

Revisiting Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*'s Jim from a Postcolonial Lens

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Abstract

The postcolonial theory conflicts with the essentialism of individuality, identity, and nation. Within its scope, related concepts such as hybridity are advocated and adopted as a systematic approach for resisting the colonialism's and colonization's discourse. Appropriating and adapting a postcolonial textual analysis of Jim's problem of slavery in Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, this paper expounds that even though racism and slavery, offshoots of cultural traditions and social systems, have created Jim's identity as a slave; he dynamically uses the hybrid approach to hit back the racist system in his life. Besides the fact that identity pursuit is a complaint and a scorn against the racial system, it is a confirmation of identity confusion among people in contemporary societies.

Keywords: Identity, hybridity, Mark Twain, resistance, slavery

I. Introduction

Postcolonial theory by and large speaks of the criticism and reflection of the imperialist acts and discourse of American and European countries through the two-part analysis consisting of colonial and postcolonial literatures. Postcolonial theory often encompasses the discussion of several related experiences such as suppression, slavery, resistance, gender, place, difference, color, and race, along with responses to the discourses of imperialist actions and discourses to the European and American countries such as history, anthropology, and philosophy (Al-Ghammaz, 2023).

Cultural identity is always on the rise as one of the most significant issues among postcolonial scholars and critics (Songbo, 2009). The concept of cultural identity contributes to raising several issues and questions associated with questioning the issue of identity such as "Who is he?", "Who are they?", "Who am I?", and "What can I be identified with?" as questions are always posed among the colonized and slaves (Abd-Rabbo, 2019). Postcolonial scholars and critics do not consider cultural identity as absolute, undisputable, rigid, and unchallengeable. Thus, Said (1999) believes that human identity can be artificially constructed, for it is not naturally established and formed.

Relatedly, Bhabha (1996) believes that no more choices left nowadays for past slaves and colonized people in multicultural societies except for living in a between-culture world constructing their own identity in a conflicting and contradictory tradition. They live in a hurtful and turbulent process of cultural and social transformation reflected in the between-culture world merely represented by the relative pronoun; this and that in one fell swoop. According to Bhabha (1996), identities' hybridity is equally a choice and a strategy to embrace colonial and postcolonial focuses to fight back the colonial discourse, expound their rights and privileges, and voice themselves as underprivileged groups. In Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the experience of Jim, a loyal slave to Huck, Tom, and his own family, deeply embodies the choice and strategy of the concept of identities' hybridity.

The structure of this paper, however, is constructed on four sections. Section one consists of the Introduction. Section two presents the Literature Review demonstrating other scholars' work on Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* being differently read and reviewed. The third section offers the Textual Analysis needed to address the issue of identity in the selected work. In the fourth section, the Conclusion is provided.

2. Literature Review

Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been diversely interpreted by readers, researchers, and scholars belonging to manifold schools of thought and theories, since *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is inundated with political, dramatic, social, and historical issues. From a critical study of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Kiskis (2012) traces the life of Huckleberry Finn as a child who strives for a life full of

peace and comfort, covering his life on the shore of the Mississippi River during the early 1830s and preferring to have an adventurous life with his lone friend Tom Sawyer. Through the analysis of Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, it is demonstrated that the novel is interwoven with the desires for freedom of several characters such as Huck and Jim.

Viewing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Twain within a legal analysis, the study by Rush (2001) reveals that the American literature canon is no longer literary works and books due to their lack of normative approval. This study demonstrates that *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is among the books and literary works that shall be removed from the American literature canon and be added to the American literature anti-canon as they are unreliable within the context of the multicultural learning process. The study concludes that Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*'s value is reflected in its anti-canonical message, i.e. the novel's normative value message should not be recognized by the White society, for it is far more racist than the whites do understand.

From another angle, Menaka & Sankar (2018) clarify that though Twain is a comic writer satirically addressing subjects, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is an open discussion on racism and slavery reflected in the places and characters. Moreover, in this study, it is shown that the affairs of the contemporary world have disguised racism referring to it as aversive and symbolic racism. The study also concludes that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is chiefly an American satire that has no bitter and vindictive remarks and is unloaded with invective signs.

A related study conducted by Lester (1984) investigates the scope of the adventures and morality concepts in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Twain. The study asserts that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a miserable representation of the white male psyche whose mind and heart are thick with contempt and hatred for the helpless and voiceless black slaves. The study also concludes that the novel is structured on deceitfulness, cunning, and misguidance, perniciously impacting women, community, and civilization.

