

@ 2013 UOB
SPC, University of Bahrain

The Controversy over Huckleberry Finn

Abdurrahman A. Wahab

*Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto, Canada and
Soran University, Erbil, Iraq*

Received: 10 Dec. 2012; Accepted 24 Nov. 2012

Abstract: In this article, I try to shed light on some of the arguments around the controversy over Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, and point to the suitability of such texts in the educational context of Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. Both the thematic features and the controversial nature of the text give people involved in the learning process opportunities to enrich cultural and educational experiences. Discussing the controversy around the novel in the Iraqi and Kurdish educational institutions is especially important. This is because examining the way race operates in the novel and discussing the issues that arise by teaching such a text in a multicultural classroom provide learners the opportunity to identify with the experiences, critically analyze concepts and construct new knowledge by relating to the individual and collective understandings. The implication of such analysis for the discussion of race in classrooms, as political as it is, also provides a pedagogical opportunity to talk about race and racism. Discussing the controversies around literary works like *Huckleberry Finn* also leads us to further explore the aims of education.

Keywords: Huckleberry Finn

"I reckon I had better black my face. For in these Eastern States niggers are considerably better than white people."

Mark Twain in his letter to his mother from New York, 1853.

In the introduction to "Satire or Evasion: Black Perspectives on *Huckleberry Finn*" Leonard, Tenney and Davis (Eds. 1992) refer to a survey conducted in the United States of America in 1985 by National Endowment for the Humanities that requested teachers and scholars to recommend books to be taught in American high schools. According to the survey Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* came third only after the works of Shakespeare, the "American Historical Documents, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution," while preceding *the Bible*, Homer's *Odyssey and Iliad*, Charles Dickens's *Great Expectation* and *A Tale of two Cities*,

and Plato's *Republic*. *Huckleberry Finn* is a classic; it is a favorite text to many Americans because it represents the "mythology of American childhood" including "emblems of freedom, high-spiritedness, and solid comradeship" and most importantly fulfilling "the dream of youthful innocence...with zest and spirit of adventure that work irresistibly on the American psyche" (pp.1-2). Yet, since its publication, there have been many controversies over the text's suitability to be considered a classic and over teaching it in academic institutions.

In this article, I try to shed light on some of the arguments around the controversy over Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, and point to the suitability of such texts in the educational context of Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. Both the thematic features and the controversial nature of the text give those involved in the learning process opportunities to enrich cultural and educational experiences. Discussing the controversy around the novel in our educational institutions is especially important, because, as McLaughlin (2005) illustrates, including "the domain of the controversial" is an integral part of the whole educational process (p. 61).

Many readers of the text, adults or children, agree to the attacks Twain carries out on the evils of his time represented mainly in the racial abuse and prejudices, finding it “a still-attractive ideal of unsullied integrity” (Leonard, J. S., Tenney, A. T., & Davis, T. M. (Eds.), 1992, p. 2). Many critics and scholars defend the text for its humorous ironies and moral benefits and its brave satirical attacks on the vices and follies in the social and religious ideologies of that time. They believe that Huck Finn has opened the door for questioning many of the beliefs that were rooted deep in the mindset of the society, like racism and religious bigotry. On the other hand, many critics, academic institutions, and families of African American schoolchildren consider the text as imprecise, irreligious, tedious, and most importantly, a text that promotes racism and racist attitudes in its readers. In what follows, I will try to demonstrate arguments and controversies by different critics over the text of *Huckleberry Finn*, some of those who go for the consideration of the text and some others who reject its suitability, while others present plans for its handling in the multicultural and multiethnic classrooms.

This text is important for classrooms in the Kurdistan Region because of its role in presenting major themes of the American literature, especially freedom and Identity. Discussing these themes in our classrooms is particularly significant while both Kurdistan and Iraq are facing problems in those two issues. For the Kurdistan Region, the problem of freedom and identity was, and still is, the top cause of all Kurdish liberation movements throughout history. Actually, seeking freedom has become the Kurdish identity. In the current situation, after about two decades of gap and separation of the Kurds and the Arabs in Iraq, a more or less mixture of different ethnic and religious groups seems to shape the future Iraqi social fabric. Fear of losing freedom and identity, as well as disapproving diversity and diverse rights are at the core of the current Iraqi problems. Diversity as a fact is one aspect of the Iraqi society and its major problem, and understanding the other is the only way to Iraq’s advancement and prosperity. That is why this compromise should start from the younger generation, from the schools and colleges. Critical dialogues and controversies over texts such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are then great assets for our educational considerations.

