

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Power Relations of Tom's Trail in Harper Lee's To Kill a Mocking Bird

Badr Abdul Qayoom Abdulla, Ayad Seleem Mansour

Article Info	Abstract
<p>Article History</p> <p>Received: August 18, 2020</p> <p>Accepted: September 19, 2020</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords Critical Discourse Analysis, Power Relations, To Kill A Mockingbird, Linguistic Interaction</p> <p>DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4140274</p>	<p><i>It is clear that understanding the nature of power relations in a literary text will make the process of interpretation easier. The objective of this paper is to analyze power relations in Tom's trial in Harper Lee's To kill a MockingBird from a critical discourse analysis perspective. Thus the language of the characters in the trial will be examined in relation to the revelation of their power relations throughout the progress of the trial. Every possible utterance by the characters will be critically analyzed using repetition, irony, metaphor as well as other literary terms. The importance of this critical analysis is to study the social interaction among the main characters by examining the linguistic interaction. The researcher concludes that it is necessary and important to study and comprehend power relations of Tom's trail in Lee's To Kill a Mocking Bird.</i></p>

1. Introduction

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an advanced methodology in the study of discourse that deals with language as a form of social practice and examines how text and talk contribute to the creation or appearance of social and political power. Van Dijk (2015:466) states that Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in fact "primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by texts and talk in social and political context."

Van Dijk (1996:85) points out that "Fairclough (1989) has contributed many articles and books that establish CDA as a direction of research, and that focus on various dimensions of power."

Fairclough (1989:26) presents three stages of critical discourse analysis:

- Description is the stage which is concerned with the formal properties of the text.
- Interpretation is concerned with the relationship between text and interaction –with seeing the text as the product of a process of production, and as a resource in the process of interpretation...
- Explanation is concerned with the relationship between interaction and social context-with the social determination of the processes of production and interpretation, and their social effects.

Different types of power can be recognized in accordance to the different resources used to practice such power. The people who have good knowledge and high rank in the discourse take control of the discourse so they have the higher power. Because of their money, the rich will have power. Politicians, judges and journalists are considered as a resource of power whose job gives them the right to affect other people's life. We should notice that power is not always absolute. Groups may control other groups, only in certain situations or social fields.

According to Van Dijk (1996:84) dominance is "understood as a form of social power abuse, that is, as a legally or morally illegitimate exercise of control over others in one's own interest, often resulting in social inequality". Wodak (2001:11) states that the relations between critical discourse analysis and power is the main reason that makes critical discourse analysis critically analyzes people who suffer and analyzes the language of people who are the reason for having inequality in society.

As van Dijk (1997: 24) puts it: 'the real ethical problem we need to focus on in critical discourse research is the illegitimate exercise of power, that is power abuse or domination'. In the same direction Fairclough (2001: 216) argues that 'critical analysis of discourse is nothing if it is not a resource for struggle against domination.'

Janks (2000:177) states that critical discourse analysis is used to understand how language works to position readers in the interests of power. It assumes a critical theory of ideology which sees power as negative and productive of inequitable social relations.

A critical discourse analysis can be applied in the study of discourse to understand the specific role of discourse in the reproduction of racism. Van Dijk (2015:348) defines racism as a specific social system of domination in

which ethnic groups and their members in various ways abuse their power in their interaction with other ethnic groups and their members. This has been especially the case for the domination by "whites" of "non-whites" such as people of Africa.

About the Text

Nelle Harper Lee (1926-2016) grew up in Alabama in USA. She wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird* in 1960 and it was about social inequality, racial discrimination and power abuse. The great novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1961. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/To_Kill_a_Mockingbird

One of the most important events in the novel was Tom Robinson's trial, a black man who was falsely accused of raping a young white woman. Atticus was the lawyer who defended Tom in court. Despite the evidences given in court proved that Tom was innocent, the court decided that Tom was guilty. <https://www.education.gov.za>

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Power Relations in Tom's Trial

In her novel and especially in Tom's trial, Lee succeeded in displaying racial prejudice, inequality and power abuse used against the blacks in the society of Maycomb. In the society of Maycomb, the whites people are powerful and superior while the blacks people are powerless and oppressed.

