
Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884): A Journey Through Institutional Racial Bias, Socio- economic Injustice, and Hope.

AZIZ Rabéa*

Mouloud MAMMERI University of Tizi-Ouzou,
rabea.aziz@ummto.dz

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Abstract:

This paper examines institutional racism in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), a novel by American author Mark Twain, set in the Southern United State during the Antebellum Period. In this work of fiction, the author portrays the socio-economic life in this region of USA, characterized by a system of slavery imposed on the Black population and the resulting systemic racial prejudice against enslaved individuals. In exploring this issue, Twain distinguishes between two racial groups: white individuals, often portrayed as the dominant and "civilized" class, and Black individuals, depicted—within the context of the novel—as subordinate and lacking in education or refinement. Twain himself was not entirely free from the white supremacist views prevalent in his community, which are particularly evident in his depiction of the character Jim. It is later argued that Twain's characterization of the runaway slave using terms such as 'a nigger,' 'ignorant,'

* Corresponding author.

and 'superstitious' reflects his upbringing in Southern society, where such language was commonly used and socially accepted when referring to Black individuals. In this region, racial discrimination is an “institutionalized credential” that became “systematic”. This reality is reflected through what can be described as “societal racism.” *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* implicitly critiques the socioeconomic structures that shaped Southern society in the Antebellum Period and puts forward a hope to free the blacks from the chains of bondage and racism.

Key words: Mark Twain; The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn; the blacks; The South; Antebellum Period; Institutional Racism; Hope.

1- Introduction :

In his renowned novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, American author Mark Twain offers a thorough depiction of daily life in Hannibal, Missouri, during the nineteenth century. What is noticeable is that all the aspects of life in this Southern district are built upon the system of slavery that defined the relationship between two races, the blacks, and the whites. Emphasis is put on the fact that slavery in this region is not only an economic exploitation imposed on the black race, but rather a matter of discrimination and possession legalized by authorities and assumed by the people. In the agricultural South, slaves are all blacks, the latter are all slaves, and they are the material goods of their masters, the whites. They are put under the latter's harsh laws and cannot get free of them unless they escape the whole community. As such, slavery in this part of USA is linked to race, namely the black one.

Since slavery is the cornerstone of civilization in this part of USA, Twain finds it impractical to overlook the issue of racism while dealing with the socioeconomic aspect of life in the South. All the dealings of his characters are guided by racist attitudes to the point that the practice of racism became natural and systematic. White people in this area are convinced that they are superior to the blacks. The latter, chained by the system of slavery, had no option than accepting their inferiority. Thus, racism, as it is presented in Twain's novel, is based on colour, and is channelled by the system of slavery. The whites are by all accounts the civilized and superior race, and the blacks are arguably the ignorant and inferior one.

Twain, himself, as a member of the Southern society, is unconsciously persuaded that the two races are naturally different. In fact, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been harshly criticized for its repeated references to the Black character Jim using terms such as 'nigger,' 'ignorant,' 'superstitious,' and 'property.' Critics argue that this language reflects Twain's upbringing in Southern society, where such terms were commonly used and socially accepted in reference to Black individuals within the institution of slavery. This research paper aims to show how racism in Twain's region is institutionalized and became systematic due to the Southern civilization which is built upon the system of slavery. The latter, in fact, consolidated the idea that a black can never be equal with a white, and attributed to the Afro-Americans all kinds of evil to keep the system functioning and preserve the white men's social and economic prestige.

Benjamin Markowitz, in “*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: How to Write about Race in the US*”, argues that:

“The central conceit of the book is that Huck feels guilty about not turning Jim in —basically, because by helping Jim he’s participating in a robbery [...], so that his refusal to shop Jim becomes just another part of Huck’s general depravity, his refusal to become ‘civilized’” (Markowitz, 2016).

Markowitz maintains that the focus of the novel is a white man fighting his conscience which is torn between rendering justice to a man who provided him with love and protection on the one hand and betraying his socioeconomic codes on the other hand. It reflects on Huck’s inner conflicts, as a white man who helped a slave to run away, not on a black man who fights for freedom. So, the abolition of slavery is not the task of Twain who, like any Southerner, does not take the slave’s freedom as an important cause (Ibid.). This indicates that the Southern community of the Antebellum Period in which the novel is set had not yet been able to discern the cruelty of slavery, which was part of its civilization. It also justifies Twain’s racist terminology while describing the blacks in his fiction, which was ordinary in this region.

