, with its continued underpinnings of racial stereotypes and identities, racially-charged injustices and crimes, assume multidimensional proportions in both novels. The paper attempts to show how Lee's latest published work compels a revision of existing perceptions of the earlier novel, while speculating on the possibility of both novels reflecting elements of past and recent American racial history, which form a problematic grey space.

Keywords: *Literary controversy, racial stereotypes, racial prejudice, white supremacy.*

For a writer who is as well-known for her avoidance of the public eye as for her immortal 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (hereafter referred to as *TKM*), Harper Lee has faced a range of controversial issues over her work, ranging from infringement of copyright law to elder abuse concerns. Her first novel *TKM* was an instant success when it was initially published and has, in the last 55 years of its existence, achieved the status of an American classic. It has figured on the essential reading lists of American high schools and found its way into the minds and hearts of people all over the world. The film version with Hollywood hero Gregory Peck starring as Atticus Finch helped to further consolidate this high popularity. Despite its powerful presence and eminently accepted status in the American literary scene, *TKM* also faced accusations from some groups of racist content and figured on the American Library Association's list of banned books. The charges mainly centred on the use of offensive language, racism and on being considered unsuitable for the age groups it was being prescribed for, despite being a novel supposedly anti-racist. *TKM* faced suppression though American Constitutional law is against the practice of banning. In the years immediately after its publication, the African American struggle for desegregation, civil rights and racial equality was marked by changing perceptions of racial terms such as negro, nigger, black, coloured people, etc. It is possible to speculate that the charges of racism levelled against the novel by some

groups in the last few decades of its existence have emanated both from African American groups, as well as those white Americans who wish to deny and forget the history of America's unsavoury racial politics. Harper Lee herself almost never got directly involved in these debates, considering her avoidance of media hype, interviews and any public forums. It was only in 2013 that she sued the town museum in Monroeville, Alabama, for using *TKM*'s iconography on T-shirts and mugs without her permission. She also sued her former literary agent Samuel Pinkus, claiming that he tricked her into signing over the copyright of *TKM* while she was living in a nursing home. She regained the rights, but claimed that Pinkus was still collecting the royalties. This triggered a spate of "Where's Atticus Finch when you need him" jokes¹.

Harper Lee's personal life circumstances came into the limelight with the publication of her second novel *Go Set a Watchman* (hereafter *GSW*) in July 2015. The rather suspicious circumstances of publication led to speculations of elder abuse, while the novel itself created polarized reader-critic audiences. The facts surrounding the former debate were so suspect as to almost amount to circumstantial evidence of elder abuse: the sudden publication of a novel by a highly reclusive writer who had always said she would never publish again; the publication's date of release (July 2015) which was soon after the death of the author's lawyer-sister Alice, who had played a very protective role; the rather doubtful antecedents of Tonja Carter, the lawyer who replaced Alice Lee in representing the legal interests of the author; Harper Lee's fragile health and advanced age-related problems after a stroke in 2007 compelled her to move to an assisted-living centre in Monroeville; also, the book itself, instead of a much-expected sequel, turning out to be an unfinished unedited early version of what later became known to the world as *TKM*. The publication of Marja Mills' memoir of Harper Lee (*The Mockingbird Next Door*) by Penguin in 2011, in which Mills claimed to have had personal and unique access to the Lee sisters to construct her narrative, added more acrimony to the elder abuse debate. Less than a week after the publication of the memoir, Lee issued a statement refuting Mills' claim that the Lee sisters had told her personal stories with the knowledge that they would be used in a book:

"Rest assured, as long as I am alive any book purporting to be with my cooperation is a falsehood ... Miss Mills befriended my elderly sister, Alice ... It did not take long to discover Marja's true mission: another book about Harper Lee. I was hurt, angry and saddened, but not surprised. I immediately cut off all contact with Miss Mills, leaving town whenever she headed this way"².

