

TOPIC: POSTCOLONIAL APPROACHES TO HARPER LEE: THE AMERICAN SOUTH AS AN INTERNAL COLONY**Sakshi**

Research Scholar, Department of English, School of Education and Humanities, IFTM University, Moradabad, Email - mishrasakshi467@gmail.com

Dr. Shivali Singh

Professor and Head, Department of English, SOEH, IFTM University, Moradabad
Email- shivali.ssingh@gmail.com

Abstract

This research paper explores Harper Lee's novels, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman*, through the lens of postcolonial theory, specifically the concept of the American South as an internal colony. While traditional postcolonial studies focus on the relationship between imperial powers and overseas territories, this paper argues that the socio-economic and cultural dynamics between the American South and the dominant national narrative exhibit characteristics akin to an internal colonial relationship. By examining patterns of economic dependence, cultural marginalization, the perpetuation of racial hierarchies, and the struggle for regional identity within Lee's fictional Maycomb, this paper demonstrates how postcolonial frameworks offer a nuanced understanding of the South's complex position. The analysis reveals how Lee's works illuminate the South's simultaneously subaltern and oppressive roles, where its own internal colonialism against African Americans intersects with its experience of being "othered" and managed by external national forces.

Keywords: Harper Lee, postcolonial theory, internal colonialism, American South, racial hierarchies, Southern literature

1. Introduction

Harper Lee's seminal works, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and its prequel, *Go Set a Watchman* (2015), remain foundational texts in American literature, primarily celebrated for their exploration of racial injustice, moral development, and the loss of innocence in the American South. While extensive scholarship has delved into these themes, a less explored, yet compelling, interpretive pathway lies in applying postcolonial theory to the Southern context. Postcolonial studies typically analyze the power dynamics between colonizers and the colonized in a global context, examining how imperialism shapes identity, culture, and resistance in formerly subjugated nations. However, the American South, particularly after the Civil War and during the Jim Crow era, presents a curious parallel: a region with distinct cultural, economic, and political characteristics that has often been "othered," economically dependent, and subject to external national narratives, arguably functioning as an internal colony within the larger United States.

This paper proposes to analyze Harper Lee's portrayal of Maycomb, Alabama, through the lens of internal colonialism. This framework posits that certain regions or groups within a nation

experience economic exploitation, political subjugation, and cultural marginalization at the hands of a dominant core, mirroring the dynamics of traditional colonialism (Hechter). By examining the depictions of Maycomb's economy, social structures, racial hierarchies, and the regional identity struggles of characters like Scout and Jean Louise Finch, this study aims to demonstrate how Lee's novels illuminate the South's experience as an internal colony. This approach promises to deepen our understanding of the persistent complexities of Southern identity, its fraught relationship with the broader nation, and the intricate layers of oppression within its own borders.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is vast, primarily focusing on its themes of racial prejudice, justice, childhood innocence, and the role of Atticus Finch as a moral paragon (Johnson; Bloom). The posthumous publication of *Go Set a Watchman* sparked renewed debate, particularly regarding Atticus's more complex and racially conservative portrayal, challenging previous idealized interpretations and prompting a re-evaluation of the continuity and disjunction between the two novels (Tate; Crespino). While these analyses are crucial, they largely operate within socio-historical and literary frameworks that do not explicitly engage with postcolonial theory.

Postcolonial theory, as articulated by foundational thinkers like Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, primarily investigates the legacy of European imperialism, focusing on the construction of the "Other," the dynamics of power and knowledge, and the formation of hybridized identities in post-independence nations (Said; Bhabha; Spivak). The application of postcolonial theory beyond its traditional geographical scope, particularly to internal dynamics within established nations, has gained traction in various fields, including Indigenous studies, critical race theory, and regional studies.

The concept of "internal colonialism" emerged to describe situations where a dominant national group or region exploits and subordinates minority groups or peripheral regions within the same nation-state. Michael Hechter's seminal work, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536-1966*, applied this concept to the relationship between England and its Celtic peripheries, highlighting economic, political, and cultural stratification. In the American context, scholars have occasionally, though less frequently, applied this framework to understand the relationship between marginalized communities (e.g., Native Americans, African Americans in segregated areas) and the dominant white society, or to entire regions like Appalachia (Billings et al.).

