

Jean-Louise Finch and What It Means to be Empowered by Maryam Lee (Yr 2 – UITM)

All men are born humans, unfortunately only a handful would die as Men. A one-hit-wonder that is *To Kill A Mockingbird* makes humanity center-stage, in the narrative voice of a female child, centrally focused on the right to exercise fundamental human rights. Particularly in a society where a large proportion of the male and female view themselves in patriarchal light, liberal codes of ethics may not be well received coming from a young girl, whose father seems oblivious to traditional gender roles and social division. The young girl being mentioned here is Jean-Louise Finch, daughter of a local attorney named Atticus Finch, who raises his children with a liberal education and humanist values.

As the first Finch in generations to leave the Finch Landing, Atticus's decision to read law and settle down in Maycomb county strikes him as a bold man. His role in the book may make him seem to be condoning patriarchal values, but Atticus's characteristics as a pacifist, non-violent man, stood evidence of him assuming the unconventional idea of masculinity. Tomboy as a child, his daughter has the idea that she would have to think, act and dress like a male to be powerful and brave. She calls herself "Scout", not a very feminine name for a girl. However, set in an era when a girl is expected to be demure and lady-like, qualities that according to young Scout were restricting, petty and a sign of weakness, puts a pressure on her as she struggles to understand how the adults run the world she's living in. Atticus, on the other hand, as Dean Shackelford puts it, "seems oblivious to traditional expectations concerning masculinity (for himself) and femininity (for Scout)". Scout as a human being is more important to Atticus than Scout as a girl. He would always remind her not to get into physical fights, not because a girl has no business pinning boys down into the ground, which would have been the typical reprimand from society to Scout, but because fist fights are not likely to get anywhere far in terms of solving the issues. Atticus never has any doubt on the feminist that Scout would later become, but he realizes that she needs some direction.

Having lost her mother at such a young age, socially speaking, Scout lacks a lead female figure to guide her around the women's world. But that soon becomes a non-issue when Atticus hired Calpurnia, who acts as Scout's surrogate mother. She teaches and shows Scout that being a strong girl in a patriarchy society is a brave thing to be also. Though these lessons are not taught directly, they are within reach of the child's observations, as Calpurnia expertly takes care of the

house and prepares the meals for them so they won't go hungry. It is one thing that pulling these off requires skills, doing it out of love and a sense of responsibility is another. It is almost, if not utterly similar to what Atticus is doing for his community – doing all the dirty work when no one is willing to do them. Atticus can teach his children about his philosophy in life, but they will have to listen to their own voice and implement their own way of living.

Why is the female voice so empowering? Because it deconstructs what we have dogmatically set as gender roles, Calpurnia as an important part of a white family, Miss Maudie as a smart and independent woman, Atticus and Jeremy Finch as the unconventional men. By empowering a young girl through these observations, *To Kill A Mockingbird* brought down one of the biggest social barriers at the time setting of the book, barriers that those like Mayella Ewell fall victim to because she can't liberate herself from them. Unlike Scout, Mayella does not get the education at home that a girl can stand on her own, sometimes without context, apart from everyone else. She has been put in a situation where her only offence is simply kissing a negro man, but for fear of rejection and humiliation, she has to put an innocent man to death. It really does take a village to raise a child. Mayella, even though secluded from her society most of the time, is still affected by the strong prejudice of her surroundings.

Youthful naivete and optimistic, Scout notices but doesn't really understand the socio-political landscape of Maycomb county in terms of women's liberation and genealogy of patriarchal power. Just like the society's acceptance of Scout's tomboy manner, racial prejudice is not something that is forced in Maycomb county, but it is something institutionalized. It is already part of the system. The whites and blacks don't go to the same church, even though they pray to the same God; they don't sit on the same floor in the court house, the Lynch mob tried to kill Tom Robinson even though he is not yet proven guilty at the time, a lot of anger stems from the accused being black, not concerned on whether or not he actually did what he is being accused of doing. Perhaps the most important lesson passed down by Atticus to Scout is to never judge a person until "you've walked around in their shoes". The misunderstanding of Miss Caroline, the spiteful Mrs. Dubose, the lying of Mayella Ewell, the Lynch mob and the harshness of Alexandra Finch were not out of evil but out of ignorance. What Atticus essentially forms in his children is a sense of morality and justice that is given an individual meaning, rather than imposed by the society. That ability to decide for oneself is empowerment, small steps at a time.