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Discussing the Notion of Literature, Truth and Morality in the Light of the novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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Abstract:

In this paper, the researcher will discuss the intrinsic bond that exists between ‘Life’ and ‘Literature.’ On a broader plane, the ‘Real Life’ and its experiences result in the genesis of the literary world, which is known as ‘Literature.’ On a philosophical plane, Literature enlightens us about various aspects and phases of life, which in a way builds our perception towards life. On this account, one can say that “Life is Literature and Literature is Life.”

Moreover, the researcher will be discussing the ideologies of Walter Pater and Matthew Arnold about “Art and Life.” As on one hand, Walter Pater upholds the aesthetic notion of art. He propagates the motto: “Art for Art’s sake.” But on the other hand, Matthew Arnold believes that the work of art should serve a social and moral purpose, therefore he reasserts the motto: “Art for Life’s sake.”

Furthermore, the researcher would refer to Christopher New’s essay titled, “Literature, Truth and Morality” which will serve as a ‘guiding light’ in order to analyse the various episodes and incidences of the novel. This essay will entitle the readers to understand the complex and intertwined nature of the various philosophical aspects which are born out of the “world of Literature” and “world of real Life” as well. At the same time, the researcher would be discussing the views of the renowned philosophers and thinkers like Rousseau and Sartre about ‘slavery’ and ‘existentialism’ respectively.

Keywords: Art for Art’s Sake, Art for Life’s Sake, Relative Truth, Absolute Truth, Slavery, Frontier, Racial Discrimination, Fugitive Slave Law.

Literature is an expression of life; it is the reflection of the personality of the literary artist; and at the same time it serves as a mirror in order to reflect the social milieu or the “Spirit of the Age” in which it is produced. Moreover, a literary artist is both a ‘creature’ and ‘creator’ of his time. It means that, through literature, he communicates his experiences of being a part of a particular social epoch; at the same time when he feels dissatisfied with the ‘life’ of his age, then he creates a world of his own through imagination and creativity, rising

well above his milieu, and thereby he instigates a movement of '*social change*'. Therefore, literature serves the dual purpose; on one hand it reflects the social reality. On the other hand, subsequently it stimulates the masses to analyse the contemporary situation and aspects of the society which further instigates them to take the relevant measures to bring about a change in the society for the better.

The work of art provides us a sense of aesthetic pleasure. On this account, it brings into light Walter Pater's philosophy of art i.e; "Art for art's sake"-- it means that a work of art should be appreciated solely on account of its aesthetic beauty and novelty. However, another function of the work of art is to impart some social and moral ideologies to the readers. This will ultimately widen their cognitive horizon. As a result, it brings into light, Matthew Arnold's philosophy of art i.e; "Art for life's sake" --it means that a work of art should serve a moral purpose as well; it should guide the masses to trace the social reality of their time and simultaneously provide aesthetic pleasure. In short, a work of art should 'teach' as well as 'delight' the readers. Moreover, the power and significance of the artist's craft lies in the revelation of some moral truth--that makes the work of art illuminating and full of meaning.

"Literature is thus, Nature's chief masterpiece, man's great achievement, the treasury of his creative power and the standard of his civilization."

-Lord Mulgrave

Broadly speaking, Christopher New's essay, "Literature, Truth and Morality", is a philosophical essay to a greater extent. It has been divided into three sections. In the very first section, Christopher New brings into light the notion of "Truth in Fiction". It pertains to the questions like: "What is true in a work of fiction and how do we know it is?" Therefore, this essay brings into light the concepts like '*relative truth*' and '*absolute truth*'.

The idea of '*relative truth*' is akin to the idea of subjectivity, which pertains to the concept of difference in perceptions and considerations; what one perceives as truth may not be the same for the other person. In this respect, one can argue that, the work of art primarily deals with this idea of 'relativism', because a literary artist aims at depicting the social milieu of his time according to his own perceptions and experiences.

But at the same time, one can also trace the quotient of '*absolute truth*', in the work of art, that is born out of major historical and political events. Such as in the case of the novel, "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn", here Twain portrays in front of us some of the most crucial

and serious issues born out of the social reality of the American society during the 18th and 19th century--‘racism’ and ‘slavery.’

Mark Twain is considered as a renowned American novelist, who meditated and reflected on the contemporary issues-- both moral and ethical, which seriously engaged his mind. Such as, quest for identity and freedom, slavery, racism and the idea the civilization. The novel is set before the American Civil War i.e; around 1835-1845, when slave trade in America was at its peak. Through this novel, Twain has given a very realistic, truthful and faithful portrayal of the atrocities and miseries being inflicted upon the blacks during the 18th and 19th century in America.