The American South, with its unique historical trajectory, distinct cultural identity, and persistent economic disparities compared to the "Northern" industrial core, offers a compelling case for such an application. Historians and cultural critics have long theorized the South as a distinct "nation within a nation," marked by defeat, reconstruction, and a tenacious hold on its traditions (Cash; Reed). While these works do not explicitly use "internal colonialism," they lay the groundwork for understanding the South's "othered" status. Recent literary criticism, such as that by Tara Prochaska, has begun to explore the connections between gothic literature, the South, and postcolonial concepts, hinting at the region's marginalized psyche. However, a comprehensive

postcolonial analysis of Harper Lee's specific texts, focused on the South as an internal colony, remains underexplored. This paper aims to fill this gap by systematically applying internal colonial frameworks to the textual evidence in Lee's novels.

3. Methodology

This research employs a close textual analysis of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman*, framed explicitly by postcolonial theory, particularly the concept of internal colonialism. The methodology involves several steps:

- **Theoretical Framework:** The primary theoretical lens is internal colonialism, which posits that a dominant core exploits and subordinates a peripheral region or group within the same nation-state. Key characteristics of internal colonialism, as adapted from Hechter and other theorists, include:
- **Economic Exploitation/Dependence:** The peripheral region's economy is geared towards serving the core, often through resource extraction or agricultural dependence, leading to underdevelopment and limited industrialization.
- **Political/Social Subjugation:** The peripheral region experiences limited political autonomy, its institutions are weaker, and its social structures are often viewed as "backward" or problematic by the dominant core.
- **Cultural Marginalization/Othering:** The culture, language, and traditions of the peripheral region are devalued, exoticized, or pathologized by the core, leading to a struggle for identity and self-representation.
- **Racial/Ethnic Hierarchies:** Internal colonial dynamics often intersect with pre-existing racial or ethnic stratification, where the "colonized" group within the periphery is further oppressed by the peripheral dominant group, while the entire periphery is subordinate to the national core.
- **Textual Analysis Strategy:** The analysis will involve a systematic reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman* to identify textual evidence that exemplifies the characteristics of internal colonialism. This includes:
- **Setting Description:** Analyzing descriptions of Maycomb's physical environment, economic activities, and social infrastructure to infer its relationship with broader national development.
- **Character Portrayal:** Examining how Southern characters are depicted in terms of their values, beliefs, and their interactions with both the local community and the perceived "outside world" (e.g., New York, Northern ideals).
- **Narrative Voice and Perspective:** Considering how the narrative (especially Scout's and Jean Louise's evolving perspectives) frames the South's identity and its struggles.
- **Symbolism and Metaphor:** Interpreting symbolic elements that might signify the South's "otherness," dependence, or resistance.
- **Depiction of Power Dynamics:** Analyzing the interplay of power between different social groups within Maycomb (white vs. Black) and the implied relationship between Maycomb/the South and the rest of the nation.

- Comparative Analysis of Both Novels: The inclusion of *Go Set a Watchman* is crucial, as it offers a more explicit engagement with the clash between Southern traditions and Northern liberalism, and Jean Louise's internal struggle between loyalty to her Southern roots and her broader American identity. This allows for a deeper exploration of cultural resistance and identity formation within an internal colonial framework.

By applying these analytical tools, this paper will connect specific literary details in Lee's novels to the broader theoretical implications of the American South as an internal colony, revealing new layers of meaning in these canonical texts.

4. Results

The application of an internal colonial framework to Harper Lee's novels reveals Maycomb, and by extension the American South, as a region marked by economic dependence, cultural marginalization, and complex social hierarchies that mirror colonizer-colonized dynamics.