Bollinger (2002), from a morality perspective, investigates the context of morality connections in Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The study shows that the radical autonomy moments have always defined the traditions of American literature such as the pursuit of independence represented by Huck's landlessness and his search for new territories. Within the framework of the findings, it is also proved that Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is over and over again taught as the text that incarnates this tradition through Huck's character; a teenager who is brave enough to go against the current of the moral conventions of the American society, risking the Hell itself instead of conform to being a civilized boy.

On a parallel line, Nabi (2015) addresses the use of literary devices and genres such as irony and satire in the *Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn* by Twain to analyze the concept of bitterness inundated with gloomy alarms and acceptance, provoking Twain to embrace the humorist's critical weapons used among the traditions of humor in the negro legends and the Indians. The study also validates that humor, a literary device, qualifies Twain to view his life experience with a high level of affection while satirizing the social, spiritual, and economic disorders. The study, on the other hand, asserts that the contemporary American literature inundating Twain's novels and books with a comic effect depicts Twain's boundless love for America and the American people (Al-Ghalith et al., 2023)

The said literature review of the various analyses and readings of Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* evinces that they lend themselves to numerous interpretations to acknowledge that the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* can be politically, dramatically, socially, ethically, and historically interpreted. However, what is new and refreshing about the current study is that Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is read from a postcolonial lens as it is a novel put together in a postcolonial context and blend represented in the slave Jim's pursuit of achieving his identity. With that being acknowledged, the textual analysis of Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* demonstrates that the postcolonial framework constructed on an identity crisis is interwoven throughout the whole novel.

3. Textual Analysis

The mid-19th century period known as the Gilded Age was the birth of the rapid American capitalism boom. With the economic crisis breaking out in the late 1800s, recurring social and economic trends have been on the rise. Of these trends is the shift of the contradictions among the American ruling families through deliberately blaming the ethnic minorities for the increased unemployment level of labor caused by the economic disaster, the decrease in the living standards of the citizens, prevailing racial prejudice, ethnic oppression, alongside incidents of persecuting and killing slaves (Zhang, 2002).

The southern United States of America has always embraced slavery regarded as the origin of American social racism whose former slaves are the focus of the racial discrimination in their lands. The American black ethnicity, culture, and identity are deformed, destroyed, and plagued by slavery ghosts in day-to-day life in the South. Since the turn of the 19th century, the living environment of the people in the southern United States has been separated by the beliefs and practices of race that forbid the smallest amount of ambiguity in white and black issues. This is reflected in the identity crisis experienced by several ethnic minorities living in American society (Qutami, 2023). Before the Civil War outbreak, the southern society, particularly the upper families imposing the slavery system, did not regard the slaves as human beings, but only as emotionless living tools that could be driven (Al-Ghammaz, 2023).

In Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Jim's living area is the South and the American Midwest in the late 19th century. The black slave Jim, similar to other slaves, receives neither enlightenment nor civilization education from the white society and families (Hamidish & Arewat, 2021). Before running away with Huck, a superstitious boy, Jim is eager to be a normal servant without a social position. At that point, Jim has never had a surname, as his name is only used for a mockery among the white people on one hand. On the other hand, within the American cultural context, Jim's name represents a black nickname at that time. The thoughts and beliefs relating to the feudal

superstition in Jim's character and mind are deeply rooted in the first section of Chapter Two, as Jim says

"Tom said he slipped Jim's hat off of his head and hung it on a limb right over him, and Jim stirred a little, but he didn't wake. Afterward, Jim said the witches bewitched him and put him in a trance, and rode him all over the State, and then set him under the trees again, and hung his hat on a limb to show who done it" (p.7) (Twain Chapter 2).

As gleaned from the excerpt, Jim tells other slaves that the five cents found in the kitchen are the amulets given to him by the devil, indicating that the demon witches have given him a ride around the world.

In Chapter Four, new documentation is at hand that Jim and Huck are still superstitious and are their society's prevailing products, circumstances, and beliefs. Using the hairball to find out Pap's plans, Jim begins predicting the future and upcoming days of Huck more than Pap's, demonstrating that the father and the son have various similarities. As said by Jim, both Huck and his father Pap have angels over them, and their future is ambiguous, as Jim says

"Dey's two angels hoverin' roun' 'bout him. One uv 'em is white en shiny, en t'other one is black. De white one gits him to go right a little while, den de black one sail in en bust it all up. A body can't tell yit which one gwyne to fetch him at de las" (Ibid., p.7) (Twain Chapter 4).