Moreover, in order to testify the facts related to slavery being depicted by Twain, one can investigate various historical roots and sources. To illustrate the same, one such book is titled as, "Slavery in America: A Primary Source of History of the Intolerable Practice of Slavery", written by Tonya Buell. This book provides a detailed description of the practice of slave trade in America starting from 1619—when Dutch merchants brought twenty Africans to the colony of Jamestown as indentured servants; to 1865-- Abolition of all forms of slavery throughout the entire United States took place.

In this regard, this novel is most importantly a satire against the institution of slavery, whose chief representative can be seen in the character portrayal of Jim (negro-slave). Slavery is shown in the most disgusting forms, whereby, slaves were treated as "chattels" and sold in ‘slave-traders market’. No humane consideration governed this practice, even the laws protected it. For instance, in 1850 the American Congress passed the notorious Fugitive Slave Law, which protected the right of the owner to get the run-away Nigger apprehended and punished. One shudders to think or visualize this 'martial law' against the slaves. Moreover, in case of any sort of disobedience on their part, they were subjected to severe and harsh punishments --whipping in public was common.

Further, the native negroes were caught and tamed as household slaves, as the possession of more slaves was regarded as a sign of aristocratic and urbane living. They were treated like other animals, ‘sold’ and ‘bought’ in the markets, just like commodities and often separated from their families. In the novel, Twain has tried to depict the miserable condition of the blacks in America during the 19th century, by means of the character portrayal of Jim (negro-slave), who has been running away to free states because, his owner, Widow Douglas has

made up her mind to sell him for 800 dollars. Later, in the novel, Jim has been sold by the scoundrels for just 40 dollars.

Through these incidents, Twain aims at bringing into light the downtrodden condition of the slaves like Jim and at the same time, hinting at the moral depravity of the American society; whereby people have become so mercantile in their approach towards life, that they don't even hesitate to use their fellow beings as commodities in order to serve their petty means. In this regard, Gray's statement is very appropriate, as he states that "The book is about the historical injustice of slavery...and the social inequality of racism, the human use or the denial of human beings".

Thus, undoubtedly the novel turns out to be a satire against the social evil called slavery. The central thrust is the motive to condemn the institution of slavery, but at the same time Twain is serving the dual purpose. On one hand, he is trying to depict the reality of the American society with utmost precision and depth as if holding a mirror to the society. On the other hand, through this artistic masterpiece, he aims at drawing the attention of the masses towards the harsh reality of their time and thereby stimulating them to take into consideration some relevant measures to make their society a better place to live in. Thus, in a broader sense, Twain is using the work of art as a tool and weapon to bring out a 'social change'.

In fact, Jean-Jacques Rousseau --a French philosopher, has denounced slavery, by stating that, "From whatever aspect we regard the question of slavery, the right of slavery is null and void, not only as being illegitimate, but also, because it is absurd and meaningless".

In the second section, Christopher New talks about "The Truth-relevance question" , whereby he discusses whether a particular work of art is true to its era, in terms of depicting the socio-political milieu of its time. In this context, apart from the central theme—condemning the institution of slavery, Twain has brought into light, 'the Frontier Life of America'; one of the most crucial aspects of the novel, based on his own 'personal experience' (the life on the Mississippi river is of vital importance, because initially Twain had started his career as a steam boat pilot). Therefore, it tends to satisfy our anxiety, as it makes us believe that it's a novel born out of Twain's own lived experiences. Though the adventures of Huck and Jim along the great Mississippi river look like fiction, yet all these incidents and events are founded in stark realities of life during the days of slavery, and these realities had become a part of Twain's rich personal experience.

Tom Quirk in the essay titled, "*The Realism of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*" states that, "One of the things to be observed about the realism of Huckleberry Finn is that, Twain is the narrator of his chronicle and the author of his book; he is the chief witness of events and emotionally at least, the principle victim of them..."

Literally, the frontier means the outer limits of settlement; in fact, it was a meeting point between savagery and civilization. Moreover, frontier is a part of American unconscious.

*"The frontier, in the mind of America is a way to
Becoming the natural symbol of resolution, courage,
The confrontation of hard realities from which
There is no convenient escape...."*

-Wilson O. Clough

It was a notorious sight for all sorts of lawlessness and crime, for it immediately provided refuge to the cheats, frauds and cut-throats. Criminality was an integral part of the frontier culture. Dupes and frauds; cheats and scoundrels; cut-throat, robbers and murderers; runaway niggers and violent drunkards--were all too common.