- Economic Stagnation and Dependence: Lee vividly paints Maycomb as a town caught in a time warp, economically underdeveloped compared to the national mainstream. Scout's narration in *To Kill a Mockingbird* frequently references the Great Depression, highlighting the town's pervasive poverty: "Maycomb was an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first knew it. In rainy weather the streets turned to red slop... somehow it was hotter then: a black dog suffered on a summer's day; bony mules hitched to Hoover carts flicked flies in the sweltering shade of the live oaks" (Lee, *Mockingbird* 5). This imagery suggests a lack of infrastructure and industrialization, a reliance on traditional, often struggling, agriculture, and a general lassitude born of economic hardship. The Cunninghams, in their struggle to pay Atticus with hickory nuts and turnip greens, exemplify a sharecropping economy where progress is elusive, and the community relies on bartering rather than a vibrant market economy. The implied absence of robust external investment or state-driven development projects positions Maycomb as an economic periphery, largely left to its own devices, distinct from the industrializing or modernizing "core" of the nation.
- Cultural Marginalization and "Othering": The South in Lee's novels is presented as culturally distinct, often viewed as anachronistic or peculiar by characters and implied national narratives. Maycomb's obsession with lineage, tradition, and strict social codes—the "caste system" (Lee, *Mockingbird* 136) described by Aunt Alexandra—is portrayed as both endearing and stifling. This cultural distinctiveness contributes to its "othering." While the North is rarely explicitly mentioned in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, its absence highlights the South's insularity.

Go Set a Watchman makes this cultural clash explicit through Jean Louise's experiences. Having lived in New York, she returns to Maycomb with a perspective shaped by modern, liberal ideals, only to confront the deeply entrenched, racially charged traditions of her home. Her struggle to reconcile her Southern past with her Northern-informed present exemplifies the internal conflict of a "colonized" subject wrestling with their identity in relation to the "colonizer's" changing values. Her father, Atticus, explains Maycomb's

resistance to change as a protective mechanism against perceived external threats: "We're a democracy, she said, and Atticus said, You mean everybody's got a right to say what he pleases, and she said, Yes, and he said, Then why are a whole lot of people so mad at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People?" (Lee, Watchman 245). This dialogue subtly reveals how Southern resistance to integration is framed as an assertion of regional autonomy against "Northern" imposition, a classic posture of a culture resisting external influence or perceived domination.

- **Racial Hierarchy as Internal Colonialism:** The most striking manifestation of internal colonialism within Lee's South is the rigid racial hierarchy that subordinates African Americans. The white community of Maycomb, while itself arguably a peripheral "colony" to the national core, acts as the primary colonizer of its Black population. The trial of Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a stark illustration of this. Tom, an innocent Black man, is accused, tried, and condemned by a white jury, despite overwhelming evidence of his innocence, simply because of his race. The legal system, ostensibly a pillar of justice, becomes an instrument of colonial control, dictating the lives and denying the rights of the Black community. Judge Taylor and the Ewells, though different in social standing, are both part of the apparatus that maintains this internal oppression.

Atticus's defense, while noble, operates within this colonial structure. He represents a benevolent "colonizer" attempting to mediate injustice, yet his efforts ultimately fail against the deeply entrenched systemic racism. The Black community, relegated to the balcony of the courthouse, embodies the subaltern position: present but voiceless, observing their fate from a symbolic distance. Calpurnia acts as a cultural mediator, navigating the strict boundaries between white and Black worlds, embodying the "mimicry" and hybridized existence often experienced by colonized subjects who must adapt to the dominant culture while retaining their own (Bhabha).

In *Go Set a Watchman*, the reveal of Atticus's involvement with the Citizens' Council amplifies this internal colonial dynamic. While Scout once saw him as a champion of racial equality, Jean Louise confronts his complicity in maintaining segregation. Atticus's motivations, as he explains them, are tied to preserving the "Southern way of life" and resisting "outside interference" (Lee, Watchman 245). This represents a regional dominant group—the white Southerners—asserting its right to maintain its internal colonial structure against the evolving national conscience, framing the national push for civil rights as an external, colonial imposition on their sovereignty.