On a parallel line, Jim cautions Huck to avoid the water as his fate is to be hanged. The Mississippi River, thus, is mentioned as a representation of the darkness in Huck's uncertain future. As Huck's fate is already fated, Huck shall suffer, as Jim says

"Sometimes you gwyne to git hurt, en sometimes you gwyne to git sick; but every time you's gwyne to git well agin. Dey's two gals flyin' 'bout you in yo' life. One uv 'em's light en t'other one is dark. One is rich en t'other is po'. You's gwyne to marry de po' one fust en de rich one by en by. You wants to keep 'way fum de water as much as you kin, en don't run no resk, 'kase it's down in de bills dat you's gwyne to git hung. When I lit my candle and went up to my room that night there sat pap—his own self (Twain Chapter 4)"

The incorporation of predestination mirrors the Calvinist background of Twain. More importantly, however, the two-angel battle foreshadows the future battle between Huck and his conscience in terms of Jim's pursuit of identity and freedom.

On the other hand, Chapter Eight marks the official commencement of Jim's and Huck's journey, as Jim's words are also on the up. However, same as the previous chapters, Jim's words are still in the superstition context. In their first meeting, Jim tells Huck about his escape journey, hardships, and difficulties experienced on the island. Jim has also noticed Huck about certain signs such as telling Huck that his chest and hairy arm signal that Huck can be wealthy at some point. Over the next few days, Jim informed Huck that seeing the bird flying away, Jim foresees heavy rains are ahead of them, and playing with the snakeskin can lead to bad events. Superstitions made by Jim, however, are similar to what he has counted, for they all come true one after the other, and Jim says

"Now you think it's bad luck; but what did you say when I fetched in the snake-skin that I found on the top of the ridge day before yesterday? You said it was the worst bad luck in the world to touch a snake-skin with my hands. Well, here's your bad luck! We've raked in all this truck and eight dollars besides. I wish we could have some bad luck like this every day, Jim (Twain Chapter 8)"

Eyeing the full picture, Jim's mind is crammed with superstitions, irrespective of the problems and hardships experienced by him and Huck, and he justifies himself from the superstition's perspective. At the same level and context, the superstition's realization is no longer a ridiculous coincidence, as it is the life experiences piled up by Jim as a black and after continual hard work.

In the same context, being in the lower society layer, the black Jim has been completely forbidden to speak thus depriving him of the right to voice himself or his personal and social stand. Jim's personal and social lower stand is evidenced in Huck's and Jim's speech in Chapter 14, as follows:

"But hang it, Jim, you've clean missed the point—blame it, you've missed it a thousand mile." "Who? Me? Go 'long. Doan' talk to me 'bout yo' pints. I reck'n I knows sense when I sees it; en dey ain' no sense in sich doin's as dat. De 'spute warn't 'bout a half a chile, de 'spute was 'bout a whole chile; en de man dat think he kin settle a 'spute 'bout a whole chile wid a half a chile doan' know enough to come in out'n de rain. Doan' talk to me 'bout Sollermun, Huck, I knows him by de back." "But I tell you you don't get the point." "Blame de point! I reck'n I knows what I knows. En mine you, de real pint is down funder—it's down deeper. It lays in de way Sollermun was raised. You take a man dat's got on'y one or two chillen; is dat man gwyne to be waseful o' chillen? No, he ain't; he can't 'ford it. He know how to value 'em. But you take a man dat's got 'bout five million chillen runnin' roun' de house, en it's diffunt. He as soon chop a chile in two as a cat. Dey's plenty mo'. A chile er two, mo' er less, warn't no consekens to Sollermun, dad fatch him!" I never see such a nigger. If he got a notion in his head once, there warn't no getting it out again. He was the most down on Solomon of any nigger I ever see. So I went to talking about other kings, and let Solomon slide (Twain Chapter 14)"

As they discuss King Solomon's smartness or not, both say that they are familiar with him and his lifestyle. Jim believes that King Solomon is no longer smart; as he does now know that splitting the child into two halves cannot put an end to the question of the identity of the child. With Huck's incapability of finding a reason to refute Jim's ideas and words, Huck says that Jim is unreasonable and talking to him is in vain like teaching a black man something, which is unattainable. Huck's feelings of superiority to Jim are evident in his conversation with Jim. In other words, Huck can accept that white people are educated and have a civilized face. Huck also accepts that he is incapable of understanding Jim's reasoning and thoughts, even though he is aware of Jim's practical common sense. Huck's act of ignorance of Jim and his right to speak of personal and social issues is a key confirmation of Huck's insistence on the prevailing standards of his white environment that do not consent to the right of speech and through to fall into black hands.