John H. Wallace (1992) starts his article “The Case Against *Huck Finn*” in a rather tense tone, calling the text “the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written” (p. 16). He refers to reports carried out by

media, which indicate the attack on the book by different states and schools, including Mark Twain Intermediate School in Fairfax County in Virginia, USA. He also refers to the banning of the text by institutions and libraries like the Concord Public Library, NAACP and the National Urban League and different schools. Many black parents and teachers, often supported by white teachers, have asked for the removal of the book from classrooms and syllabi as a result of continuous complaints from their children and students about the contents of the book. Wallace argues that the book has a negative impact on black students in class, which promotes humiliation and insult and contributes to their feelings of low self-confidence and to the white students’ disrespect for black students. “It constitutes mental cruelty, harassment...tension, discontent, and even fighting” against black students when it is read aloud in the classroom and while sitting with their white peers (p. 17). Despite decades of attempts to ban the book, black families have been turned away by “insensitive and often unwittingly racist teachers and administrators” claiming that *Huck Finn* is a “classic.” “Classic or not,” Wallace sates “it should not be allowed to continue to cause our children embarrassment about their heritage” (16).

Bringing the definition of the term “nigger” from *Webster’s Dictionary* which refers to the word as “offensive,” Wallace (1992) comments on the historical account of the emergence of the term, stating that the term is never been accepted by black people, “not in George Washington’s time, Mark Twain’s time, or William Faulkner’s time,” although a few “white authors” have put the term on their black characters’ mouths aiming at ridiculing them. It is true, Wallace argues, that some black authors have used the term in their writings – though not in literature to be “consumed” by students – yet, they, as well as white writers, know that books that ridicule black people are a good source of moneymaking (p. 17). He further argues the unsuitability of teaching the text in classrooms, which are “highly charged with emotions,” and that the difference of the students’ ethnicity, class and color will be highlighted by reading and teaching books like *Huck Finn*. Such books, Wallace further argues, negatively affect the teacher-student relationship in class. When a teacher permits the use of the term “nigger” in class, no matter what justification they might bring, the black students will be offended; therefore, the affected students tend to reject the teacher confidently, believing that the teacher is prejudicing (p. 18). Another issue that Wallace brings into his argument is the conditions and preparations the

“authorities” put when recommending *Huck Finn* for study, such as: appropriate planning, understanding the historical setting and social context of the novel, portraying the characters, balance judgment, and considering the age and maturity of students. He argues that no matter how good and educated teachers might be, “any material that requires such conditions could be dangerous racist propaganda...” He also questions the “historical setting” “authorities” mention, stating that it is inaccurate because *Huck Finn* is “written twenty years after the end of slavery” and that Twain has written it out of his memory and imagination, therefore taking away its historical credibility (pp. 19-20).

Wallace (1992) refers to the issues black students face in school with other materials studied, such as the American history, where black students read about their ancestors being slaves, which make them so much pain that not many educators, writers, and teachers understand. He then asks: “How much pain must a black child endure to secure an education?” Black students tend to hear so much unpleasant things about their history of slavery that “[they] have no tolerance for either ‘ironic’ or ‘satirical’ reminders...” (p. 22). Therefore, according to Wallace, a book that feeds and gets fed on racism, a text that promotes racism, hate, pain, and the idea that “black people are less intelligent than white...black are not human beings” should not be relied upon, because it “causes so much psychological damage to a large segment of...population,” and through which “many Americans insist on preserving [black people’s] racial heritage” (pp. 21-23). Wallace then presents two recommendations, one is that the book should not be taught to children, yet giving the possibility of teaching it in graduate courses where it is less likely to cause feelings of intimidation by instructors, fellow students, or by the notion of racism. The other recommendation is that if teachers find it necessary to teach *Huck Finn*, they should use his revised version, the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn Adapted* by John H. Wallace, where the offensive terms like “nigger” and “hell” are removed, keeping the story the same (pp. 23-24).

In her article “*Huck Finn*, Slavery, and Me,” Hengstebeck (1993) takes a milder stance in the argument about *Huck Finn*, while calling Wallace’s stance “offensive and reactionary” and his “sanitized” version of the text “a blatant example of censorship.” She refers to the reason why she could not see the text as racist before, stating: “it’s hard for white people to recognize racism, especially when they’re surrounded by other white people for most of their lives” (p. 32). Being one of those who supported teaching the text,

she has decided not to teach it anymore because she thinks that teaching racism through *Huckleberry Finn* is a “flawed idea” and that “there are much better texts to use...” instead. She argues that the idea of dealing with racism through *Huck Finn* is only a justification for reading the text, and that the main reason behind it is to educate white students, while black students should accept embarrassment and humiliation. Therefore, “white students and their needs are being put first.” Hengstebeck then refers to the critical term “nigger” and agrees with other critics that white people cannot “comprehend the enormous emotional fright attached to the hate word...for each black person.” She also states that a lot of the controversy is over the text more than the issues of racism. Considering the text as “the great American novel” resembles that it is a part of the American culture and mythology. Thus, what is at stake is not only a novel, but “a basic idea on the line about America and its self-concept” which heats up the arguments of both supporters and rejecters of the text. Holding to *Huck Finn* is, according to Hengstebeck, “one last grasp for that old national identity [of a free, great, and liberated America] that’s on the way out” (p. 32).