"Could you say it to the jury, Mr. Tate? Who called you?" Mr. Gilmer said. Mr. Tate said, "I was fetched by Bob—by Mr. Bob Ewell yonder, one night—"

"...Mr. Ewell came in, very excited he was, and said get out to his house quick, some nigger'd raped his girl."

"And what did you find?" said Mr. Gilmer

"Found her lying on the floor in the middle of the front room, one on the right as you go in. She was pretty well beat up, but I heaved her to her feet and she washed her face in a bucket in the corner and said she was all right. I asked her who hurt her and she said it was Tom Robinson—"

"So I went down to Robinson's house and brought him back. She identified him as the one, so I took him in. That's all there was to it."

(Lee p.166-167)

Sheriff, Mr. Heck Tate, is the first person who is called by judge to testify. Although Mr. Tate is the person who is responsible for keeping security and law in Maycomb, he takes on a different situation with Tom. The Sheriff immediately locks up Tom for the accusation of rape of Mayella Ewell and puts him in the prison despite the lack of evidence depending on Bob Ewell's allegation whom nobody trusts in the town. Tate's behavior shows that racial prejudice plays an important role in the application of the law ignoring that all people are equal regardless of their race or the colour of their skin.

The sheriff Tate exploits his power to treat Tom improperly putting him in the jail without performing an investigation or calling a doctor to make sure of Mayella's allegation. That is obvious in the following conversation when the lawyer Atticus Finch who defends Tom's case asks Mr. Tate if a doctor is called.

"Did you call a doctor, Sheriff? Did anybody call a doctor?" asked Atticus.

"No sir," said Mr. Tate.

"Didn't call a doctor?"

"Well I can tell you why I didn't. It wasn't necessary, Mr. Finch. She was mighty banged up. Something sho' happened, it was obvious."

"But you didn't call a doctor?....." (Lee p.167)

The sheriff doesn't perform an investigation and he doesn't call a doctor, despite both the investigation and the doctor might have provided obvious evidences that Tom is innocent. Atticus also does the same thing with Bob when Bob is on witness stand, Atticus repeatedly asks him if a doctor is called after Mayella's rape.

"Mr. Ewell," Atticus began, "...you say you ran to the house, you ran to the window, you ran inside, you ran to Mayella, you ran for Mr. Tate. Did you, during all this running, run for a doctor?"

"Wadn't no need to. I seen what happened."

"No, I mean her physical condition. Did you not think the nature of her injuries warranted immediate medical attention?" (Lee p.175)

Here, throughout the repetition, the writer uses irony to point out that Bob claims that he is very sad about the brutal assault on his daughter, which caused her serious wounds in addition to rape by Tom. At the same time, he doesn't call the doctor because he believes that there is no important thing that requires the presence of the doctor. Atticus wants to pay the jury attention that there is no medical evidence. Also by repeating the same question may trigger Bob's anger and make him say something different undermines the veracity of his previous speech. Interestingly, the jurors ignore the testified medical evidence for violence and there is no verifiable material provided that may show Tom isn't guilty. The jurors deliberately don't ask any medical evidence from Bob. They just depend on Bob and Tate's testimonies who ignore the truth deliberately.

Through his testimony, Bob Ewell describes scene of the rape of his daughter saying that he saw Tom Robinson was raping Mayella.

