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**Rebellion against Authority as the Essence of Existentialism in Harper Lee's  
*To Kill a Mockingbird***

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**ABSTRAK**

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan bagaimana eksistensi individu dapat dicapai dengan cara memberontak figur otoritas yang tergambar pada salah satu novel sastra *To Kill a Mockingbird* karya Harper Lee. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan filosofis Eksistensialisme dengan konsep Kebebasan dan Otentisitas yang dicetuskan oleh Jean Paul Sartre. Manusia terlahir di dunia dengan mewarisi hak kebebasan untuk memilih tujuan hidupnya, dan untuk menjadi pribadi yang otentik manusia harus melawan tekanan doktrin masyarakat dalam membentuk pribadi yang terstandarisasi. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa dengan menyadari kebebasan manusia dalam memilih, salah satunya dengan memberontak figur otoritas, karakter utamadapat mempertahankan pribadi dasarnya yang otentik dan dengan itu memperoleh eksistensi dalam hidupnya. Pemberontakan karakter utama dalam novel ini mencitrakan ide utama Eksistensialisme sebagai gambaran manusia dalam mempertahankan eksistensi di tengah dunia sebagai pihak yang mengintimidasi.

**Kata kunci: Eksistensialisme, Kebebasan, Otentisitas, Pemberontakan, Sastra Remaja**

**ABSTRACT**

The aim of this article is to describe how individual existence can be achieved through rebellion against the authority figures which is projected in one of classic literary works, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. In developing this research, the writer uses the approach of Existentialist philosophy in relation to the concept of Freedom and Authenticity coined by Jean Paul Sartre. Human being cast into the world inheriting his nature of freedom to choose his way of life, and to be an authentic human being, one must resist mass society's doctrine of standardized human. Through the analysis, the writer discovers that by acknowledging the freedom to choose, which in this case is rebelling against strict authority, the main character managed to hold her true authentic self and thus acclaiming her existence. The rebellion by the main character in *To Kill a Mockingbird* portrays the main notion of Existentialism, how human being striving for his existence in the middle of intimidating universe.

**Keyword: Existentialism, Freedom, Authenticity, Rebellion, Coming of age Literature**

## 1. Introduction

One of the quintessence carried by literary piece is when the reader can relate deeper to the story, reflecting upon the values, and perhaps applying the result of contemplation into life's standpoint. Coming-of-age literature is one of the genres in literary realm which revolves around the growing up phase of a child into adulthood. This genre is able to provide a large space for the readers to completely relate their experiences to the protagonist's. The beauty of this genre is that the story could be cross cultures or periods. It may concern about race, gender or ethnic, but the characteristic of growing up is universal. One of the aspects is the journey to search for one's identity to acclaim one's existence.

Through the innocence of children's perspectives, from purity to experience, authors manage to explore this essence of existentialism in their works. *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee is one of 20<sup>th</sup> century influential American novels which are able to project this notion through the journey of Scout Finch facing the strict authorities who limit her rights as human being, then how she manages to break free and create meaning to her life by confronting them.

## 2. Background of The Research

The journey of finding and holding an identity is a tough phase, confronting the world which trying to shape Jean Louis 'Scout' Finch is tougher. She is left to no choice other than to rebel the strict rules. The portrayal of her struggle in striving her true self and following her conscience by not affected with all the inequality she is surrounded by shows the essence of existentialism. The writer focuses on what restriction the universe of the story puts on Matilda, how the child heroine surpasses those restrictions by rebelling, and show how her struggle is actually an existential one.

Existentialism is one of philosophical schools which mainly focus on an individual as the master of himself, resisting the outside pressure of mass society which attempts in creating standardize human being. The concept of Freedom and Authenticity by Jean Paul Sartre is able to explain the constant attempt of Scout's rebellion to the strict authorities. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre presents his

notion of freedom as the act of making choices, and indeed not being able to avoid making choices. Sartre's conception of choice can best be understood by reference to an individual's original choice. He asserts in his book *Existentialism is a Humanism* that "...there is no determinism— man is free, man is freedom." (2007:29). Freedom in Sartre's opinion is not merely freedom to do something. One is free when he succeeded in acknowledging his consciousness that something is lacking in his life, which triggered him to make a strong purpose of himself and choose to commit something regarding to that matter.