The Duke and the late Dauphin in Huckleberry Finn represent the roving cheats and frauds, which the American society tolerated and encouraged. The very fact that they travel incognito shows that the novelist means them to be 'types' rather than 'individuals', and their main task was only to dupe the innocent people and loot their living by their debased means. They befuddled the villagers and collected eighty-seven dollars and seventy-five cents in the name of being the helpless and poor fellows. Their cunning practices reached to its apex when these frauds sold away Jim, in Huck's absence just for forty "dirty dollars". These two frauds are the product of the frontier society, where cruelty, violence, wild kind of justice prevails; where feuds, killings, shootings are a routine. This is how; Twain provides us a deep insight into the frontier life of America, which constitutes the major portion of American social history. At the same time, he aims at reflecting upon the moral degeneracy of the society of his time, whereby men are exploiting men, and materialism turned out to be the defining feature of their lives.

On this account, one can argue that, indeed Huckleberry Finn has a great touch of social reality. American writers were grappling with the social realities by means of depicting the socio-ethical problems of the day (racism and slavery) as well as some of the universal issues (moral degeneracy of mankind) which touch upon the existence of man as man.

In the third section, Christopher New elaborates on the fact that, “the truth-relevance question” further leads on to “the morality relevance question” that of the relation of the moral aspects of a literary work to its value as literature. In the novel, the adventures of the run-away boy-hero (Huck Finn), and his run-away nigger friend (Jim), set in motion, a chain of patterns of moral growth which in a way symbolize the great transformation of the American conscience.

In the novel, both Huck and Jim are running away, from slavery. On one hand, we find Huck, running away from the duplicitous world, and its stifling mores. Huck realizes that, he cannot live a life of rigid decorum, under the dictates of Widow Douglas. The innocence of the child Huck comes into direct clash with so-called civilized world with its double standards of morality. As a child of nature, as free as the elements, he is naturally perturbed at the mechanical regularity and rigid puritanical discipline, which govern the widow's household. Here, in the civilised world of the adults, he can establish no rapport with the people around him. He is baffled, feels sick and lonely.

Huck’s statement: "...I felt so lonesome...wished I was dead."

Huck's revolt is against the 'civilising' society and the world of imposters, frauds and violent shootings, which ultimately forces him to run to the raft on the mighty Mississippi where he feels free.

Huck’s statement: "...You feel mighty free and comfortable on a raft."

Gradually, we learn that his protest is against the false culture, hypocritical values and double standards of the society; he stands for 'radical innocence' and 'instinctive knowledge'. Huck is fleeing from all constrictions of society. His quest for freedom assumes larger moral and philosophical dimensions. Moreover, as Jean-Paul Sartre, elucidates about his theory of '*existentialism*' whereby he states that, “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself.” In this novel, we find Huck experiencing a sense of existential crisis, when he finds himself caught in the institutionalized society, and therefore, he embarks on a journey to

carve an identity of his own, by means of liberating himself from the stifling effects of the society that he inhabits.

On the other hand, Jim aims at securing the personal freedom; his flight is from actual slavery, when he learns that, his owner Miss Watson is planning to sell him for 800 dollars, "down to Orleans." Thus, the two run-aways establish an identity of purpose. Their union creates another world on the raft, which Trilling calls the "community of saints."

David L. Smith in his essay titled, "Huck, Jim and American Discourse" states that, "Twain uses the narrative to expose the cruelty and hollowness of that racial discourse which exists only to obscure the humanity of all Afro-American people."

Mark Twain was a profound thinker and philosopher; he desired the inner, rather than the outer reform of man. He advocated personal morality rather than institutional or conventional one. He ruthlessly attacked the hypocrisy and priggishness of those who exploited the helpless and the poor under the honorific garb of civilization, which in practice, was a ritualistic adherence to the dogmatic belief in the superiority to one another.

Huck becomes the true mouthpiece of the novelist. In his protests, reactions and responses we can discern the heart and mind of his creator. Twain attacks the notion of formalism in religion, through one of the incidents that he encounters during his journey on the raft. Huck comes to a village camp meeting, where the preaching was being done. There were lots of people at the meeting with ostensible purpose of hearing the sermon.

But Huck notices something else which is quite evident by this statement: "Some of the old women were knitting, and some of the young folks were voting on the sly."

