

**John Grisham's 'A Time To Kill': A Study In Humanism****Dr Pranjali Kane**

Assistant Professor

Department of English  
S B City College, Nagpur**Abstract:**

*The paper deals with the idea of humanism in face of racial discrimination as seen in the world. Humanism considers all men equal and at the centre. All other things are at the periphery. Literature also captures this reality and gives us a glimpse of the condition of man. Society in India as well as Africa has the same set of problems. The paper will consider John Grisham's novel 'A Time to Kill' for study. The story is set in Mississippi. It has universal appeal though. It is important for us to change our perspective to deal with the problem. The novel gives us an alternative to this issue.*

In India, statistical data tells us that about 12,609 rape cases were officially registered under the POSCO (Protection of Children from Sexual Offenses) in the year 2019 alone. Around 6, 222 cases have been charge sheeted. The others are under investigation. Recently, the Supreme Court had passed Death Penalty to the four accused in the Nirbhaya case, the gangrape and brutal assault that took place in the year 2012. The six men involved in the case were convicted by the court. One of the accused committed suicide in the jail in 2013. One more culprit was a juvenile. He was given a sentence of three years imprisonment in a reform facility. He is free now. As of now, the death sentence has been postponed since one of the accused has applied for mercy plea. The girl died after fighting a battle for 13 days. But since then her parents have died every single moment of their existence. The question is: Is Justice done in the gruesome assault that shook the nation?

Let us take the case of the Hyderabad Female Doctor who was gang - raped and burnt leading to her death. The accused were shot in an encounter within 7 days of the incident in custody. This elicited many reactions from various quarters of the country. Again the same question: Is Justice done to all involved?

The alarming increase in the rape cases and sexual assaults on girls and women is not limited to India alone. The racial and gender discrimination is seen in African countries. Rape as a weapon to suppress the lower race and secondary gender is evident in the act itself. Women are doubly marginalized. The National Organization of Women, in an article, 'Black Women and Sexual Violence' states: "For the African American Women, sexual assault and violence are incredibly pervasive issues that routinely go unreported and under-

addressed. Over 18% of the African American woman will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime..... Law enforcement and the legal system are not seen as viable avenues of recourse as these systems continue to oppress and discriminate against people of color. In a study done on the Oregon Justice system, 76% of the young women were survivors of sexual abuse by the age of 13....."

The world has witnessed and is still witnessing crimes and atrocities against women of all ages. But the African American girls and women have been victims of oppression in a double way. It becomes extremely difficult to report the crime and punish the culprit especially if he is a white man. It has increasingly been the focus of all the media to highlight these issues to try and bring out some solution to it. Governments of all nations are trying to bring under ambit of law such cases and expedite justice. Artists & Writers have also taken up such issues sometimes inspired by real life situations to sensitize the public. One such work of fiction is John Grisham's first book 'The Time to Kill' (1989) which was also made into a film in 1996.

Born in 1955, John Grisham is an American novelist, attorney, politician, and activist, best known for his popular legal thrillers. His books have been translated into 42 languages and published worldwide. His first novel, A Time to Kill, was published in June 1989. Grisham said the big case came in 1984. As he was hanging around the court, he overheard a 12-year-old girl telling the jury what had happened to her. Her story intrigued Grisham, and he began watching the trial. He saw how the members of the jury cried as she told them about having been raped and beaten. He says he wished he had a gun himself to kill the accused. It was then that a story was born.

Several of Grisham's legal thrillers are set in the fictional town of Clanton, Mississippi, in the

equally fictional Ford County, a northwest Mississippi town still deeply divided by racism. The first novel set in Clanton was *A Time to Kill*. The idea behind setting the story in a fictional place has deeper meanings. Such heinous crimes, as is described in the novel are a result of the debased mindset. They can happen at any place and at any time and with any girl of any age group.

Grisham's novel 'A Time to Kill' has a poignant quote: The most horrible crime of all is the violent rape of a child."

In the novel 'A Time to Kill', two white racists, Billy Ray Cobband and Pete Willard violently rape a 10 year old black girl named Tonya Hailey in rural Mississippi. They beat Tonya and dump her in a nearby river after a failed attempt to hang her. She survives and the two men are arrested. The verdict is predecided in the minds of the people. Since Tonya is a black girl, and the crime has been committed by white men, the verdict will not be in favour of the girl. Tonya's father chooses the constitutional way. He hires Jake Brigance, an easygoing White lawyer. He is worried that the men would not be punished due to deep-seated racism in Mississippi Delta area. Brigance is also aware that the men will go scot free, ready to repeat the crime with some other innocent girl. So impatient to get justice for his 10 year old girl, Carl Lee acquires an M16 rifle, goes to the county courthouse, takes law into his own hands and kills the White men. He does not resist when he is arrested. There was no other way to get justice according to him.