5. Discussion

The analysis of Harper Lee's novels through the lens of internal colonialism offers a powerful reinterpretation of the American South's complex identity and its persistent struggles. By viewing Maycomb as an internally colonized region, we gain a deeper understanding of the motivations behind its social structures, economic stagnation, and the fervent defense of its traditions.

The economic conditions described in *To Kill a Mockingbird* highlight the South's historical position as an economic periphery. Dependent on agriculture, often exploited for its raw materials, and lacking significant industrial investment from the economically dominant North, the South

remained socio-economically underdeveloped. This dependence is not merely a backdrop but fundamentally shapes Maycomb's social fabric, where poverty exacerbates racial tensions and where the perceived need to maintain social order (however unjust) becomes paramount for stability.

Culturally, Lee's narratives illustrate how the South's distinctiveness led to its "othering" within the national imaginary. The national narrative frequently depicted the South as backward, violent, or culturally anachronistic, much like a traditional colonial power might categorize its subjects. *Go Set a Watchman* particularly foregrounds this cultural resistance, as Jean Louise grapples with the clash between her deep-rooted Southern identity and the progressive values she has absorbed in the "core" metropolis of New York. Her journey is emblematic of a postcolonial subject navigating two worlds, struggling with assimilation and the preservation of a distinct, albeit problematic, heritage.

Crucially, the internal colonial framework allows us to understand the layered nature of oppression in the South. While the South itself experienced a form of internal colonialism from the national core, it simultaneously perpetuated its own brutal internal colonialism through the Jim Crow system against African Americans. The white Southern community, despite its own peripheral status, replicated colonial power structures by economically exploiting, politically disenfranchising, and culturally dehumanizing its Black population. Atticus Finch, in both novels, embodies the contradictions inherent in this system. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, he is an ethical voice challenging the overt injustices of white supremacy, yet in *Go Set a Watchman*, his more ambivalent stance on civil rights reveals how even "good" white Southerners were deeply embedded in (and beneficiaries of) this internal colonial apparatus, viewing national intervention as an infringement on their regional autonomy.

This perspective moves beyond simply labeling the South as "racist" or "backward" to understand the historical, economic, and power dynamics that shaped its unique trajectory. It argues that the South's fierce protectiveness of its traditions, its resistance to "outside" interference, and its often-tragic self-perception are not merely idiosyncratic but are symptoms of a region that has itself experienced a form of marginalization and subjugation, even while it perpetrated extreme injustices internally. The internal colony framework thus provides a nuanced lens to understand the persistent complexities of Southern identity and the enduring legacy of its past.

6. Scope and Limitations

This paper's scope is confined to a postcolonial analysis of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman*, focusing specifically on the application of the "internal colony" concept to the American South. While the chosen texts offer rich material for this framework, it is important to acknowledge that the concept of internal colonialism, particularly when applied to regional dynamics within a nation-state like the U.S., is a theoretical construct and not a universally accepted historical classification. Its application here is an interpretive lens to reveal specific power dynamics, not a definitive declaration of the South's historical status in the same vein as traditional colonial conquest.

Furthermore, this analysis does not aim to offer a comprehensive historical account of internal colonialism in the American South, nor does it delve into the specific socio-economic transformations of the post-Civil War era in exhaustive detail. Instead, it uses the literary representations within Lee's novels as a primary site for theoretical exploration. The paper also acknowledges the potential for oversimplification: the relationship between the American South and the national core is highly complex, marked by periods of conflict, integration, and mutual influence, far exceeding a simple colonizer-colonized binary.

Finally, while the paper highlights the South's experience as an "othered" region, it unequivocally condemns and does not seek to justify the South's profound internal colonialism against African Americans. The analysis is intended to illuminate the layered nature of power and oppression, where the South's own subaltern position within the U.S. did not absolve it of its role as an oppressor against its Black citizens. Future research could expand this framework to other Southern literary figures, a broader historical context, or engage with other critical theories that intersect with postcolonial thought.