Mills' memoir supposedly purported to clear the air of mystery and speculation about Harper Lee and her sister because they were so reclusive. But the book ended up fanning the flames of controversy with reference to privacy issues and elder abuse. To complicate matters further, Alice Lee wrote a letter to Mills in 2011 in which she refuted her sibling's statement: "Poor Nelle Harper can't see and can't hear and will sign anything put before her by anyone in whom she has confidence," Alice Lee wrote. "Now she has no memory of the incident,"³ referring to Harper Lee's having no memory of signing the 2011 statement. Apart from the memoir's issues, Tonja Carter's statement, quoted in gossip blogs, that Lee "signed things she did not understand"⁴, raised speculations about whether Lee was in her sane mind after her stroke, and whether *GSW*'s publication had actually had her informed consent. A *New York Times* columnist Joe Nocera characterises the publication of *GSW* as "constitut(ing) one of the epic money grabs in the modern history of American publishing"⁵. His article reveals that Tonja Carter had discovered the manuscript of *GSW* in 2011, but strategically claimed its discovery only after Alice Lee's death in 2014 and thereafter negotiated the terms of publication with HarperCollins. Meanwhile, investigations also found that a restaurant started by Carter and her husband previously had failed and been wound up, leading to speculations as to who would be the real beneficiary of *GSW*'s publication. By April 2015, however, state-led investigators found that the much-trumped up claims of elder abuse were unfounded, and Lee herself stated via HarperCollins that she was "humbled and amazed"⁶ that her long-forgotten book was finally out.

Promoted initially by HarperCollins as a sequel to the beloved *TKM*, *GSW* entered the American literary scene amidst an outcry composed of large-scale reader disappointment, a sense of betrayal fuelled by theories about the nature of sequels of famous first novels and a general tendency to view the new arrival through a sensibility informed by the earlier-published work. The apparent inconsistencies (Atticus Finch as a white supremacist), additions (Hank Clinton, a childhood friend never mentioned in the earlier work), omissions (Jem, an important part of *TKM*, is casually mentioned in passing as having died of a sudden heart attack, Dill is dismissed as being far away in Italy, Boo Radley finds no mention at all), other perceived flaws (lumpy, laboured narrative), and contradictions (entire passages almost word for word from *TKM* but changed in a few key places) were pursued and debated mostly in relation to *TKM*. One of the consequences of such a perspective is that the iconic figures of *TKM* -- the heroic lawyer and morally upright father Atticus Finch, the lovable tomboy Scout, the intelligent but confused Jem, the dignified maternal figure of Calpurnia -- are all but destroyed in *GSW*. The novel's setting is twenty years after *TKM*, perhaps accounting for its being initially viewed as a sequel. A now twenty-six year old Jean Louise comes home as a blasé New York gal, with shockingly liberal views, to dabble amusedly and half-heartedly with the idea of marriage with Hank Clinton, a childhood friend now working for her father and regarded by him as a son-figure. The novel sets up a clear divide between the attitudes fostered by a big metropolitan city like New York and the small-town rigid narrow mentality of Maycomb. The novel's sedate pace is disrupted in Jean Louise's shocked discovery of a pamphlet titled "The Black Plague" in her father's living room, and her subsequent witness of the participation of Atticus Finch, along with Hank Clinton, at a White Citizen's Council meeting, showing passive acquiescence to a racial hate speech by another member. One can understand Jean Louise's confrontational outburst at her father and would-be fiancé Hank, and sympathise with/share her sense of complete betrayal. When she visits a now grown-old retired Calpurnia in her hovel to ask if she and her folk had hated them, she gets a cold polite reply which leaves no opportunity to revisit or revive old ties. Further, when Calpurnia's grandson accidentally runs over a white drunk pedestrian, Atticus Finch agrees to take on the case, apparently in well-known characteristic style and not for reasons that emerge only in another, different, perspective, as suspect. The fearless and heroic lawyer Atticus Finch beloved of so many generations of readers emerges in *GSW* seen as a sequel, as a secret bigot holding a white supremacist stance on the changing socio-political scene of mid-1950s America. His views on race are articulated against the background of the Supreme Court decision on mandatory integrated schooling across the country in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case, and the *Montgomery Bus Boycott*. In addition to what appears a hideous volte-face in his character is the incongruous fact of his having taken on, and won acquittal for, a black man's case so similar to that of Tom Robinson, that it might be mistaken for the same. Atticus seen this way can be said to be a character that has deteriorated with age, and not evolved through experience.