Even though Huck is completely taken by the thought of the white people's superiority to black people, along with its effect on his opinions of Jim, Jim has never held Huck blamable. Alternatively, Jim treats Huck as a close friend and keeps an eye on him while drifting on the big river. Another example of Jim's loyalty to the whites is the accident of Tom being shot and wounded, where Jim prioritizes Tom's safety and ignores his safety, staying in an area full of dangers to help doctors save him. At the personal level, despite the fact that Jim is humble, honest, kind, audacious, and known for spiritual world traits and the exceptional value of self-sacrifice, the white people do not consider these outstanding values and qualities when judging his character; they judge Jim from the skin color perspective, believing he belongs to a lower status, and thus she should be an obedient servant to the white people. This is easily gleaned from Huck's words on Jim, saying "I see it warn't no use wasting words – you can't learn a n***** to argue. So I quit" (Twain Chapter 14). This demonstrates that Huck echoes his white society that respects neither the blacks nor Jim, viewing him as a stupid black man.

Within the slavery system framework, the white people merely consider the black people as properties. Precisely, not only the black people lack the social stand and status of white people, but they are not counted as normal persons. Evidently, the whites' hearts and minds are inundated with colonialism's feudal thought and consciousness. The identity of blacks affects his behaviors, thoughts, and the world in his eyes. At one point, though Jim is sympathetic and simple, he is to a certain degree overly resigned and passive, valuing his value as a human in dollars. "Of the well-known facts about the southern United States is that the prevalent racism prejudices have established a white-oriented, white-dominated, dollar-oriented illusory, as well as fake ideologies in the hearts and minds of enslaved blacks" (Al-Ghammaz, 2023). Accordingly, these wrong and right judgments constructed on racial differences inevitably distort the hearts of those oppressed slaves such as Jim and also the normal development of humanity.

Despite's Jim deep beliefs in submissiveness, obedience, and superstition, a few situations prove Jim's bravery and intentions for a different and brighter future away from being an everlasting slave. With the passing of days, however, once Jim hears the news that Miss. Watson wants to sell him for eight hundred dollars, he heroically escapes to go to a free state so that he can earn enough money to save his wife and children left behind. This is Jim's first step in pursuit of self-identity because Jim wants to put a happy end to his character as a slave, live blissfully with his family, and is eager to be treated like other white people. Aspiration and pursuit of black people in general and Jim in particular for an independent identity, freedom, and the life of real humans are reflected in the awakening of Jim's consciousness to live as an equal person in white society (Yuan & Lie, 2009). This is seen in Huck's words:

"This second night we run between seven and eight hours, with a current that was making over four mile an hour. we caught fish and talked, and we took a swim now and then to keep off sleepiness. it was kind of solemn, drifting down the big, still river, laying on our backs looking up at the stars, and we didn't ever feel like talking loud, and it warn't often that we laughed – only a little kind of a low chuckle" (twain chapter 12).

Jim no longer wants to be framed as the "other" or a "commodity" who is an oppressed and marginalized person on the edge of society, and thus he flees with Huck to find his identity. This is seen in the boy Huck's words commenting on the two hundred dollar reward assigned for capturing the runaway Jim "Well, I reckon! There's two hunderd dollars reward on him. It's like picking up money out'n the road" (Twain Chapter 31).

In Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the personal and social dilemma experienced by Jim is reflected in having black blood. Jim, however, is still capable of initiating to grab his identity, resisting white supremacy and the world, freeing himself, and eventually making a fresh start. In the last chapters, particularly after escaping, Jim's strife for identity is truly completed. "Jim is no longer the foil of Tom's stupid adventure game for being an independent person with his way of behaving consistent with the behavior established when venturing with Huck on the river in the first chapters" (Kiskis, 2012, p. 2). Despite Jim's acts to sacrifice his freedom and help the wounded Tom, Jim with his strong personality and identity is still capable of ignoring Tom's opposition. At the Jim-Huck relationship level, Jim is the only one who can dominate Tom. Thus far, Jim completely reclaims the right of speech from the superior whites, i.e. Tom, Uncle Silas, Aunt Sally, and doctor, and also the right of disclosure from the inferior whites, i.e. Huck.