In order to develop this research, the writer uses three steps in constructing this research. Those steps consist of collecting data, analyzing data, and presenting data. In collecting the data of this research the writer uses the library research method which leads in two kinds of data, primary and secondary data. The primary data comes from the first novel by Harper Lee entitled *To Kill a Mockingbird* related to the existential issue. The secondary data are collected from several sources such as articles, book, and journal related to the topic and theory.

### **3. Review of Related Literature**

The writer provides three previous studies related to *To Kill a Mockingbird* and then compares the following studies to this research. The first study is an essay by Dean Shackleford titled "The Female Voice in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: narrative strategies in film and novel". In this review, Shackleford examines gender-based voicing both in the novel and its film translation, along with his assesment of female characters in the novel.

The second review is a thesis by Laura Hakala titled "Scouting for a Tomboy: Gender-Bending: Behaviors in Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*" Hakala provides more details about the adults that shape Scout's conceptions of gender. Furthermore, she places Scout within the context of the tomboy's multifaceted history, which emphasizes her gender-bending behaviors. She also focuses on Scout's struggle between tomboyish attitude and ideals of femininity.

The third review is an essay written by Iris Halpern entitled “Rape, Incest, and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*: on Alabama’s Legal Construction of Gender and Sexuality in the Context of Racial Subordination”. Halpern examines the legal and cultural environment before and during desegregation in the South and dissects the mechanics of white supremacy by analyzing how gender and sexuality were oriented under its discourse.

The explanation above shows how the third previous studies are different from this research which discusses how the main character strives to hold her true self and the sense of existence through the acts of rebellion in the universe with strict authorities. How the main character acknowledging her freedom of choice and takes an action upon it for the sake of her.

#### **4. The Analysis of Rebellion as the Essence of Existentialism in *Matilda***

The writer’s analysis revolves around the issue of restrictions put on the child heroine by the universe with strict authorities, how she rebels to keep her right as a human being to feel the liberty of driving her own life according to her conscience, and shows a deeper meaning behind her struggle. Scout’s act of rebellion then arises the notion of freedom to choose as one of the fundamental nature of human being seen through Existentialism philosophy.

##### **a. Restrictions as The Trigger of Rebellion**

This section of subchapter covers what triggers the child heroine, Scout to rebel. The authority figure in the novel comes from the society and its strict rules which can be divided into two general conceptions; Femininity Code of Proper Little Lady and Class and Race as Limitations to Human Relationship.

The issues of gender stereotype perhaps the one that makes a direct contact to the child heroine’s identity, because occupying the middle space in between the binary gender conceptions as a tomboy, this regional code about proper southern lady totally challenges her ground as a part of community and later affecting her existence as a human being. This limitation emerges in the form of basic southern lady appearance such as the way they dress which is “cool in fragile pastel prints:

most of them were heavily powdered but unrogued; the only lipstick in the room was Tangee Natural. Cutex Natural sparkled on their fingernails, but some of the younger ladies wore Rose” (307), while Scout’s preference daily attire is t-shirt and breeches, with the stains of sands and mud on her fingernails.

The limitation is also portrayed through various verbal attacks from the native Maycomb women who criticize her with mocks and harsh words. The closest figure who clash with Scout’s tomboyish manner is Aunt Alexandra. She emphasizes Maycomb’s convention of femininity by suggesting Scout to play with stoves, tea sets, and wearing the Add-A-Pearl necklace, telling her that she “should be a ray of sunshine” in her father’s lonely life (108). Desiring her niece to submit into domesticity, while then again, being poles apart of this standard, Scout’s favorite leisure activities including playing with boys and rolls in a tire (49).