Subsequent critical reception of *GSW* has shifted towards viewing the novel as a prequel, in the sense of it actually being an earlier, unedited first draft finished in 1957, of what later evolved as *TKM*. By virtue of having been published 55 years after *TKM*, it is a strange example of a prequel that is also a sequel, both with reference to its setting as well as the date of its publication. With the fact of Tay Hohoff (of the then J.B. Lipincott Company, who were bought by Harper & Row in 1978, and which became HarperCollins, publisher of *GSW*) having advised the young Harper Lee to revise her first draft along lines which would go on to ensure its enormous popularity as *TKM*, questions also arise as to the extent of a given book being the product of its author, or its editor. Viewing *GSW* as a prequel in the abovementioned sense leads to several changes of perception of the main characters in it as well as our view of the earlier-published novel. Atticus portrayed as a racist in the first draft evolves as the iconic lawyer-hero of *TKM*. His apparent volte-face actually emerges as an attempt to slow federal government intervention into state politics; when he agrees to take on Calpurnia's grandson's case, it is not so much for old times' sake, her

loyalty or for ethical reasons, as for trying to minimise the inevitable 'interference' that he anticipates from the newly-powerful NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). This admission, which he makes to a seething Jean Louise, compels a revisiting of the accepted motives attributed to him in *TKM* when taking on the case of Tom Robinson: according to Judge Taylor in *TKM*, he was the only unprejudiced fair-minded white lawyer in Maycomb who would consider defending Tom Robinson. He agrees to defend Tom not from personal ideological convictions on racial justice, but because the court (the State) had assigned it to him as a duty and his acceptance would preclude any black 'interference'. His blindness to the constitution of an all-white jury, a racially unjust and unrepresentative composition, further endorses this view. Tom's death, hitherto viewed as a tragic accident which prevented Atticus from clearing his name, now takes on a darker dimension: through *GSW*, we realise that Tom, if he had not been shot, would probably not have gotten justice *in spite of* an Atticus Finch defending him in *TKM*.

The links between the two novels centre on the character of Atticus Finch, a key figure who plays a pivotal role in popular conceptualisations of racial justice from post-1960s to the present in America. In 1992, a law professor named Monroe Freedman published an article in *Legal Times* (a magazine for practising lawyers) in which he argued that Atticus Finch was a lawyer who spent his career as a "passive participant" in "pervasive injustice"⁷. This article provoked hate responses from Atticus Finch admirers and Harper Lee fans back then, but the publication of *GSW*, with an Atticus Finch who is a faithful reflection of Freedman's construction, impels a second look at the reasons for Atticus Finch's larger-than-life heroic reputation. In the setting of *TKM*, i.e. 1930s America, Atticus Finch could emerge as a hero and remain so, for several reasons. Firstly, seen through his innocent children's eyes, one can easily give in to a certain kind of sentimentality about the brave widower-father trying to give his children life-lessons on integrity and moral agency. It is only as an adult Jean Louise that the daughter Scout can see right through her father's stance and abuse him as a "double-dealing, ring-tailed old son of a bitch"⁸. Secondly, the political condition of blacks in the 1930s was just beginning its revival from racial oppression through resistance and struggle. The role of a white lawyer defending an unjustly accused black man at a time when racial injustices were so widespread as to be commonplace, especially in the decadent South, lends to the character of Atticus Finch of *TKM* the halo of a noble white saviour and of an "icon of legal icons"⁹, as John Sutherland (in a review of *GSW*) puts it. Atticus' comment that he had "hoped to get through life without a case of this kind"¹⁰ could be understood as a matter of moral conscience in *TKM*, but viewed through his unapologetic racist position in *GSW*, becomes transformed into a white supremacist anxiety amidst the gathering momentum of the civil rights movement and the resistance to segregationist and discriminatory practices. His defensive anxiety makes him justify his support and membership of the Maycomb White Citizens' Council to his disgusted and horrified daughter, who had learnt from his upbringing to be "color blind"¹¹. In her view, the Council is just another version of the infamous Ku Klux Klan, politically empowered to thwart desegregation. Incongruously, Jean Louise agrees with her father on one thing: how the Supreme Court decision in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case, on mandatory integrated schooling across America, went against the 10th Amendment of the American Constitution, which guaranteed states the right to run their own education systems. A reviewer of *GSW* has inferred from this that she, Jean Louise, probably would not want any of her own children, if she had them, sitting on terms of equality with blacks in a school classroom¹².