Jakob Knab, in “Racism in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*” (2011), considers that Twain’s racist views when he was young are due to his growing up with a different treatment of whites and blacks. His statements about the blacks, which would be considered racially prejudiced nowadays, were common for whites at that time. Later, some important factors influenced his view about Afro-Americans. In fact, his marriage in 1870 with Olivia Longdon, whose family was reformist and abolitionist helped him to understand the cruelty of slavery and change his mind about racial issues. Knab elucidates that in *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain adopted Realism in his writing. So, he “intended to

write a novel in which he could portray the society in which he had grown up.” (Knab, 2011). As such, the racist lingo he used is reported from the Southern environment of the pre-civil war era.

2- Research problem and Hypothesis:

Based on the above short review of the novel, Twain's racist attitudes towards the blacks in his masterpiece *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is not denied. Nevertheless, a good number of reviewers justify this fact by his bringing out in the Antebellum Southern community in which slavery and racism were legitimate and institutional facts. This paper aims to analyse the characters and language of the novel in order to highlight the attitudes and feelings of the white Southern inhabitants towards the black race. In fact, the author, as a member of this community in which racial inequality is “structural”, does not miss a word that indicates the whites' feelings of superiority, relegating the blacks into a position of intellectual and social inferiority. A wide line is drawn between the two races, leading to many dichotomies that attribute positivity to the whites and negativity to the blacks. Opposite words, such as white/black, master/slave, civilized/ uncivilized, etc., are all indicative of the belief in the superiority of the whites in this region. Twain uses some terms, like nigger, superstitious, ignorant, property, etc. to refer to the blacks, a thing that shows his influence by the Southern culture. The racist attitudes that shaped the Southerners' minds for centuries became systematic, and neither blacks nor whites could free themselves from them. In fact, this racial prejudice is born from the Southern racial legacy, and it was easier for a black to free himself from slavery than from racism. Actually, this is embodied by the character of Jim in Twain's novel.

3- Theoretical Grounds:

Twain's filthy language about the blacks falls within "institutional racism", also known as "systematic racism". "Institutional racism" generally engenders "societal racism", which is the establishment of certain institutional, historical, cultural, and social practices in a society that favor one or more social or ethnic groups, giving them an advantage in achieving success, while disadvantaging others (Lawrence and Keleher, 2004: 24). Over time, inequality between the groups develop. Karl E. James refers to "societal racism" as "structural racism" because, according to him, Society is organized in a manner that prevents a significant number of individuals from minority groups from participating in key social institutions. (James, 1996: 27). So, "societal racism" can also be considered as "systematic racism" (Yancey-Bragg, 2020).

According to George M. Fredrickson, "societal racism" is deeply rooted in American culture. It emerged before the eighteenth century with the purpose of maintaining the white-dominated society (Ray, 2009: 07), and it doesn't need an ideology to maintain it as long as it is assumed to be normal or unquestioned. (Fredrickson, 1988: 202). In the pre-civil war years, the period in which *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is set, "structural racism" was embedded in the US order, especially in the South where Twain was brought out. This was manifested in putting the whites in a position of advantage, holding positions of power, and mistreating the blacks. The whites' daily language is also expressive of their feelings towards the Afro-Americans.

4 — Historical Burdens: Tracing the Roots of Institutional Racism through the Shadow of Slavery in *Huckleberry Finn*

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the narrative centers on the evolving bond of friendship between Huck, a white boy, and Jim, an enslaved Black man who has escaped. Throughout the novel, various events and

situations both challenge and strengthen their connection, highlighting the complexities of their journey and the social context in which it unfolds. Through this friendship, Twain reveals the Southern perspective on the Black community, which is intrinsically tied to the institution of slavery. By means of Huck's observations about Jim and his community, the author emphasizes the specificity of racial discrimination in the Missouri region, giving this subject social, economic, political, and primarily moral dimensions. His purpose is to call attention to the fact that in the Southern context of the novel, societal norms, legal systems, and religious beliefs collectively oppose any form of amicable relationship between Black and white individuals. This deeply ingrained racial divide presents numerous obstacles during Huck and Jim's journey. Huck often struggles to uphold his bond with Jim, as the prevailing mindset of his community equates Black identity with enslavement, making their friendship both socially and morally contentious in his world.

