

**BOOK REVIEW<sup>1</sup>****JUST MERCY BY BRYAN STEVENSON****ABSTRACT**

The novel 'Just mercy' by Bryan Stevenson is the soul of this research and the topic is examining the death penalty. This piece of work deals with the story of the novel and its legal importance. The work started with reading and analysing the book followed by writing about the author, a detailed but brief introduction of author, such as his education, other works of writing, and achievements, then about the novel, what is its genre?, a brief summary of story, legal aspect of the novel and its current importance. In this part it will be shown how death penalties were sentenced to prisoners and how the American criminal justice had done so far, its previous and current actions of death sentence. What reforms were made in from then till now? Further the research methodology gives a brief about the qualitative method of research in this research; the data collection methods are mentioned and from which sources the data have been taken is also mentioned in the research methodology. Moreover, it also briefs about the research aims/objectives of this research. In the literature review section, the reviews done by various other author/reporters and journalist is taken in to account and is compiled. The remarks made by the reviewer are mentioned and summarised in this section of the research paper. For the literature review, book reviews, article and interviews are considered. In the analysis section the key features of the novel are analysed, taking the instances and incidents from the novel in relevance with the key features are written in the analysis. At the end conclusion is giving which talks about the final findings from this research paper.

**KEYWORDS**

Racism, death penalty, American criminal justice, wrongly convicted

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## INTRODUCTION

### **About the author:**

Bryan Stevenson was born on November 14, 1959. He is an American lawyer, founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama. A Harvard law school graduate and professor of law at New York University Law School. He has won several cases of prisoners who were sentenced death row, challenged five times before the Supreme Court decision. Represented poor, colour biased people and minorities in America, Liberated the administration of criminal justice with reform litigation. He has numerous awards which include ACLU National Medal of Liberty, MacArthur fellow, golden plate award and Right livelihood award. His book 'Just Mercy: A story of justice and redemption' won the 2015 Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Nonfiction

### **About the novel:**

The novel highlights the injustice and cruelty of the Americans and its criminal justice system which targets and exploits the black people, African Americans, minorities and the mentally ill. In the novel it is shown who bias and cruel they were to blacks and poor. It also showed how the law enforcers were corrupted and racist, the commitment of protagonist towards his clients and willingness to help them, the professionalism to do what is right and to make something correct out of pervious mistakes. The book narrates the story of Bryan Stevenson a young lawyer graduated from Harvard law school. He founded a law firm to help poor and wrongly condemned. His first case was that of Walter McMillan who was convicted for the murder of a young white woman. He was sentenced to death row at Alabama high court. It was later found that he was innocent and didn't commit that murder. The story then focuses to proving him not guilty and later uncovers the conspiracy.

### **The legal aspect of the novel -Examining the death penalty in the novel:**

The novel highlights the topic itself. The story narrates the inmates of Alabama prison who were sentenced to death row by the criminal justice system. Few of them were not even guilty. Taking the example of the protagonist himself who was convicted for the crime that he didn't even committed and sentenced to death even before trial. As mention in a book, "America had the highest number of incarcerations in the world; one in every fifteen people born in United States in 2001 is expected to go jail or prison". Some of the states had no minimum age for

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prosecuting children. It was found that 154 people were proved innocent who were earlier sentenced to death, and death penalties were also given on racial basis. After analysing story, it was found that if the person is black then he/she does have more chances of getting death row than that of white and if the defendants were blacks and the victim were white even then the blacks were more prone to get sentenced. Even not racial basis the death row was very much common in United States in early 80s. For this very reason reforms were required at United States regarding criminal judicial system. Everyone deserves a second chance.

### **Research methodology:**

The research methodology used for conducting this research work is qualitative methodology. Since the research work is related to book review and there was no use of statistical data for the research that's why qualitative research methodology is used, moreover the for this research paper the work done by other author previously on this topic shall also be taken into account. This research paper aims to analysis the topic of death penalties in the novel, the living conditions of the black people and the prisoners/criminals and to analysis the American criminal justice system. For this research paper secondary sources of data will be used such as book reviews and articles. The secondary sources of data have been collected through various books and its review on the internet with the similar genre of this novel which is about racism and legal prospective. For the analysis of the research paper two major objectives will be analyses which are racism and criminal justice in America.