"—I seen that black nigger yonder ruttin' on my Mayella!" (Lee p.173)

Bob Ewell uses abusive and filthy language when he metaphorically describes Tom as animals and he portrays Tom and black men as beasts using the verb "rutting". This word "rut" always uses just for describing the animals mating habits, not people. He also mocks Tom calling him as a "nigger". He uses an outrageous words to describe the black people. He exploits his power because he is white against Tom who is a colored man despite the fact that Bob lacks power and respect and he is considered the lowest status in the white society taking advantage of the silence of the jury, who don't object to his insults against Tom Robinson. So Bob Ewell continues describing the black people to the Judge saying:

Judge, I've asked this county for fifteen years to clean out that nest down yonder, they're dangerous to live around 'sides devaluin' my property—" (Lee p.175)

Bob says that the blacks live in bad and miserable houses as nests. The irony is that Bob himself lives in a dump heap. In fact, white people consider black people as second-class people so the land values where they live will be lower. He continues scorning and devaluing the black people using abusive language. The whites consider the blacks as enemies and they will never trust them or respect them they also describe the black as dangerous animals and it is difficult to live with them. The colored people are controlled by the white people who believe that the blacks are savage animals need to be tamed. The whites believe that they are superior and they must be the dominant group because they have the ability to lead such inferior people.

Atticus asks some questions to Mr. Tate and Bob when they are on the witness stand to know the detail of the accident.

"It was her right eye, I said.

Atticus looked up at Mr. Tate. "Which side again, Heck?"

"The right side, Mr. Finch, but she had more bruises—you wanta hear about 'em?"

Atticus said, "Yes, what were her other injuries?" As Mr. Tate answered, Atticus turned and looked at Tom Robinson as if to say this was something they hadn't bargained for.

"...her arms were bruised, and she showed me her neck. There were definite finger marks on her gullet—"

"All around her throat? At the back of her neck?" "I'd say they were all around, Mr. Finch." (Lee p.169)

"Do you agree with his description of Mayella's injuries?"

"How's that?"

"Mr. Tate testified that her right eye was blackened, that she was beaten around the—"

"Oh yeah," said the witness. "I hold with everything Tate said." (Lee p.176)

Mr. Tate and Bob's answers are the most important part of Atticus's defense because he knows from their testimony, it is clear that Mayella's bruises and injuries are on the right side of her face. Atticus concludes that who beat Mayella should be left handed and Tom is undoubtedly innocent because he lost his left hand in an accident. Thus Atticus asks Bob to write to prove that the doer is Bob himself but Mr. Gilmer refuses Atticus's request. Mr. Gilmer considers Atticus's question is irrelevant.

"Mr. Ewell, can you read and write?"

Mr. Gilmer interrupted "objection," he said." Cannot see what witness's literacy has to do with the case, irrelevant" immaterial" (Lee p.176)

So Atticus asks the juror again, the juror allows Bob to write.

Judge Taylor was about to speak but Atticus said, "Judge, if you'll allow the question plus another one you'll soon see."

"All right, let's see," said Judge Taylor, "but make sure we see, Atticus.

Overruled."

"I'll repeat the question," said Atticus. "Can you read and write?"

"I most positively can."

"Will you write your name and show us?"

he asked. "Clearly now, so the jury can see you do it."s?"

"You're left-handed, Mr. Ewell," said Judge Taylor. (Lee p.176-77)

Atticus wants to prove that Bob is left-handed. Atticus wants to hint that Mr. Bob Ewell hits his own daughter because Mayella is hit on her right face. But, the jurors consider this evidence isn't convincing and isn't decisive. The jurors' behavior proves that racial injustice plays an important role in the application of the law so they refuse any evidence which leads to Tom's innocence. Court becomes an awful place for the powerless like the blacks and they will never get justice and fair treatment. It is ironic, because court is the place where people are treated equally.

Mayella, a young girl walks to the witness stand. When Mr. Gilmer asks her to tell the jury what happened that night, she says

' I went in the house to get him the nickel and I turned around an 'fore I knew it he was on me. Just run up behind me, he did. He got me round the neck, cussin' me an'

sayin' dirt—I fought'n' hollered, but he had me round the neck. He hit me agin an' agin—"

"-he chunked me on the floor an' choked me'n took advantage of me." (Lee p.180)

She claims that she is raped by Tom and she describes Tom's violent behavior during her rape saying that she is hit and choked and finally she is raped by Tom. Mayella's choice isn't by chance; she chooses Tom because she knows he is black and weak and nobody will believe him if she accuses him of raping her. Despite he is very kind to her, and he always helps her without taking money she has no mercy on him. Despite the fact that Mayella's race gives her power in the courtroom, overall, she is powerless in the eyes of society because she lives in poverty. After that Atticus asks her to look at Tom closely.