The friendship between Huck and Jim begins by chance when they realize that both of them are escaping the oppressive realities imposed by the rigid moral and social codes of the Southern society. Their first meeting along the banks of the Ohio River is marked by mutual fear and uncertainty, as each is unsure of the other's intentions in a world where trust is rare and racial boundaries are strictly enforced. When they first encounter each other on the shores of the Ohio River, both are initially afraid. Influenced by the racial prejudices of his community, Huck views Jim as a savage and a potential threat, fearing he might harm or even kill him. Conversely, Jim, a runaway slave, is fearful that Huck will betray him to authorities or even harm him. Their initial reactions reflect the tense and mistrustful relationship between whites and blacks in the American South. However, they soon discover they share a common goal—to escape the oppressive society they are trapped in—and begin

to plan their future together. They decide to journey down the Mississippi River on a makeshift raft, aiming to reach Cairo. From there, they plan to board a steamboat that will take them upriver to the Northern free states, where both hope to find freedom.

As Huck and Jim embark on their journey, their friendship is tested by numerous challenges. While both are fleeing the same society in search of freedom, they are escaping different forms of oppression. Consequently, they face similar dangers and difficulties, but their responses differ due to the distinct types of freedom they each seek. Huck is running away from the strict, aristocratic values imposed by Miss Watson, seeking a more natural, untamed life away from societal refinement. In contrast, Jim is escaping the bonds of slavery, hoping to attain the freedom and social status that Huck is escaping from.

Huck finds himself trapped in a profound moral conflict, shaped by the values instilled in him through his upbringing in the South. Although he has been taught to view slavery as acceptable, his personal experiences with Jim awaken a different sense of right and wrong. Deep down, Huck feels that helping Jim escape is the just thing to do. He recognizes Jim's humanity and appreciates the care and protection Jim has offered him. These heartfelt emotions clash with the rigid Southern beliefs embedded in his conscience, which constantly accuse him of wrongdoing for assisting a runaway slave. This internal struggle reflects the broader societal contradictions of the South, where freeing an enslaved man is seen as betrayal, and liberty is reserved for white individuals. Through Huck's moral uncertainty, Twain presents a powerful critique of a society in which justice is distorted by deep-rooted racial and ethical hypocrisy.

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the author draws readers into a portrayal of America marked by its racial divisions and the tensions between

conscience and conformity. These practices are legitimized through an intricate blend of political authority, economic interests, social customs, and religious doctrine. Together, these forces strip Black individuals of their humanity, reducing them to mere property under the law. These rigid structures are deeply woven into the fabric of Southern civilization, leaving little room for resistance or moral dissent, whether from white or Black members of society. It is clear from the novel that slavery and racism are linked to each other. They are institutional and systematic since they are not only upheld by legal institutions but also by the prevailing norms and values of society.

Huck ultimately chooses to follow his conscience, which tells him not to betray Jim. When the time comes for them to leave Jackson's Island, Huck is more concerned with Jim's safety than his own, understanding that Jim faces far more severe consequences if caught. Their decision to move forward with the escape plan takes shape when Huck, curious about how their disappearance is being perceived, ventures to the Illinois shore and he learns that people along the river are actively searching for the person responsible for his supposed murder. He also hears that suspicion has fallen on both his father and an escaped slave. This reaction reveals the racial bias of the time: when a crime occurs, society is more inclined to blame a Black person than a white one, regardless of the evidence, because blacks are attributed all kinds of evil in this racist society.

However, the innocent boy realizes after befriendng the black man that all what is taught to him about this category of people is fake and that the run-away slave is much more humane and refined than most white men who pretend to be religious and cultured. Driven by a sense of duty to protect Jim, Huck proposes that they abandon the raft, board a steamboat, and journey up the Ohio River toward the free states, where Jim might finally find safety and freedom.

From that jiffy on, Huck and Jim are united by a common goal: to escape the confines of the Southern society and reach the open states of the North—where Jim hopes to gain self-determination, and Huck seeks deliverance from the moral and social precincts imposed on him as a white youngster. Involuntarily, the teachings ingrained in white society are still resonating in the mind of Huck from time to time. When they encounter their first serious peril—getting separated in the thick fog near Cairo—Jim comes to realize that Huck tricked him as soon as he returned to the raft, and Huck feels deeply mortified of his behavior. In a striking reversal of societal norms, a white boy humbles himself to apologize to a Black man. Jim, hurt by Huck's cheating, takes numerous minutes before accepting the apology—a moment that underscores the emotional depth of their relationship. Once reconciled, they agree to continue their journey, unaware that they have drifted past Cairo and are unknowingly heading deeper into the Southern territory.