The moral earnestness of *TKM*, in the words of John Sutherland, has been and continues to be deeply satisfying to those Americans who subscribe to a national myth of their country as an embodiment of democracy and freedom from racial prejudice¹³. One might wish to remember how the black community in Maycomb is portrayed as being dumbly grateful for Atticus' efforts to get Tom Robinson off in *TKM*. But the Atticus of *GSW* makes us realise that he could have appeared heroic only because of the general denial

of black agency that was current in the America of *TKM*. Readers of *GSW* are denied the moral satisfaction of seeing Atticus once again emerge as a noble white saviour; the moral urgency stems from Jean Louise's disillusionment of her father as representing an ideal. Critical reception of *GSW* has linked the 'message' of *GSW* with the history as well as the ongoing realities of contemporary American race politics. The apparently discordant racial views held by Atticus Finch in *GSW* may be seen as an honest reflection of America's pervasive racial hatred, enacted in several glaring instances of heinous racial crimes which are no less lacking in hatred and prejudice, for e.g., the infamous Scottsboro Boys racially-charged trials (1931) or the appalling lynching of Emmett Till (August 28th, 1955) or the Ferguson killing (August 9th 2014). The Atticus Finch who held up the national myth of racial equality and justice in *TKM* was one among those heroes who peopled the popular imaginary of America as the land of the free and home of the brave. The furore over *GSW* is also because this beloved myth is destroyed in this novel, by none other than Atticus Finch himself. One is compelled to see this once-heroic figure as an ordinary human being, culturally and politically conditioned by his times like anybody else. The outcry over his apparent morphing into a racist points to the desperate need for admirers of American culture to be able to believe that this fictional character was, and is, real. The white conscience regarding racial injustices was soothed by the iconic Atticus Finch of *TKM*. But it must be remembered that he only defended one black man, for reasons that *GSW* now renders suspect. Through critical reception he was built up into a national hero whose one gesture of apparent moral probity could suffice for centuries of racial oppression and injustice in the past and those to come. Andrew Young, Congressman and then civil rights activist spoke of *TKM* as a redemptive work associated with the civil rights era, giving people “a sense of emerging humanism and decency”¹⁴.

One possible conclusion is that it is more useful to view *GSW* as an earlier draft of *TKM*, which was cast aside as un-saleable in the America of 1960. When finally published in 2015, it was simultaneously on bestseller lists, even as some bookshops were offering refunds to customers over its perceived 'disappointing' nature. The *San Francisco Chronicle* has linked the strength of *GSW* with America's racial history, while the *Chicago Tribune* praises it as a novel written long ago but which continues to reflect America's current struggles with racial inequality¹⁵. The uncertain ending of *GSW* and its uneasy attempt at resolution are unsatisfactory because the novel functions as a conscience-keeper of a different sort; Harper Lee's comment on *TKM*, “The book is not an indictment so much as a plea for something, a reminder to people at home”¹⁶, applies to *GSW* as well. The two novels can be seen as reflecting the historical continuum of racial injustices in America, as against its much-projected and advertised national myth of freedom and racial equality.

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