

RACISM IN AMERICAN SOCIETY AND THE METAPHORS OF FREEDOM A STUDY OF MARK TWAIN'S HUCKLEBERRY FINN

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Abstract:

Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn published in 1885 is placed among the most celebrated works of American fiction. The novel directly condemns the institutionalized racism of the pre Civil- War South and tries to highlight on issues like freedom and slavery from different humanitarian angles. It was a dark period of American history that Twain examines and uncovers in minute detail through his principal characters of Huck and Jim and further explores the very essence of the idea of freedom in the American society of his time. This paper tries to highlight on the presentation of the concept of freedom in the contemporary American society of Mark Twain and explores the multiple facets of freedom offered by the so called civilized society of his time. The paper also tries to examine the different angles from which the central idea of freedom has been viewed. It further deals with the question of morality and conscience while exploring the central theme. Mark Twain definitely had a humanitarian look at all the things happening around him in the society and this paper tries to come closer to this aspect of the author's outlook in building the narrative of Huckleberry Finn.

Key Words:

Racism, freedom, Morality, humanitarian, American.

Introduction:

Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn has long been recognized as one of the greatest achievements in American literature and truly regarded a classic of world literature. The background of the story is undoubtedly the evils of the institution of slavery, specific to the contemporary American society of Mark Twain and the novel provides a human approach to that particular aspect deep rooted in the traditions and culture. One central theme frequently explored in modern criticism of the book is the quest for freedom. The story of the novel revolves around this central theme and the characters explores this theme in their own ways. However while exploring the theme of freedom Mark Twain sets his characters in different temporal spaces. Thus the central theme of freedom

animates Jim literally and Huck figuratively. Twain allows his characters to grow and this growth can be seen particularly in Huck As we find him growing in social awareness, beginning with a moment of commitment when Huck shouts 'They're after us,'and makes common cause with Jim. Throughout his journey, Huck develops from a boy into a man and in the process he attained knowledge of the functioning society and understood how values were being formed and stereotyped.

Racism and Slavery

The two evils that constructed the American identity at large and shaped the nation till a century or so from now are the two most inhuman institutions of racism and slavery. Mark Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn* two decades after the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the Civil War, but America and especially the South was still struggling with racism and the aftereffects of slavery. By the early 1880s, Reconstruction, the plan to put the United States back together after the war and integrate freed slaves into society, had hit shaky ground, although it had not yet failed outright. As Twain worked on his novel, race relations, which seemed to be on a positive path in the years following the Civil War, once again became strained. The imposition of Jim Crow laws, designed to limit the power of blacks in the South in a variety of indirect ways, brought the beginning of a new, insidious effort to oppress. The new racism of the South, less institutionalized and monolithic, was also more difficult to combat. Slavery could be outlawed, but when white Southerners enacted racist laws or policies under a professed motive of self-defense against newly freed blacks, far fewer people, Northern or Southern, saw the act as immoral and rushed to combat it. Although Twain wrote the novel after slavery was abolished, he set it several decades earlier, when slavery was still a fact of life. But even by Twain's time, things had not necessarily got much better for blacks in the South. In this light, we might read Twain's depiction of slavery as an allegorical representation of the condition of blacks in the United States even after the abolition of slavery. Just as slavery places the noble and moral Jim under the control of white society, no matter how degraded that white society may be, so too did the insidious racism that arose near the end of Reconstruction oppress black men for illogical and hypocritical reasons. In *Huckleberry Finn* Twain, by exposing the hypocrisy of slavery, demonstrates how racism distorts the oppressors as much as it does those who are oppressed. The result is a world of moral confusion, in which seemingly "good" white people such as Miss Watson and Sally Phelps express no concern about the injustice of slavery or the cruelty of separating Jim from his family.

Humanistic Approach to Freedom:

When the question of freedom comes Mark Twain Presents the theme in a reverse way than what exactly was being experienced in the contemporary American society. He allows Huck to develop naturally and thus the boy started showing respect to Jim and regarded him as a human being and further he learns the values of life from Jim. After a lot of violence in the society faced both by Huck and Jim they fled to Jackson's Island and the island gives him a feeling of peace. He explores the island, and just as he begins to feel lonely he discovers Jim who ran away from his owner Miss Watson as they planned to sell him down to New Orleans which was a place equivalent to hell for the negroes. There after they started sharing the unbiased space of the island and comfort each other. When Huck first finds Jim in the Island, he was happy just because he wanted a companion in the lonely island. But as the two shared the peace of the island Huck comes to regard jim as a human being rather than a faithful dog. Thus he gradually becomes a part of Jim's quest for freedom. When Huck hears that there is a reward fo Jim, the money offered no temptation to him. A part of Huck's development came when he apologized to Jim for fooling him about a dream. Throughout all these incidents Mark Twain's constant effort was always to represent Jim as a man with dignity and Huck, influenced by Jims stately indignation deided to help him reach his freedom at any cost.