In the same direction, *Huckleberry Finn's* understanding of Jim's character and efforts to gain his identity is a life-discovery journey constructed on learning and realization (Anfeng, 2004). Huck has easily accepted the traditional belief that blacks are born inferior to whites, and therefore, the destiny of blacks is in the power of their supreme white masters. Like other white kids, he is taught that slavery is a right and good act, and helping a runaway slave to escape leads to "go to hell". This is evident in Huck's words, saying

"So I was full of trouble, full as I could be; and didn't know what to do. At last I had an idea; and I says, I'll go and write the letter—and then see if I can pray. Why, it was astonishing, the way I felt as light as a feather right straight off, and my troubles all gone. So I got a piece of paper and a pencil, all glad and excited, and set down and wrote: Miss Watson, your runaway nigger Jim is down here two mile below Pikesville, and Mr. Phelps has got him and he will give him up for the reward if you send. Huck Finn.

I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking—thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell" (Twain Chapter 31).

On a parallel line, Huck's mind and heart are thick with endless contradictions concerning Jim's character. Huck has honest feelings and respect for Jim and his heroic deeds on one hand. On the other hand, Huck shall not support Jim, as Huck is the secular punishment of his white society. Towards the end, Huck leaves behind the white discrimination and prejudice and turns into a mature person with a sound

mind, demonstrating that Jim has a sentimental and virtuous character, thinks unconventionally, and deals with all white and black people on an equal footing. Once again, this is truly evident in Huck's following words:

"I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking—thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me all the time: in the day and the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, 'stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like times; and would always call me honey, and pet me and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had small-pox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he's got now; and then I happened to look around and see that paper. It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was atrembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: "All right, then, I'll go to hell"—and tore it up. It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head, and said I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and the other warn't. And for a starter I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again; and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that, too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog" (Twain Chapter 31).

4. Conclusion

In a nutshell, Samuel Langhorne Clemens, whose pen name is Mark Twain, constructs Jim's character to take on the entire heavy burden of racial discrimination in the long run before setting him free. Appropriating a comic literary blend, Twain sounds the alarm and expresses his rebellious attitude towards irrational, illogical, and baseless phenomena, namely: racism on one hand. On the other hand, Twain gives comfort sympathy, and support to Jim and other victimized black slaves. Twain's characters are often plagued with identity and independence problems as the lion's share of the characters live in tremendously life-threatening environments. In other words, they are exposed to the dangers of losing their external physical form, along with their basic self-consciousness. Jim, on the contrary, goes against the current and escapes, establishes his style of achieving missions, and ultimately disregards Tom's opposition, which all represent his brave efforts to pursue his identity.

To tell the truth, the process of identity pursuit is merely a revelation of the cultural and ethnic racism system. What is more, the said process also overlaps with the tragedy of the contemporary people living behind bars. Twain also neither has a way of tracing the origins of the darkness and extinction of humanity in Western society nor can he point to a way out for the plight of present-day downtrodden people. Yet, with the adoption of his insightful ideological connotations and exceptional artistic skills, Twain furnishes the readers with a unique opportunity to delve into the Western modern culture and a cherished key to recognizing human nature. The family and social subject matters raised by Twain's works in general and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are undeniably inseparable from the process of developing modern Western societies, as various ethnicities are still afflicted with issues such as identity and cultural racism, particularly amid globalization waves sweeping the whole world.

Mark Twain is well-known as one of the elitist American writers thanks to his advanced vision and his profound thoughts. Though the first Twainian path to literature revolves around writing famous short stories full of humor, Twain's benevolent heart, powerful eyes, and audacity to establish social justice are extremely exceptional. It is precisely due to this that readers view the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a combination of the eulogies of the humans' universal values. Appropriating such an ideological rule, Twain surely strives for Jim and other victimized and downtrodden people and fights for justice and equality, demonstrating that Mark Twain's literary works are still on the rise among researchers in the current postcolonial contexts.

At present, Twain's books, short stories, and novels are read from the theoretical perspective relating to cultural identity. It is also clear that current researchers are passionate about investigating the problem of cultural identity and other social and political issues profoundly raised in Twain's literary masterpieces. Along with the issue of identity, the other related concepts advocated by the postcolonial theory are ethnic differences, cultural hegemony, and cultural diversity.

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Authors contributions

Dr. Saif Al-Deen Al-Ghammaz was responsible for doing the textual analysis of the American novel selected to demonstrate that Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* can be read from a Postcolonial Lens. Other co-authors were responsible for doing the proofreading and editing work and final revision. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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