Atticus turned to the defendant. "Tom, stand up. Let Miss Mayella have a good long look at you. Is this the man, Miss Mayella?" (Lee p.185)

Atticus asks Tom to stand up, so the jury and people can see him clearly that he is crippled and it is difficult and impossible for him to do what Mayella says. Although the obvious evidences can prove that Tom's incapable of choking anybody because his left hand is useless so that he can't beat Mayella's right face with his left hand and he can't strangle her, which requires to use both of his hands, the jurors say that evidences are not decisive. Again the jurors deliberately neglect the fact that Tom isn't guilty.

It is natural for the black people to be afraid of the white people just because they are whites. This feeling is clear when Atticus asks Tom after Tom sees Mayella's father:

"Why did you run?"

"I was scared, suh."

"Why were you scared?"

"Mr. Finch, if you was a nigger like me, you'd be scared, too." (Lee p.195)

Tom Robinson states and repeats twice that he is scared and this shows that there are no normal relationships between the black people and the white people in Maycomb town. Both of them live a separate life. Whites are always honest and believed whatever they tell while blacks are always liars and this is the main reason makes him runs after he sees Mayella's father. Since that is the nature of oppressive society, he is sure that he may be accused of what he has never committed.

Again, Mr. Gilmer asks Tom the same questions saying :

"You're very candid about this, why did you run so fast?"

"I says I was scared, suh."

"If you had a clear conscience, why were you scared?"

"Like I says before, it weren't safe for any nigger to be in a—fix like that."

"But you weren't in a fix—you testified that you were resisting Miss Ewell. Were you so scared that she'd hurt you, you ran, a big buck like you?"

"No suh, I's scared I'd be in court, just like I am now."

"Scared of arrest, scared you'd have to face up to what you did?"

"No suh, scared I'd hafta face up to what I didn't do." (Lee p.198)

Tom's answer reveals what he believes in and states his understanding of oppressive and prejudiced society that won't be impartial with him. Fear is instilled in Tom's mind and soul and this refers to that he doesn't trust the whole immoral legal system. Tom is an oppressed person who feels that the law will never be just to him because of being a black man. So Many black people lose their faith and confidence in the justice. Tom is also sure that the rights of the black people will be violated and exploited for the benefit of the privileged white people. So he expects to be guilty which causes him continuous fear.

Through his investigation with Tom, Mr. Gilmer repeatedly indicates him as a "boy" which degrades a black man. "Had your eye on her a long time, hadn't you, boy?"

"Didn't Mr. Ewell run you off the place, boy?"

"Then you say she's lying, boy?"

you so scared that she'd hurt you, you ran, a big buck like you?" (Lee p.197-98)

In these examples, Mr. Gilmer uses offensive language to humiliate him. Tom is an adult man and the word "boy" considers a kind of humiliation. Mr. Gilmer's behavior provokes Tom's hatred of the jury because they insult and degrade him by calling him a "boy". This reveals that Gilmer mocks and disrespects him and he has intention to insult him.

It is as a big crime when a black man helps or feels pity for a white woman. It is clear in Mr. Gilmer's provocative and ridiculous remarks.

Mr. Gilmer smiled grimly at the jury. "You're a mighty good fellow, it seems—did all this for not one penny?"