During their time in company, Jim confides in Huck that his greatest hope is to earn a sufficient amount of money in the industrialized North to provide a better life for his family. This revelation causes Huck to experience a moral crisis. He begins to feel guilty for helping a man he has been taught to see as someone else's property—namely Miss Watson's. According to the moral and legal codes upheld by the State and the church, what Huck has done is not just wrong but equivalent to larceny. Convinced by these deeply internalized beliefs, Huck resolves to find a way to return Jim to Miss Watson, believing it is his duty to restore what legally belongs to her (Twain, 1884: 79). Jim, in his side, starts to express to Huck feelings of prize, reverence and affection for his help, identifying him as his best and sole friend. As a result, the white boy, overcome with remorse for Jim, once again steps in to protect him—this time when confronted by two slave hunters. Here also feelings of dilemma are expressed by

the white youngster, whose mind is fashioned by the legacy of slavery and institutional racism of his community.

For a second time, Huck is presented with the opportunity to embrace the comfort and privilege of aristocratic life, when he takes refuge with the Grangerfords, a wealthy Southern family of high social standing, after their raft's destruction by a steamboat. Yet, he chooses freedom instead. Reflecting on this lifestyle in Chapter Nineteen, he remarks that they were always without clothes, day and night, as long as the mosquitoes allowed them. The new clothes that Buck's family made for him were too fine to be comfortable, and really, he didn't care much for clothes anyway (Twain, 1884: 121). His words suggest that he feels out of place within this social class. Huck values the sincerity and companionship of someone like Jim over the hypocrisy and moral decay he perceives in the upper class that attempts to confine him. His growing disillusionment with Southern society and his evolving perception of Jim reflect, for many readers, Twain's hopeful vision for a future in which enslaved individuals might one day be free. As a boy guided by instinct rather than social conditioning, Huck ultimately comes to see Jim as more humane and civilized than the white slaveholders who reduce him to superstition and servitude.

From this turning point, Huck makes a definitive choice to help Jim attain the freedom he longs for. Upon reuniting with his old friend Tom Sawyer, the two devise a plan to rescue Jim. By the novel's conclusion, Jim ultimately gains his independence, and Huck learns that Miss Watson had, in fact, already granted Jim his emancipation. This revelation represents another moment of optimism in Twain's portrayal, hinting at the possibility of change in the South's relationship with slavery. With this optimistic conclusion, Twain appears to

counterbalance the earlier negative depictions and language used to describe Jim throughout the novel.

5. Twain's Diction and Racial Bias in *Huck Finn*: A Linguistic Mirror of Institutionalized racial injustice in the American South

Twain's representation of the Black community in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* features several racially biased depictions, particularly through the character of Jim, who is often shown as superstitious, uneducated, and lacking refinement. These traits are evident early in the novel—for instance, in Chapter Two, when Jim claims to have been bewitched after discovering his hat hanging on a tree and recounts an imagined journey across the state. Jim expresses pride in this experience, unaware that it was a prank orchestrated by Huck and Tom, who mock his reaction. At this moment, Huck begins to understand that Jim's superstitious thinking may not be a natural trait but rather a result of the dehumanizing effects of slavery. From Huck's perspective, years of bondage have distorted Jim's sense of reality to the extent that he takes pride in believing in encounters with witches and the devil. This theme recurs in Chapter Ten, where Jim is bitten by a snake and interprets the incident as a consequence of bad luck brought by Huck's handling of a snakeskin. Although Huck initially plays a joke by placing a dead rattlesnake in Jim's bedding, he realizes too late that its mate would return, putting Jim in real danger.

In Chapter Fourteen, the theme of racialized ignorance surfaces when Huck expresses surprise at Jim's ability to reason logically. Influenced by the prevailing beliefs of Southern society, Huck assumes that Black individuals are inherently less intelligent than whites. His astonishment grows when Jim offers

a sharp and well-thought-out analysis of his predicament, stating that he was doomed no matter what happened; if he wasn't rescued, he would drown, and if he was saved, the person who helped him would return him for a reward, after which Miss Watson would likely sell him deeper into the South, condemning him to an even more brutal fate (Twain, 1884: 81). Huck is taken aback by the clarity of Jim's thinking, as he had not expected such insight from someone he viewed through the lens of racial bias. For Huck, shaped by a society that equates Blackness with ignorance, Jim's reasoning challenges deeply held prejudices and forces him to reevaluate his assumptions.