At the beginning of the novel Scout emphasizes that the Finches holds a respectable position as a Southerner in Maycomb, affirming several significant aspect of Southern lifestyle about the pride in their heritage, their agrarian history on Finch’s Landing, and her ancestor’s ownership of slaves (4-6). Among families with diverse backgrounds, these facts create a class stereotype in the town, with The Finches and other ‘common folks’ as the upper and middle class resident. This notion also highlighted by Jem— Scout’s older brother, when they are discussing whether they should mingle with their friend who belongs in the poverty-stricken family. “There are four kinds of folks in the world. There’s the ordinary kind like us and the neighbors, there’s the kind like the Cunningham out in the woods, the kind like the Ewells down at the dump, and the Negroes” (302). Alexandra clarifies that the lower class will remain in their position in society’s hierarchy even if they are scrubbed until they shine and put them in a proper suit and shoes, they are still the same kind of whom they are born as (299-300). Alexandra stresses the society’s code of class gap and installs this principle to the child heroine to ‘fix’ her manner as a part of Southern upper class whenever she wishes to mingle with her friends in the ‘lower class’ stratum.

Scout often gets bullied verbally because of this fact that her father defending an african-american resident in a criminal case. It does not only come from her neighbor but also from her family. When they attend a family gathering, her cousin Francis makes fun of Scout upon the fact that Atticus defends the Negro, calling him a “nigger-lover” and the fact that by doing so Atticus is disgracing and “ruining” their family’s reputation (110). The child heroine is also mocked by her peer because of the same case, merely because her father treats the African-American inhabitant just as equally as he defends the people in his race.

#### **b. The Act of Rebellion as The Essence of Existentialism**

Maycomb and its whole sets of codes transform into a strict authority figure who opposes completely towards any form of revolting acts upon its barriers. Although frequently receives unpleasant attacks by the members of authority figure in the town, Scout does not step back when her stand point is shaken. Jean Paul Sartre asserts in his book *Existentialism is a Humanism* that “...there is no determinism— man is free, man is freedom.” (2007:29). Through existentialist lens the child heroine’s act towards society’s way of pushing its doctrine is the core of what Sartre defines as freedom of human existence, the act of making choices.

Scout’s statement at the beginning of the novel describes Maycomb as the town where “[m]en’s stiff collars wilted by nine in the morning. Ladies bathed before noon, after their three o’clock naps, and by nightfall were like soft teacakes with frostings of sweat and sweet talcum” (6). However, as a member of the society, plus being a girl who is supposed to be following its standard the child heroine prefers to venture outside with her brother and friend. She wears breeches and at times having a fist fights. With all the limitations put on her, the child heroine’s awareness of freedom begins to surface. She acclaims the freedom by choosing to confront the femininity conceptions with various acts of rebellion. In one of the scene where Alexandra dictates her to start behaving like a girl and wear dress, Scout innocently yet cunningly responds: “I suggested that one could be a ray of sunshine in pants just as well” (108), which then drives her aunt more furious. Another form of rebellious act she commits is when Calpurnia advises her

to begin considering acting like a proper girl, she does not instantly oppose but mentally contemplates and defends herself, as she says: “I could have made several answers to this: Cal’s a girl, it would be many years before I would be interested in boys, I would never be interested in clothes... but I kept quiet” (170). The most important part of her rebellion is the development in understanding the society she lives in before taking an action. She develops the reason of why she refuses to follow the standards in being a girl, to be part of the southern belles, then later to be one of them. In one of the occasions where the role model southern ladies gather, she is reminded by this reason, and is able to affirm herself that she is comfortable in being a tomboy (313). Scout chooses the kind of person she is comfortable to be and what she feels is fit for her. Even some of her acts of rebellion may not be direct and anarchic, but her self-awareness of being a tomboy is one big discovery in her journey. She remains as a tomboy until the end of the story. It is the portrayal of how inherently free is a human being’s choice to follow what is true to oneself in attempt to create meaning in life.

