Trauma, Race, and Resilience: A Study of Percival Everett's *James*

Ayesha Iqbal & Sonia Irum

Abstract

This paper examines Percival Everett's *James* (2024) by drawing on Sheldon George's work on trauma and race, especially his reworking of the Lacanian psychoanalytic notion of "Jouissance" and Toni Morrison's ideas on whiteness and the literary imagination. I argue that Everett's novel moves beyond traditional representations of trauma and race by displacing the central figure of the original classic. In the process, the novel engages with those traumatic experiences that were previously marginalised. In addition, James's engagement with the ordinary and the banal, alongside his acts of care, become the means through which his resilience and strength emerge. Hence, *James* not only reverses the order of things in his reimagined tale but also changes the vantage point in favour of the ordinary yet transformative acts through which racial and traumatic experiences are negotiated.

Keywords: Jouissance, Invisible Trauma, Race, Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, Percival Everett, James

Introduction

Percival Everett's novel *James* (2024) is a simple yet powerful retelling of Mark Twain's classical novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Everett plays upon the original storyline and works out a perspective which is more authentic

---

Ayesha Iqbal is an Assistant Professor at Department of English Higher Education Department, Government of Punjab, Pakistan.
Dr. Sonia Irum is an Assistant Professor at Department of English International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

and relevant to the sufferings of those who are left waiting on the margins for centuries. Everett's storyline decentres the character of the main protagonist, Huck, that has already enjoyed the spotlight for about a century and a half and brings Jim, now James, Twain's runaway slave from the margins to the centre stage.

In Twain's novel, Huck leaves his home to chart his own journey away from the abusive quarters of his childhood. On those unfamiliar paths, he meets Jim, his guardian's slave, who is himself trying to find a safe passage amidst unnerving threats of being sold. Their joint voyage of escape down the Mississippi river turns into an adventure tale where Huck enjoys a central role, the famous classic's fascinating protagonist who attracts people's attention. Percival Everett's rewriting is equally exciting. In an evocative first person-narrative, Everett presents a combination of original spirit and a uniqueness written from Jim's previously marginalised perspective. The narration by Everett is a corrective lens on American culture which instils a fresh energy into this tale while also allowing the story to reach its new potential. Everett sketches James at the heart of his tale by working out scenes both old and new that are infused with the energy of freshly released captive. In doing so, he is ready to take on new adventures and along the way he explores the nature of the American experience. My research thus examines the new order of relations and encounters that result from James's move from the periphery to the centre by engaging with the central topoi in the selected fiction. My research also critically engages the methodical selection, addition and omission of scenes that is deliberately done by the author to highlight the characters' exposure to vulnerabilities and trauma in the most difficult times. The events revolve around the central character, who gradually works his way in the mid-nineteenth century United States when slavery was a legal phenomenon.

Trauma, in its broader sense, has redefined the contemporary ways of understanding the past and the present. It introduces many literary frameworks to understand the contemporary culture, its different versions of realities and narratives. This study not only aims to investigate the trauma that is bound with slavery, it also intends to explore the individuality, the humanity and resilience of Everett's protagonist by engaging with the extraordinary in the banal and the mundane.

The novel continues to address central concerns of Everett's earlier fiction, namely, how the imposition of a racial identity has been damaging on both the individual and national levels, the inflexible binaries upon which American society is based, and the ongoing conflict and tension between races with one holding long-established dominance over the other. This imbalance of power is so massive that it is even felt by the "five-year-old Rachel" when she along with other children sits in a cabin with James and asks, 'Why did God set it up like this?' She then continues, 'With them as masters and us as slaves?' (Everett, 2024, p. 29). What is different from Everett's earlier fiction is that though the story of James could be enjoyed independent of the original work by Twain, its real power lies in its connection to the original and how it reimagines it.

By taking the cue from Lacanian psychoanalytic notion of "Jouissance" and accompanying study of Sheldon George on Trauma and Race and Toni Morrison's ideas on the notion of whiteness and the literary imagination, I argue that Percival Everett's Novel *James* (2024) re-presents trauma and race by displacing the central figure of the original classic. In the process, the novel not only engages with those traumatic experiences that are previously marginalised but also revises the character of James. In fact, James's engagement with the ordinary and the banal, alongside his acts of care, become the means through which his resilience and strength emerge. Hence,

James not only reverses the order of things in his reimagined tale but also changes the vantage point in favour of the ordinary yet transformative acts through which racial and traumatic experiences are negotiated.