Beyond the repeated portrayal of Jim as superstitious and uneducated, Twain also illustrates the dehumanization of Black individuals through language that reduces them to mere property. Throughout the novel, Jim is frequently subjected to verbal and psychological degradation, most notably through the repeated employ of racial insults and possessive language that mirrors the dehumanizing norms of slavery-era society. In Chapter Eighteen, Huck notes: "Each person had their own nigger to wait on them—Buck too. My nigger had a monstrous easy time because I wasn't used to having anybody do anything for me, but Buck's was on the jump most of the time" (Twain, 1884: 109). This passage demonstrates how enslaved individuals were seen as belongings, as emphasized by the possessive pronouns "their" and "my," along with the possessive "'s." Additionally, the casual and repeated use of the slur reflects the normalized racial abuse and social attitudes of white Southerners during the Antebellum period, revealing the extent of systemic oppression inflicted on African Americans at the time.

Because of Twain's contentious depiction of Black characters, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been labeled by many critics as a racially

offensive work. The frequent use of the term “nigger” is particularly troubling for readers—especially African Americans—who are deeply shaped by both the historical legacy and the continued presence of racism in the United States. The term is widely regarded as one of the most derogatory and dehumanizing labels used against people of African descent. Its origins trace back to the English word “neger,” itself derived from the Spanish “negro,” meaning “black.” In the context of American culture, however, it evolved into a deeply pejorative expression that came to symbolize racial hatred and was often associated with acts of violence and systemic oppression, including lynching, arson, and social marginalization. By the nineteenth century, the term had become a racial slur aimed at degrading Black individuals, reinforcing ideas of inferiority and social exclusion. This language reflects a broader cultural mindset, particularly in the Southern states, where the economic system was built on slavery and where it was essential to justify the subjugation of enslaved people by portraying them as inherently inferior to their white counterparts.

Given that the term “nigger” was commonly used in everyday language in the American South during the 19th century, some scholars argue that Twain’s repeated use of it in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* does not necessarily stem from a racist intent. Rather, it reflects the linguistic and cultural norms of the region where Twain was raised. These expressions and beliefs were ingrained in the daily life of Southern communities at the time. Indeed, the overarching message of the novel can be understood as a condemnation of slavery and the inhumane treatment of Black individuals. Twain is often acknowledged as one of the first Southern American writers to openly confront the institution of slavery and to expose the moral contradictions of white society. Through Huck’s inner conflict and his decision to help Jim escape, Twain challenges the societal teachings represented by

characters like Miss Watson. Huck's evolution in the novel mirrors Twain's own journey—he reportedly questioned the ethics of slavery even as a young boy, but it wasn't until adulthood, after marrying into an abolitionist family and associating with people who actively opposed slavery, that he fully recognized the extent of racial injustice and white cruelty toward African Americans.

Based on the above, it is realized that Twain's regular use of the term “nigger” in his novel indicates that racism in his community is systematic or societal. Around this time, the Southern community needed such stereotypes to keep black people in their inferior position so as to avoid any rebellion from them. In the novel, Twain referred to Miss Watson, a religious woman, who used to organize religious ceremonies attended by her slaves to convince them that it was their destiny to live their life as slaves guided by their master, who is more civilized than them. By this, the author recalls the hypocrisy of the Southern white community, which used to alter religious texts to justify their cruelty towards the slaves. This serves as Twain's implicit criticism of the white community for distorting religious texts and implementing social codes and political acts to maintain its ethnic superiority and secure its economic concerns.

6- Conclusion:

Twain's use of discriminatory jargon while referring to Jim in his novel is not reflective of his attitudes as an individual towards the blacks. It is rather an expression of the feelings of a whole community, the Southern one, towards this race which is, according to them, born inferior to theirs. The author's racist words fall within institutional racism, which legitimizes discrimination by some laws embedded in the structure of a given society. Institutional racism, which manifests in the societal racism, is a problem of a whole society that must revise

its laws. In *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain initiates a critical reflection on the legal and social structures that define Black—white relations in the American South. The Postbellum period demonstrated that while emancipation ended slavery, it did not eliminate the deeply rooted racial prejudices held by many white Americans. A century after the Civil War, Afro-Americans were still fighting against racism which became part of American cultural identity and historical legacy. In fact, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s was an even more formidable challenge than the Civil War of the 1860s.

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