In confronting the class conception, even though she is considered as the upper class, the child heroine would just carelessly about her strata. Scout’s act of rebellion regarding this conception is when she decides to befriend Walter Cunningham, whose family is known as the working class. Scout begins to accept Walter as her peer without being clouded by society’s opinion by inviting him to dinner and suggesting an idea to let him stay the night in their house (299). According to David Cogswell in his book *Existentialism for Beginner*, the red string from all the existentialists’ ideas is that Existentialism focuses the attention and concern on the individual, to achieve an authentic life an individual must direct oneself and resist the pressure of mass society to create standardized human being (2008:16). Alexandra as the authority figure would always find the way to limit the child heroine, however Scout thinks Alexandra’s judgment towards her friend is unfair and the fact that she tries to limit the child heroine’s right to select her own comrades tingle Scout’s sense of freedom. Noticing these limitations, Scout chooses to defend Walter by asking Alexandra a witty yet innocent question: “If they’re good folks, then why can’t I be nice to Walter?” (300). In the

midst of her confusion towards the limitations to have relationship with a peer she comfortable to mingle with, the child heroine's resolve about her incomprehension towards the standard applied that she is forced to follow is by keeping her friendship with Walter. Because her view towards him is broader than Maycomb's code about working class people, Scout sees Walter as human with good quality in him not a lowly neighbor who cannot read or write hence it is forbidden to be friends with.

Scout's form of rebellion towards this communal code regarding African-American residents is shown by the good relationship she has with Calpurnia. In fact, Calpurnia is one of the protagonist female role model for the child heroine to follow. The maid treats Scout like her own daughter and Scout respects and trusts her like how a family should be. As Sartre asserts that "You're free, so choose; in other words, invent. No general code of ethics can tell you what you ought to do..." (2007:33), the child heroine and her brother cross the barrier that has been preserved for generations by agreeing to come to the African-American church with the maid for their Sunday praying. Even though they receive a harsh welcome from the church attendants, Scout's perspective towards the colored community does not change one bit. In fact after that the child heroine suggests to visit Calpurnia's house (181). Atticus's decision on the final trial of Tom Robinson gives a bad impact to his children, especially Scout, as she is often receiving some verbal bullies from the town's residents and her own peer. However, she is not back away but confronting the bullies physically for the authority figures in the same age.

Scout's resolve towards the race and class limitations then fall in one conclusion, "...Naw, Jem, I think there's just one kind of folks. Folks" (304). She embraces her freedom to choose, thus she chooses to trust her own judgment and conscience that everyone must be treated equally, rebelling the communal conceptions, even she has to bear the responsibility of being an outsider in the town she lives in.



## 5. Conclusion

Existentialism believes human being is defined through the choices and actions he takes. Humans are cast into chaotic world and he must direct himself, aware about the freedom he possessed to control his own life. In *Mockingbird*, Scout embraces her freedom as a human being by choosing to present herself as a tomboy which is considered inappropriate and poles apart to the communal codes of how a proper lady should dresses and behaves. Scout has to bear with the alienation as the manifestation of responsibility from her acts of making choices. *Mockingbird's* realistic story depiction offers several realistic conflicts which cause the rebellion Scout commits also involves deep contemplative thoughts. Though her rebellious acts are not too bold, the way she contemplates about what she believes to be true to her becomes the highlight. At the end of the novel, Scout is standing in front of the Radley's house while sweeping her gaze throughout the neighborhood, seeing life from a new perspective. Her strong empathy and the experience of being casted as a tomboy give her a new understanding and a sense of appreciation to human authenticity. Scout still lives alongside with the authority figures who have been constraining her. However, her mind is free from their rules. She lives the way she wishes to be.

After several revolting acts confronting the authority figures, the child heroine's efforts fall into one meaningful journey of maturity. Moreover, if we take a closer look, they portray an existential struggle depicting how human strives to find meaning of his/her existence in the midst of meaningless world full of order. Because to find meaning in existence is to find oneself in the chaos.

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