On the other hand, Carter (1985) finds the text and the judgments on it an “apotheosis” for modern critics and “modern temper” and that *Huck Finn* “qualifies as a saint.” After accepting the text and its character by several generations of readers, he argues, recently new critics “have returned to the silliness of the nineteenth-century librarians” who banned the text from libraries and schools (p. 170).

According to Alberti (1995), the controversy over the use of the word “nigger” in *Huckleberry Finn* ages almost forty years, when demographic and political realities changed as a result of historical developments, such as the civil rights movement, which “brought a new group of readers and critics into formerly all-white educational institutions” (p. 920). This is along with the pain, anger, and humiliation many black schoolchildren were facing as a result of the repetition of the term, which made organizations like NAACP and “other sympathetic parties” question the existence of the book on the list of required texts in schools. The academic establishment has had responses, Alberti states, though “puzzled or dismissive,” to challenges from such groups, which he calls “nonacademic critics” who are lumped “together as extremists and censors,” assembled to ban the text from being taught in schools. What Alberti aims at in his article “The Nigger Huck: Race, Identity, and the Teaching of *Huckleberry Finn*” is not to conclude whether or not

Mark Twain, or *Huckleberry Finn*, is racist, as he claims, but rather to see what such an approach can tell about American “historical and pedagogical moment as part of the reception history of the book” (p. 920).

To dig deep into the matter, Alberti (1995) brings different perspectives on the issues aroused by the text from different critics, aiming at giving a rather complete picture about the controversy over the text. One point he refers to is the views some critics have about the historical stance over slavery and the term “nigger.” Teaching it in classrooms, students who object to the term might be good to understand that during the times of slavery, the term was ‘not necessarily abusive,’ and that it was the ordinary term used to address slaves. This in itself brings other issues rather than “defusing the controversy” (p. 921). It makes one ask why slavery was approved and justified in the first place. To partially answer that, he finds it necessary to understand the construction of “race theory” that was formed “to justify slavery not only by creating a permanent servant class but also by creating an ideological barrier between work seen as ‘slave’ labor [black]...” and non-black servants and domestic workers (p. 925). To illustrate more the issue of race and identity, he asks the question of how one identifies him/herself racially, what it means to identify with a specific color and what investments this identification might bring about. He further discusses the reason why Huck could not overcome the use of the term “nigger” despite the strong comradeship he establishes with Jim, and the reason behind this “racial distinction” Huck tries to maintain throughout the novel (p. 924).

The emergence of race as a “social construct” in the British American colonies and the early United States has served, according to Alberti (1995), as a mediation to lessen the tensions that were arising as a result of the differences and inequalities among classes, and to maintain the distance between the different social statuses. While the main employers of labor, the slaveholders, were considered the upper class, the working force was considered the lower class; therefore, the institution of slavery and racism were the major determiners and establishers of the social order. Even if not having slaves to be in a higher class, the lower class “white” people were compensating themselves to their difficult class status by considering their “white” race as a privilege in front of the “slaves” in which they were almost on the same social level. Therefore, many whites of lower working class approved slavery and racism because they were “finding themselves in potential competition with African Americans” (p. 925). Alberti then brings Pap

Finn as an example of this “racial privilege” that the main reason behind Pap’s rage on the black “p’fessor” and the “govment” is based on class and race. His anger is over “the white government” that permits a “slave” to cross over and extend outside his boundary, which in turn minimizes the distance between free and slave, and on Judge Thatcher when he refuses to give Pap his “property” in order to be the wealthiest man in town. When his wish of moving up his “marginal status” through getting rich is not granted, Pap Finn then considers his race as a privilege over the black professor’s race. Further, while Huck’s own status is at stake when he helps Jim in his escape, he never hesitates to use the term “nigger” partly because of his urgency to separate himself from Jim through retaining his racial privilege when his class is not much different from Jim’s. Nevertheless, he is torn not only between “conflicting loyalties” and “self and society” but also between “sound heart and a deformed conscious.” Turning Jim will win Huck the approval of the white community and maintain and protect his white status. Yet, his act of helping Jim escape is considered “a profoundly political and revolutionary act, branding Huck as a ‘low down Ablitionist...and involving him not just in the eradication of race slavery, but in efforts at the social construction of race” (pp. 926-928).