Jake Brigance agrees to defend Carl Lee for a small amount of money than such a trial would usually require. He intends to enter a plea of not guilty by reason of temporary insanity. The rape and subsequent killing gain national media attention. The Ku Klux Klan, America's white supremacy hate group whose primary target are African Americans, begin to organize in the area. They also target Jake Brigance since he is helping the Black Carl. They threaten his family and assault his assistant Ellen Roark. They also burn a cross in Jake's lawn and kill his dog too thereby instilling in him a greater fear. After all these dangers, Brigance is advised by his race people to quit the case. Was it really worth the whole trouble? But Brigance argues that to quit now would make his sacrifices meaningless. The Jury also decides against Carl Lee.

Brigance suggests that Carl Lee should accept a lesser guilty plea. Carl Lee refuses and rejects Brigance's idea of race and justice. There is a wonderful exchange of dialogue between the two. It is the crux of the matter. Carl Lee mentions that although some of the Whites consider themselves as friends of the Blacks, they do not visit each other's

houses. Nor do their kids play together. There is a natural social segregation. It is a convenient distance that they maintain since they do not want any disturbances. It is not out of a sense of equality or love, but because they do not want troubles. Carl Lee chose Jake Brigance even though he was his enemy. He knew that Brigance belonged to the same set of social race as the Jury. He would best know how to deal with the Jury. So it is not out of respect or friendship that Carl chose him. Here the Black man has outwitted the White man. The tables have turned in favour of the Black.

When Brigance represents Carl Lee, he knows he has a losing case. He tells the jury to close their eyes and listen to a story. He describes, in slow and painful detail, the rape and assault of a 10 year old innocent girl. He then asks the jury in his final comment, to 'now imagine she's white'. This plays a psychological trick on the minds of the Jury. This also challenges the very nature of the trial itself. It brings to the notice of all the fact that within the racist community, we value the life of one more than the other just because of the color of the skin. The actions of Carl Lee would not have been questioned if the victim had been white. His actions would have been seen by the public as justified . and there would not have been any prosecution.

Carl Lee is acquitted by the Jury. The novel ends when Brigance brings his wife and daughter to a family cookout at Carl Lee's house, surprising Carl Lee. Brigance replies, "just thought our kids could play together", and Carl Lee smiles at that.

The intellectual novel *A Time to Kill* combines two main plot lines or problems of the whole mankind – violence and racism. Grisham used these main plot lines to teach people to be more honest and responsible for deeds, which have terrible and everlasting consequences. The novel forces readers to think about honor, conscience, morality, law, court, justice, subjectivity and many other concepts, which are so necessary in the modern society. However, it is very difficult to count on justice, when you have a dark skin color and live in the south. You realize that acquittal is a fantasy, when you are tried for murder. Moreover, it does not matter at all that you just avenged your innocent child. The global problem of the racial conflict has its own principles, according to which people with a dark skin color suffer. The black population is trying to keep up to date and get the same rights as other people, but this conflict creates a real war between two races. Grisham uses the problem of the racial segregation in his novel to show that inequality of the human race is prevalent in the present times also and it destroys all the positive traits of character. Sometimes, it seems that there is no justice

in the world at all. Nevertheless, it can be achieved and the main character of the novel Jake Tyler Brigrance proves to readers. He was not afraid to be the lawyer of a black man, because he considers that justice must exist in the world. Brigrance shows that there is good in the world, which is not afraid of evil. Jake has truly transcended the barrier of racism and emerged as a HUMAN showing the readers a path they all should travel upon. The end of the novel shows the ideal and desirable way in which all of us can exist and make this world a better place! It is not just to tolerate each other but also to accept the other wholeheartedly.

**Present Status:**

In India, in 2019, Union Minister Smriti Irani introduced a bill in the Rajya Sabha to amend POSCO Act. It aims to make punishment more strict and even include death penalty for offenders involved in sexual crimes against minors. According to the amendment bill, those committing penetrative sexual assaults on a child below 16 years of age would be punished with imprisonment up to 20 years, which might extend to life imprisonment as well as fine. To curb child pornography, the Bill provides that those who use a child for pornographic purposes should be punished with imprisonment for up to five years and a fine. However, in the event of second or subsequent conviction, the punishment would be extended up to seven years along with a fine.

Since 1989, many things have changed. The child abusers have found newer ways to commit crimes. Now the rate at which cyber crimes involving children are on the rise, it is very important to have stricter laws and fast track courts for judgement. In the absence of the above, it is becoming increasing frustrating for the near ones to take law in their hands. The cruelty of the abusers were matched by equal force like by the police in case of the Hyderabad Rape victim. John Grisham in his novel has not endorsed violence against the perpetrators. He is not showing that way of seeking justice. He is bringing in front of the world the condition of the near and dear ones of the victims. And shows in his own way that it is time that all of us need to unite, the whites as well as the Blacks, to seek justice. The color of the skin should not matter. Whether one should be forced to take such a stand to get justice is a debatable topic. It is high time that the Government, the Legal system and the other stakeholders should take active steps in this direction to avoid further such incidents.

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