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Reflection of Racism in John Grisham's *Sycamore Row*

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Abstract

John Grisham, an American novelist, has a knack for creating law-based stories. His skill in capturing the reader's curiosity about every word is commendable. In most cases, the story takes an expected turn, but the writer is especially successful in keeping the reader hooked while reading. *Sycamore Row* shows how the southern states of the United States treated blacks with contempt, humiliation and cruelty. *Sycamore Row* is a novel written during the period 1987-1988. Through this novel we realize how intense apartheid was at that time. This novel makes the reader think while shedding light on the brutal tendencies in the human mind. And the idea comes not only from a social question but also from a thrilling description of a lawsuit.

Keywords: *apartheid, lawsuit, racism, contempt, humiliation*



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American novelist John Grisham's novel *Sycamore Row* was published in 2013. *Sycamore Row* is the sequel to the novel *A Time to Kill* which paints a grim picture of America's latent racism. The protagonist of the novel, Jake Brigance, is a young lawyer. His principle is, there should be no racial distinction between white and black human beings. Although the owner of his firm is an alcoholic, he has a fondness for blacks in his personal life. In *A Time to Kill*, Jake defends a black father in court. He is the father of an unfortunate black girl. The two criminal gangs brutally tied up the girl, raped her, and then threw her away. The black family, living a very miserable life, trembles. The girl's father is angry. "Anger that has been simmering in my mind for so many years comes to a boil" expresses the girl's father. Their lives would have already been ruined by the indiscriminate atrocities perpetrated on blacks by the white for decades. Like a ferocious beast, the whites have broken the limbs of that cowardly girl. The latent message conveyed by the two white men is that black people are the property of the whites and they were born to serve the whites and to feel helpless before them. The girl's father gets up and kills the accused while taking them to court. Of course, he was arrested immediately. Jake Brigance is an ordinary lawyer. Hearing this story, he gets upset and starts prosecuting the father. He defends black father before the jury. Meanwhile, a clan organization of fanatics (Clan) burns down Jake's large bungalow. Jake, his wife, and their sweet daughter Hannah are constantly threatened. But without hesitation, Jake wins the case and brings justice to the unfortunate girl and her father. *A Time to Kill* has to be praised as an effective portrayal of apartheid that is accurate and close to reality.

Sycamore Row is the sequel to the novel *A Time to Kill*. Although the plot is completely different, the core is the same, 'apartheid'. *Sycamore Row* is a novel written during the period 1987-1988. Through this novel we realize how intense apartheid was at that time. The Civil War, waged to eradicate apartheid in the United States, dates back to 1861. Unlike the novel *Gone with the Wind*, *Sycamore Row* depicts conflicting roles against blacks living in the southern United States. The novel *Gone with the Wind* shows that white people in the southern states have a close relationship with the black, as equal members of their family. And so, the role of *Gone with the Wind* shows that the invasion of the southern states by the northern states to break the practice of slavery is futile. *Sycamore Row*, however, displays how the southern states of the United States treated blacks with contempt, humiliation and cruelty. Surprisingly, apart from 1861, it was not until 1988 that racism was established. In fact, it is still intact. Even after 100-125 years, this discrimination has not completely disappeared. Even though the law has brought many restrictions, this discrimination



is still burning in some corner of the mind. Black people are still rarely found in large companies in the United States. Their way of life is very different from that of white people. An invisible wall still feels. Less education, more crime, and so the terror of blacks is still felt in America. Although caste-based discrimination in India has not been completely eradicated, discrimination, which was once rampant in social life, seems to have faded away. Discrimination against caste in India is greatly reduced in terms of behavior, speech, education, social and economic status, health, security. It is also a fact that in recent times some regional and national parties have been spreading these differences for personal gain. Caste-based politics is a bitter reality in India and it is unfortunate that selfish politicians in India seek social peace and harmony. Of course, in America, the issue is apartheid and in India it is 'casteism'. There must be a difference between the two. There is no caste discrimination in India similarly In the United States, racism is rare. The basic underlying point is the same and that is the walls built by a particular group to dominate the whole society. It has become selfish for man to treat man as a human being and to leave the society unsettled by cultivating discrimination to fulfill human and personal ambitions and emotions born in the minds of both men. One that takes everyone along and the other that divides people. It is important to win the one who is undoubtedly right. This is underlined in *Sycamore Row*.