"Yes, suh. I felt right sorry for her, she seemed to try more'n the rest of 'em—"

"You felt sorry for *her*, you felt *sorry* for *he*?" Mr. Gilmer seemed ready to rise to the ceiling. (Lee p.197)

When Tom answers Mr. Gilmer that he helps Mayella because he feels sorry for her, the judge Gilmer extremely becomes so angry and stunned saying two times "You felt sorry for *her*, you felt *sorry* for *her*". The repetition shows the irony and the shock of the judge. The judge uses a sardonic language to insult Tom as if he wants to say indirectly to him how dare you say that, you are just a despised black man and it is not allowed to you to feel sorry for a white woman. Gilmer's behavior and reaction toward Tom's answers always bad. Tom can't

express his feelings and he feels powerless and oppressed because everything that he always says 'wrong in judges' eyes. Tom is a victim of the race and the color so there is no place for the weak people.

Atticus speaks to the judge Taylor and the jury saying

"To begin with, this case should never have come to trial. This case is as simple as black and white". (Lee p.203)

The writer uses simile to state that Tom's case is very simple. She means it is clear that Tom is innocent but it is impossible for the white jury to accept this reality. Atticus wants to refer to aspect of racial discrimination of the case. He realizes that the white jury refuses reality and they are biased against Tom in spite of truth is obvious for people that Tom is innocent. Just because of being powerless and black, Tom's testimony turns into serious evidences condemn him despite the clear evidence that he isn't guilty. The justice becomes in conflict with racial bias. That is so clear when powerful people take away the rights of the ones they control. Atticus continues saying

"The state has not produced one iota of medical evidence to the effect that the crime Tom Robinson is charged with ever took place. It has relied instead upon the testimony of two witnesses whose evidence has not only been called into serious question on cross-examination, but has been flatly contradicted by the defendant. The defendant is not guilty, but somebody in this courtroom is."

"I say guilt, gentlemen, because it was guilt that motivated her. She has committed no crime, she has merely broken a rigid and time-honored code of our society,..."

"She was white, and she tempted a Negro. She did something that in our society is unspeakable: she kissed a black man...." (Lee p.203)

The writer uses antithesis in "The defendant is not guilty, but somebody in this courtroom is" to assert that the real perpetrator is another person. Atticus wants to point out that there is no conclusive medical evidence proves that Tom is guilty but the testimony of two witnesses whose evidence is in doubt and the accused denounces it. He also stresses that the real perpetrator of this crime is another person present in the courtroom. He indicates that Mayella is a victim of a set of strict traditions and customs, and she knows that her violation of these principles makes her live rejected by the white society. It is a big crime when a white woman tries to seduce a black man therefore she must destroy the evidence of her offense even if it is at the cost of an innocent man, taking advantage of the power of her race.

During his closing comments, Atticus wants to let people feel and know that case is evil and unjust saying

"...The witnesses for the state, with the exception of the sheriff of Maycomb County, have presented themselves to you gentlemen, to this court, in the cynical confidence that their testimony would not be doubted, confident that you gentlemen would go along with them on the assumption—the evil assumption—that *all* Negroes lie, that *all* Negroes are basically immoral beings, that *all* Negro men are not to be trusted around our women, an assumption one associates with minds of their caliber."

"Which, gentlemen, we know is in itself a lie as black as Tom Robinson's skin,....." (Lee p.204)

The writer uses anaphora to emphasize on the whites' bad impression about the blacks when she repeats "that *all* Negroes lie, that *all* Negroes are basically immoral beings, that *all* Negro men are not to be trusted around our women," several times. This thing is clear when Atticus basically states that people believe that anything associated with the blacks is either bad or a lie so they never believe or trust that a black man is not guilty when a white woman accuses him with a crime of rape. The writer also uses simile to refer to the injustice that occurs to Tom and compares it to the black lie that leads to catastrophic consequences. So Atticus describes the Ewell's accusation is a lie as black as Tom's skin. He refers to injustice and prejudice which prevails in the courtroom. He also wants to refer to the immoral legal system based on wealth and power, not on the principle of equality and justice between people, regardless of their colors and races. He points out that the biased jury just rely on the Ewells' testimonies which are in doubt but they are confident that the jury believe them because they are whites. Everyone in the court waits the final decision when

"Judge Taylor was polling the jury: "Guilty... guilty... guilty... guilty..." (Lee p.211)

The writer uses repetition to assert that the jury can't tolerate the blacks even if they are innocent so that whites always remain dominant and victorious. The jury convict Tom and give him the death penalty about a crime he didn't commit. They ultimately find him guilty of raping Mayella despite the lack of evidences. The judiciary exploits its power against Tom to save Mayella's life. They just apply the laws that assure their interests and hegemony over the powerless. Therefore, justice can't see the light as long as this bad judicial system found.