Alberti (1995) asks, towards the end of his article, the question of how to teach *Huckleberry Finn* and use it as an opportunity to “open discussions about racial identity and racial oppression that doesn’t merely reinforce racial identity...” (p. 933), referring to a number of articles that present detailed lesson plans and approaches for handling *Huckleberry Finn* in the classroom. One of those articles is *Teaching Huck Finn in a Multiethnic Classroom* by Ann Lew (1993), who reflects on her experience with teaching the novel giving guidelines and strategies to a better approach of its controversial issues.

Facing difficulties in teaching the text at her class, with the complaints from several African American students about the novel’s content, and from other non-native speakers of English having difficulties with the language, all these made Lew (1993) suggest the deletion of the text from the required list in schools and move it to the extended reading list while suggesting other books instead. Failing in the suggestion, she had to find a way in order to present the text as a positive experience. Doing her own research about *Huck Finn*, trying to determine whether or not the text gives a negative stereotype in the characterization of Jim, she “put to rest any doubts...about Twain’s portrayal of Jim,” and concluded that the novel is to be a required

text in teaching American literature. She states that Mark Twain has shown Jim as “smart, assertive, and compassionate.” Lew believes that through Jim, who “violates the behavior code of the slave as prescribed by the white system,” who teaches morality to Huck and rises himself ‘above the brutalizing effects of slavery,” Mark Twain shows his opposition to the values he believes immoral and “wages his war against slavery” (p. 17). Through this perspective, she started teaching the novel, first by presenting its historical context—a time when slavery was approved by different religious, social and economical institutions, even when science and culture were supporting the theories of race— which she believes cannot be isolated from the text.

By looking deep at the character of Jim, Lew (1993) goes into teaching the book, asking her students many questions and close observations that show Jim deeper and different and the way he violates the wrong concepts readers have about slaves, concluding that “he is the only decent adult male in the novel...” (p. 20). Then she goes to ask questions about the language and the use of ironies throughout the text, and the way in which many of the terms do not resemble their realities. Through highlighting examples of the ironies and the characterization of Jim, students come to realize that the term “nigger” is an irony itself. She then come to the conclusion that *Huckleberry Finn* is indeed “a valuable piece of literature” if it is taught in its historical context with adequate guidance in reading and interpreting it. She comes to this conclusion when no student, she states, “walked away from [the class] saying that Mark Twain was a racist or that he made them feel bad about themselves.” She also suggests that Jim is a good example “with a rich cultural heritage” for teenagers and “nonwhite males” who continually face difficulties in their life. They should, like Jim, “find resources within themselves to cope with the world, to turn situations to their advantage... They, like Jim, must achieve their own self-definition” and not accept “negative labels” in which others try to enforce on them (p. 21).

Whether *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a “racist trash” and its writer a “racist” or it is a “masterpiece” and a “great American novel,” the controversy over the text, its contents and the meanings and notions it implies will never end. Taking side in the argument depends on the sociopolitical background and the different experiences one might have through reading, studying or teaching *Huck Finn*, depending on the environment in which they take place. Any contact with the text brings about critical issues that are mostly

rooted in the history of humankind, their behavior and attitudes towards each other, the way they look at each other, and the way they identify themselves as humans, class, color or all in one. Examining the way race operates in the novel and discussing the issues that might arouse by teaching such a text in a multicultural classroom provide learners the opportunity to identify with the experiences, critically analyze concepts and construct new knowledge by relating to the individual and collective understandings. The implication of such analysis for the discussion of race in classrooms, as political as it is, also provides a pedagogical opportunity to talk about race and racism. As Alberti (1995) states, “the controversy over the *Huckleberry Finn* or any other ‘problematic’ text is not finally an interpretive argument, but a debate over what the ends of education should be” (p. 934).

References

- Alberti, J. (1995). The nigger Huck: Race, identity, and the teaching of *Huckleberry Finn*. *College English*, 57(8), 919-937.
- Carter, E. (1985). The modernist ordeal of *Huckleberry Finn*. *Studies in Fiction*, 13(2), 169-182.
- Hengstebeck, M. (1993). *Huck Finn*, slavery, and me. *English Journal*, 82(7), 32.
- Leonard, J. S., Tenney, A. T., & Davis, T. M. (Eds.). (1992). *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Lew, A. (1993). Teaching *Huck Finn* in a multiethnic classroom. *English Journal* 82, 16-21.
- McLaughlin, T. H. (2005). What is controversy? In William Hare and John P. Portelli (Eds.), *Key Questions for Educators* (pp. 61-64). Canada: Edphil Books. Print.
- Wallace, J. H. (1992). The case against *Huck Finn*. In James S. Leonard, Thomas A. Tenney, & Thadious M. Davis (Eds.), *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn* (pp.16-24). Durham: Duke University Press.