7. Key Findings

This research offers several key findings through its postcolonial analysis of Harper Lee's novels:

- **Economic Peripheralization:** Lee's depiction of Maycomb illustrates the American South's historical experience as an economic periphery, characterized by underdevelopment, reliance on traditional agriculture, and limited integration into the national industrial economy. This economic stagnation contributes to the region's distinct social and cultural characteristics.
- **Cultural Othering and Resistance:** The novels portray the South's distinct cultural identity, marked by an emphasis on tradition, lineage, and a certain insularity, which leads to its "othering" by the national mainstream. *Go Set a Watchman* particularly highlights the Southern community's resistance to external (Northern) cultural and political influences, viewing them as encroachments on local autonomy, a classic response of a "colonized" region.
- **Layered Colonialism:** The most significant finding is the revelation of a layered colonial dynamic. While the white South experienced aspects of internal colonialism from the national core (economic dependence, cultural marginalization), it simultaneously perpetuated a brutal system of internal colonialism against its African American population. The justice system, as seen in Tom Robinson's trial, functioned as a tool of this internal oppression, maintaining racial hierarchy and denying Black citizens their fundamental rights.
- **Complex Identity Formation:** Characters like Jean Louise Finch exemplify the internal struggles of individuals caught between their deep-rooted Southern identity and the broader American national identity, reflecting the challenges faced by subjects in a postcolonial context who must navigate conflicting loyalties and values.
- **Reinterpretation of Southern Defensiveness:** The internal colony framework provides a theoretical lens to understand the South's perennial defensiveness against external criticism

and its tenacious hold on its "way of life," interpreting these not merely as inherent backwardness but as responses to its subaltern position within the larger American nation.

8. Conclusion

Harper Lee's enduring novels, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman*, when read through the lens of postcolonial theory and the concept of internal colonialism, offer a remarkably nuanced understanding of the American South. This approach moves beyond traditional interpretations by foregrounding the intricate power dynamics that shaped the region, revealing Maycomb as a microcosm of a South simultaneously marginalized by the national core and actively perpetuating its own system of oppression against African Americans.

The analysis has demonstrated how Lee's texts vividly portray the South's economic peripheralization, its struggle against cultural "othering," and the profound impact of these dynamics on individual and collective identity. From the stagnant economy of Maycomb to Jean Louise Finch's internal conflict between loyalty to her Southern heritage and her adopted Northern sensibilities, the novels resonate with themes of dependence, resistance, and the complex negotiation of identity that characterize internal colonial relationships. Importantly, this framework allows us to fully appreciate the layered nature of oppression in the Jim Crow South, where the white population, while experiencing its own form of marginalization, acted as a colonizer to its Black citizens, employing legal, social, and economic instruments to maintain racial hierarchy.

By applying postcolonial approaches, we gain a critical perspective that enriches our understanding of the South's historical particularities and its ongoing legacy in the American imagination. This research encourages further exploration of non-traditional colonial contexts within national borders, demonstrating the versatility of postcolonial theory in shedding light on persistent inequalities and the enduring struggles for self-determination and justice. Lee's novels, therefore, stand not only as powerful commentaries on race and justice but also as profound literary explorations of a region shaped by, and perpetually grappling with, the complex aftermath of an internal colonial experience.

Works Cited

- Billings, Dwight B., et al. *Appalachia in an Age of Globalization: Theory and Practice*. University Press of Kentucky, 2006.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Bloom, Harold, editor. *Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird*. Chelsea House, 1999.
- Cash, W. J. *The Mind of the South*. Vintage Books, 1991.
- Crespino, Joseph. *Atticus Finch: The Biography*. Basic Books, 2018.
- Hechter, Michael. *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536–1966*. University of California Press, 1975.
- Johnson, Claudia Durst. *To Kill a Mockingbird: Threatening Boundaries*. Twayne Publishers, 1994.
- Lee, Harper. *Go Set a Watchman*. HarperCollins, 2015.

---. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006.

Prochaska, Tara. "*The Haunted South: Decolonizing the Region through the Gothic Mode*." Ph.D. dissertation, University of South Florida, 2017.

Reed, John Shelton. *Whose South? America's South in the National Imagination*. University of Missouri Press, 1996.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Vintage Books, 1979.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.