Tom loses his confidence and hope and gets tired of waiting for appeal in a local prison so he decides to escape from the prison but the guards kill him brutally.

"Tom's dead."

Aunt Alexandra put her hands to her mouth.

"They shot him," said Atticus. "He was running. It was during their exercise period. They said he just broke into a blind raving charge at the fence and started climbing over. Right in front of them—"s (Lee p.235)

Atticus tells Alexandra that Tom has killed by the guards because he tried to escape from the prison. Tom knows that he will never get a fair trial and his attempt reveals his extreme desperation because he is a black

man accused by a white woman. He is a victim of social injustice. Although all evidences refers to Mayella's father as the perpetrator, but the jury decides that Tom is guilty. Symbolically , Tom is the mockingbird; shot down although he is kind and innocent.

Conclusion

Throughout Tom's trail, Lee states that racial prejudice plays an important role in the application of the law ignoring that all people are equal regardless of their race or the colour of their skin. Lee uses techniques with careful words choice to create specific rhetorical effect and to reveal the social and racial prejudice. For example, she uses anaphora throughout Atticus's closing statements to emphasizes on the whites' bad impression about the blacks. This thing is clear when Atticus basically states that people believe that anything associated with the blacks is either bad and rude or a lie so they never believe or trust that a black man is not guilty when a white woman accuses him with a crime of rape.

The writer also uses simile to refers to the injustice that occurs to Tom and compares it to the black lie that leads to catastrophic consequences. So Atticus describes the Ewell's accusation is a lie as black as Tom's skin. He refers to injustice and prejudice which prevails in the courtroom. He also wants to refer to the immoral legal system based on wealth and power, not on the principle of equality and justice between people. When white people have trouble with black people, the white people automatically win. Therefore, Tom's life is exploited to save life of a white woman called Mayella.

The writer also criticizes the abuse of power and the use of that power to humiliate others as the sheriff Tate did with Tom. He put him in the prison without performing an investigation or calling a doctor to make sure of Mayella's allegation. Also, through Bob's words, Lee wants to show the great gap between the black and white. He exploits the power of his race against Tom when he metaphorically describes him as animals.

References

- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and Power*, London: Longman.
- Fairclough, N. (2001). *Language and Power* (2nd ed.). London: Longman.
- Janks, H. (2000). *Domination, access, diversity and design: A synthesis for critical literacy education*. Educational Review, 52(2), 175-186.
- Lee, Harper. (1982). *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Warner Bros Publishers.
- Van Dijk, T. 1996. *Discourse, Power and Access*. In C.R. Caldas-Coulthard, and M. Coulthard (eds.) *Texts and Practices: Readings in Critical Discourse Analysis*, London: Routledge, pp. 84-106.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (1997). *Discourse as interaction in society*. In T. A. van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse as social interaction* (pp. 1-37). London: Sage.
- van Dijk, T. A. (2015) *Racism in the Press*. In Bonvillain, N. (Ed.), *Handbook of Linguistic Anthropology*. (pp. 384-392). London: Routledge.
- Wodak, R. & Meyer, M. (2001). *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. London: Sage.
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/To_Kill_a_Mockingbird
- https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Manuals/MTG%20EFAL%20P2n%20TKAM%2019_01_2015%20WEB.pdf

Author Information

Badr Abdul Qayoom Abdulla
General Directorate of Al Anbar–Iraq

Dr. Ayad Seleem Mansour
University of Kirkuk-Iraq