Sycamore Row begins with Jake's fallen life. The house is on fire. Jake may have been named in a major lawsuit won three years ago, but Jake is on the financial front. The insurance lawsuit is ongoing and the insurance company is reluctant to pay for the insurance of the burnt house. Jake and his family live in a very small apartment. Jake's financial income is very low as there are not many lawsuits in hand. Jake is annoyed by this obsession. Gone are the days of frustration, and one day a letter arrives at Jake's office. It is a letter from a deranged white man in his village. The man's name is Seth Hubbard. Seth is in his late seventies. Before a day or two, Jake remembers that Seth committed suicide by hanging himself from a tree. It is clear from the letter he wrote that Seth committed suicide because of the intense pain of cancer. Jake wonders if the letter in his handwriting should come to him after his death. Jake opens the wallet. It contains a letter and a two-page will in Seth's autograph. According to this, Seth instructed to give 90% of his property to a poor middle-aged middle-aged maid, Lettie, who has been taking good care of him for three years with a very neutral attitude. Of the remaining 10%, 5% is to be given to his younger brother who ran away as a child and the remaining 5% to the church. Seth instructed not to give a single penny to his children, a boy and a girl. In his letter, he had given Jake the responsibility of distributing his property as he wished. He would have written with great concern that his children should not be given a penny. He also mentioned that no other lawyer should be involved in the execution of the will. He also wrote instructions on where and how to perform the funeral rites after death. Jake never met Seth. He is known in the village as a wacky, very sick blonde old man. Seth believes



in Jake's sincerity and sense of justice, as he has done justice to a black family in a previous rape case. That is what Seth mentioned in his letter. Jake begins his career as a lawyer for Seth's estate. Jake feels that it is his duty to fulfill his last wish. About a year ago, Seth had obtained a typed will from a reputed law firm. In it, Seth proposes that all property should be given to his children. It is logical that a will signed by law and signed one or two days before death is admissible. Both of Seth's sons challenge his will in court, filing earlier wills. His argument is that Seth was in a coma for most of the day, as he was on medication and painkillers at the time of his death. So, Lettie took advantage of his situation and got the will from him as she wanted; this means that Seth's handwritten will is made under 'undue influence' and he lost the ability to think straight while preparing the will. This means that Seth lacked the testamentary capacity to make a will.

Lettie is a very poor black woman. Her husband is an alcoholic. At home there is a large family of mother, two sisters, their children, her own daughters, her daughters' children. They all live in a very small house. This whole cart is dragging on for a meager income. However, she takes care of Seth very intimately. Lettie does all the chores around the house, like cleaning the house, washing clothes, taking Seth to the bathroom from time to time, giving him the medicine on time. Seth's children's lawyer argues that her inner motive is tainted in doing all this with such care.

The lawsuit is settled out of court. The hard work of gathering evidence begins. Lawyers from both groups begin to gather information on their own. Jake's motives are clear. He wants to honor Seth's last wish. The purpose of Seth's children, of course, is to gain Seth's wealth. Everybody wonders how much will be the wealth of a deranged old man. An inspector is assigned to measure his wealth. Everyone in the village knows that Seth is involved in two divorces. Therefore, many people are of the opinion that whatever is a pest should be shared without making a fuss. The white people are angry that a poor black woman will get 90% share. And when Seth's fortune finally comes to light, the good guys are shocked. Seth has 24 million in cash. There is also 80 acres of land. No one in that entire county has that much wealth. And the idea that 90% of this wealth will go to a petty black woman like Lettie, sparks racism. Then begins the jury selection game. Lawyers from both groups strive to select the best jury to win. Jake is upset because the majority of whites in the village are white and will vote against the poor Lettie. Opposition lawyers work hard to bring as many whites as possible to the jury. Then begins the thrilling game based on apartheid. What happens next? What secrets come out? What turn the lawsuit takes? Does Lettie really get 90% of the property? Are Seth's children involved in the lawsuit for no reason? Is there a conspiracy behind all these lawsuits? Whose side is true? etc. are shown skillfully. John Grisham has a knack for creating law-based stories. His skill in capturing the reader's curiosity about every word is commendable. In most cases, the story takes an expected turn, but the writer is especially successful in keeping the reader



hooked while reading. The novel is characterized by events that take an unexpected turn of events, a dramatic and mysterious sowing of events, vivid descriptions of the characters, and vivid writing that brings the events to the fore. The language is very fluent and powerful.

Sycamore Row makes the reader think while shedding light on the brutal tendencies in the human mind. And the idea comes not only from a social question but also from a thrilling description of a lawsuit. And this unfamiliar mix keeps the reader hooked. To conclude we can say that this novel, which reinforces the idea that there should be no discrimination among human beings for any reason, is a must read.

Works cited

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