### **Literature Review:**

#### 1. Book review on 'Just Mercy' By Rob Warden-

In the book review done by Rob Warden on the book 'Just Mercy' he states that "Just Mercy is an easy read — a work of style, substance and clarity. Mixing commentary and reportage, he adroitly juxtaposes triumph and failure, neither of which is in short supply, against an unfolding backdrop of the saga of Walter McMillan, an innocent black Alabaman sentenced to death for the 1986 murder of an 18-year-old white woman." He also mentions in his review that 'Bryan Stevenson is enigmatic, a bachelor who is married to his work'. The reviewer also states that "the author had suffered the indignities of the vestiges of Jim Crow since he was born in an African American family and that after five years of the case "Brown v. Board of Education". At the end the reviewer thanks and admirers Stevenson's work as a great lawyer and as a gifted writer.

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## 2. Book review by Ted Conover-

In the review conducted by Ted Conover it talks about unfair justice system that had been in America and analysis done by DNA states that on weekly basis false convictions were made. The reviewer also gives a brief background of the author early life. Further in the review it is mentions of the book “To Kill a Mockingbird,” by Harper lee shows its relevance in this novel. Moreover, the reviewer also states that Stevenson found a good subject which was McMillan unpleasant experience. However, Stevenson was not the only one to write about miscarriage of justice. The reviewer mentions that “60 Minutes” a television interview and book “Circumstantial Evidence “written by Pete Earley also talks about it. At the end reviewer states that “just mercy would make a person upset and hopeful with its story.”

## 3. Book review by Steve Weinberg-

In Steve Weinberg’s book review, he talks about author’s brief family background and his early life, death of his grandfather who was murdered over a black and white television. The reviewer writes a brief summary of the novel the incident with Henry made him feel and understand redemption and hopefulness which led him devote his life to work for innocent prisoners. The reviewer compares the work of Pete Earley “Circumstantial Evidence: Death, Life, and Justice in a Southern Town” with the work of Bryan Stevenson’s “just mercy” and conclude that he was shocked deeply with Earley’s work that none of the Stevenson’s exoneration could have done. At the end the reviewer states, “Narrative was jumping around in time little bit and Stevenson’s memoir is a powerful examination of the need for judicial reform.”

## 4. Book review by Alan W. Clarke-

In Alan W. Clarke’s review, he talks about how the criminal justice bureaucracy was broken, racist and inefficient, that they wrongly condemn and executes innocent people in the prison. In addition, which he mentions how author Bryan Stevenson exposed the wrongs of criminal injustice system, to begin with he exposed the racist Alabama judge ‘Robert E. Lee Key, Jr’ from the very first conversation they had with each other on the telephone in which judge key told him not to take McMillan’s case. The reviewer also states that Stevenson not only against racism but also experienced it. The reviewer questions the sins of McMillan,

### **Analysis:**

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The novel 'just mercy' is about a black man being wrongly convicted for murder of a lady. For the analysis part of this research paper, it will be focused on the American criminal justice system and living condition of the blacks.

*Analysis on racism:* In the very beginning when Stevenson received a telephone call from Judge Robert E Lee Key who asked him withdraw from the death penalty case of Walter McMillan. Judge, Key also states McMillan as a member of "Dixie Mafia" (biggest drug dealers of South Alabama). Robert E. Lee Key was racist judge in the review done by Alan W. Clarke. He states that "Robert E. Lee Key, Jr.—a man who, unlike his namesake, never stopped fighting the civil war, Key's racism reeked from his first tele-phone conversation with Stevenson".

Furthermore, even after the legally prohibited by anti-miscegenation statutes law enforcers saw it as their duty to punish black men who try to intimate with white women. Even the voting the rights were away from the African Americans. Several restrictive laws were enforced for the racial hierarchy which were called "Racial integrity" these were the laws similar to slavery out which one was criminalising interracial sex and marriage.

*Analysis on the criminal justice system:* In the book itself, it was stated, "In 1988, Alabama has the country's fastest-growing prison population, including almost 100 death-row inmates, to whom the state offers no public defence". Stevenson states that "The prison population has increased from 300,000 people in the early 1970s to 2.3 million people today. There are nearly six million people on probation or on parole."

## CONCLUSION

Author Bryan Stevenson with his novel "just mercy" showed the suffering of the black community in the 1980s and the cruel and racist nature of the justice system of the America. With this research it can be concluded that even after the civil war people are racist and were not ready to accept the black in America it was an era of corruption in the law enforcement. However, the judgement held in favour of McMillan turned the tables and a ray of hope was seen for the black people of American for the justice and redemption they deserved. The work of Bryan Stevenson both as lawyer and writer have had made a remarkable change in the criminal justice system of America.

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