It is an instance of moral depravity and hollowness of the people, who have become, morally corrupt, emotional barren and spiritually sterile. Every time Huck experiences such a shocking spectacle of human life, he rebuilds back to the safety and security of the raft. Every such movement out-and-in forms a specific step forward in growing the moral wisdom of the boy. Such moral awareness was an essential part of Huck's initiation into the world of adults.

In Jim's company he gradually comes to discard the canons of institutional or the social morality of the class to which he belongs. Jim may be called Huck's moral preceptor. As Cox states that, "Huck's moral sense grows out of and revolves around the presence of Jim. Huck's whole sense of wrong, his feeling of guilt are products of his intimate association with Jim--

his companionship with the runaway slave, makes possible his moral growth." When Jim is bitten by a dead rattlesnake, then immediately Huck begins to nurse him, forgetting the stature of being superior (being a white boy) to Jim (a Negro slave). Later Huck even invents a lie in order to save his friend from being arrested by the slave-hunters. This is a marker of the fact that, Huck attains a kind of emotional and psychological maturity, in the company of Jim. Now 'compassion' becomes the governing principle of his life, and implicitly the novelist aims at imparting a moral lesson to the people of America (to be precise) and to the readers (all cross the world), by depicting Huck as an emblem of compassion; a man of sensibility and maturity.

On one hand, Huck's father (Pap) wants the custody of his son only because the boy is now a source of gold-dollars. The treatment he meted out to Huck (confining him in a secluded place, and mercilessly beating him), can be ironically contrasted with the black negro Jim, who acts as Huck's father throughout the journey and his love for Huck is not founded on any selfish motives, therefore one can argue that, it is a marker of Jim's '*innate whiteness*'.

What Twain is debunking or exposing is the false notion that, 'whites' are superior in all respects to 'blacks', or the prevalent racial discrimination based on the skin colour. What ultimately matters-- is not the "whiteness" or the "blackness" of the skin, rather it is the mind, the inner goodness, love and self-sacrifice which shows the real worth of a human being. In one sense, the novel can be read as a democratic manifesto-- a plea for humanism.

At the end of the novel, Huck finds himself caught in an 'inner debate' between his 'conscience' (to be loyal to the English culture) or to follow his 'inner self' (by supporting his friend Jim, to escape from this vicious social evil called slavery). His conscience addresses him in the language of the official culture in which he has grown up; and his heart seething with compassion, humanity and love. It was perhaps the greatest crisis which seems to shake his very being for a moment. The whole past reels past his eyes, and he is pricked by a sense of duty to Miss Watson, whose slave he was assisting in his flight. Side by side he recalls the great communion that he and Jim had on the raft.

A reflection of his inner debate is depicted through these lines:

"I took it (The letter to Miss Watson informing her of her slave's whereabouts) ...I studied a minute, and then said to myself: All right then, I'll go to hell-- and he tore it up."

Ultimately, we find the triumph of his "sound heart" over his "conscience". Finally, we see the white recognition of the essential humanity for the black. In this regard, the novel *Huckleberry Finn* has much greater dimension; as it places before us certain human ideals, such as love, compassion, gratitude and fellowship, which are indeed the bedrock of Twain's moral philosophy. Through this masterpiece, Mark Twain explodes the shaky foundations of the contemporary American society with the dynamite of his scathing satire, and advocates re-establishment of a new society based on securer and stable foundations. It is its complete heart-searching quality that makes it so great a novel.

Lionel Trilling in his essay titled, "The Greatness of *Huckleberry Finn*" states that, "The greatness of the novel lies primarily in its power of telling the truth-- *Huckleberry Finn* is of a different kind from that of *Tom Sawyer*. It is more intense truth, fiercer and more complex, the truth of moral passion; it deals directly with the virtue and depravity of man's heart."

Thus, one can state that, this novel, at once gives us a panoramic view of the socio-political and historical life of America during the 18th and 19th century. At the same time the uniqueness of this novel lies in the fact that, Twain enacts the drama of the growing American conscience symbolized by Huck, and the great struggle of the negro, symbolized by Jim. The Negro, assisted in his flight by a white boy is a unique moment in American history, which in fact lifts this novel to the heights of moral and philosophical complexity.

One can testify the greatness of this novel, by means of tracing the statements made by Ernest Hemingway: "All modern American literature coined from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*....it's the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since." Moreover, the relation between truth and fiction has been very rightly pointed out by a scholar in the following manner:

“Fiction reveals the truth that reality obscures.”

--Ralph Waldo Emerson

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