Moral Conscience and Conflict

By focusing on Huck's education, *Huckleberry Finn* fits into the tradition of the bildungsroman: a novel depicting an individual's maturation and development. As a poor, uneducated boy, for all intents and purposes an orphan, Huck distrusts the morals and precepts of the society that treats him as an outcast and fails to protect him from abuse. This apprehension about society, and his growing relationship with Jim, lead Huck to question many of the teachings that he has received, especially regarding race and slavery. More than once, we see Huck choose to "go to hell" rather than go along with the rules and follow what he has been taught. Huck bases these decisions on his experiences, his own sense of logic, and what his developing conscience tells him. On the raft, away from civilization, Huck is especially free from society's rules, able to make his own decisions without restriction. Through deep introspection, he comes to his own conclusions, unaffected by the accepted—and often hypocritical—rules and values of Southern culture. By the novel's end, Huck has learned to "read" the world around him, to distinguish good, bad, right, wrong, menace, friend, and so on. His moral development is sharply contrasted to the character of Tom Sawyer, who is influenced by a bizarre mix of adventure novels and Sunday-school teachings, which he combines to justify his outrageous and potentially harmful escapades.

When Huck plans to head west at the end of the novel in order to escape further "sivilizing," he is trying to avoid more than regular baths and mandatory school attendance. Throughout the novel, Twain depicts the society that surrounds Huck as little more than a collection of degraded rules and precepts that defy logic. This faulty logic appears early in the novel, when the new judge in town allows Pap to keep custody of Huck. The judge privileges Pap's "rights" to his son as his natural father over Huck's welfare. At the same time, this decision comments on a system that puts a white man's rights to his "property"—his slaves—over the welfare and freedom of a black man. In implicitly comparing the plight of slaves to the plight of Huck at the hands of Pap, Twain implies that it is impossible for a society that owns slaves to be just, no matter how "civilized" that society

believes and proclaims itself to be. Again and again, Huck encounters individuals who seem good—Sally Phelps, for example—but who Twain takes care to show are prejudiced slave-owners. This shaky sense of justice that Huck repeatedly encounters lies at the heart of society's problems: terrible acts go unpunished, yet frivolous crimes, such as drunkenly shouting insults, lead to executions. Sherburn's speech to the mob that has come to lynch him accurately summarizes the view of society Twain gives in *Huckleberry Finn*: rather than maintain collective welfare, society instead is marked by cowardice, a lack of logic, and profound selfishness.

Moral Consciousness and Guilt:

Huck experiences guilt and shame at various points throughout the novel, and these feelings force him into serious questions about morality. Huck's guilt is largely tied to the religious morality he learned from Widow Douglas. Not long after he and Jim set out on their journey, Huck realizes that by helping Jim escape he has done harm to Jim's owner, Miss Watson. He explains: "Conscience says to me, . . . 'What did that poor old woman do to you, that you could treat her so mean?' . . . I got to feeling so mean and so miserable I most wished I was dead" (Chapter 16). Here Huck recognizes that he has broken the Golden Rule of Christianity. Huck remains conflicted until near the end of the book. The breaking point comes in Chapter 31, when he finds himself unable to pray. Huck realizes that in his heart he doesn't believe Jim should be returned to slavery, and saying so in a prayer would result in him "playing double" and hence lying to God. When he finally resolves to help Jim escape for the last time, Huck banishes the last vestiges of guilt. The theme of empathy is closely tied to the theme of guilt. Huck's feelings of empathy help his moral development by enabling him to imagine what it's like to be in someone else's shoes. The theme of empathy first arises when Huck worries about the thieves he and Jim abandon on the wrecked steamboat. Once he's escaped immediate danger, Huck grows concerned about the men: "I begun to think how dreadful it was, even for murderers, to be in such a fix." Huck's concern drives him to go and find help. Another significant example of empathy in the book comes in Chapter 23, when Huck wakes up to Jim "moaning and mourning to himself." Huck imagines that Jim is feeling "low and homesick" because he's thinking about his wife and children: "I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks for their'n. It don't seem natural, but I reckon it's so." Despite the residual racism in this comment, Huck's capacity for empathy has a strong humanizing power.

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