Sheldon George's study on *Trauma and Race* (2016) draws on Lacanian psychoanalytic notion of "Jouissance". Within the context of the Lacanian perspective, George proposes that "race functions not only at the social level but also at the psychic" level, and the inability to dismiss it is based on "race's capacity to structure a relation to *jouissance* for the subject of race" (2016, p.135, original emphasis). Jacques Lacan's "jouissance" refers to the pleasure that a subject draws from a discourse due to their "ability to ground a psychic sense of the self as coherent, autonomous, and self- controlled through use of the mechanisms of language and fantasy" (George, 2016, p. 3). My research addresses the question of trauma, taking it in Cathy Caruth's sense of the term as "the wound of the mind – the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world", as "an event that […] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known", and is characterised by belatedness, repetition, and the burdensome struggle between forgetting and remembering (Caruth, 1996, pp. 3-4).

While George argues that African American racial identity is marked by a historically inherited psychic trauma that repeats through not just race but also the core process of othering, which is central to racial difference. Percival's *James* reveals that this trauma also operates through forced narrative positions, for instance, the stories that Black subjects must perform in order to survive. This "slave filter," in James own words, is one of the survival tactics. Everett, here, underscores the fact that to constantly regulate your language through such a slave filter may function as a protective measure; it simultaneously exerts a

substantial toll as it requires undue vigilance and internalised constraints on one's own self and entails significant emotional burden and psychic trauma. James's rattlesnake-induced delirious state and the consequent dream encounter with prominent philosophers exposes the deep-seated fear and resulting psychic trauma of a slave figure when James experiences extreme "fear of Huck coming back" and hearing his unfiltered thoughts (Everett, 2024, p. 58).

Echoing Lacan, the novel suggests that slavery's psychic residue also manifests as recurring signifiers of otherness that bind African Americans to "undeserved excesses of *jouissance*" and imposed "notions of inferiority that question not just their access to being but also their very humanity" (George, 2016, p. 8, emphasis in original). In *James*, the protagonist negotiates this tension through careful speech by deliberately shifting between the linguistic performance expected by white interlocutors and his actual, concealed literacy demonstrates how African American identity is continually negotiated through a split between the made-up version of the self as required by the racial order and that of the real self that must remain hidden. The protagonist James, in the narrative present is seen to sit down with Lizzie (Elizabeth)– his daughter and six other children in his cabin to give them a "language lesson." When Lizzie asks as to why they have to learn this, James goes on to say what is a sad truth of their lives: "White folks expect us to sound a certain way and it can only help if we don't disappoint them" (Everett, 2024, p. 28). Thus, the novel extends George's claim by showing that the trauma of slavery is not merely repeated at the level of racial identity but is enforced through the very structures of language, which demand that the Black subject occupy a humiliating or diminished position to be recognized.

The central problem the novel exposes is that the African American subject is compelled to speak within a system that both

names and negates them, where they need to act subservient to make the whites feel safe. When Huck asks James about how far he can go in his loyalty towards his master as a slave, Jim reiterates his thorough loyalty towards his master by telling Huck that he would carry out "whateber dey say." He further explains if they say "jump," he will ask "how high?" revealing James's readiness to perform a version of blackness that is palatable and nonthreatening to white observers (Everett, 2024, p. 49). This also reveals the linguistic vulnerability that functions as a key site where the psychic trauma of slavery persists, shaped by the subservient posture and compulsory compliance of African Americans demanded in their everyday actions, behaviour, and speech.

Mark Twain's 1884 novel is a gripping adventure tale for young readers, but its deeper dimensions can be better understood by adults. According to Lionel Trilling, it is "one of the world's great books and one of the central documents of American culture" (as cited in Garner, 2024). Dwight Garner points to the injustice with the ten-year-old Black readers who should also be given an equal opportunity to enjoy this adventure story but with its "219 uses of the N-word," it denies them the same pleasure read (2024).

By using fiction as an idiom through which focus could be shifted, Everett portrays Jim, now James—one of the most popular black characters in the American literary tradition in its true spirit—a living, breathing, and evolving character with a narrative arc like that of Huck in Twain's novel. It is important to note that Jim in Twain's fiction was a mere vehicle to frame Huck's moral growth into visibility. His character shifts into a simple, one-dimensional portrayal of a person devoid of any complexity. From a different yet related perspective, Toni Morrison's contemporary classic *Playing in the Dark (1992)*, a short book on the role of race, and specifically, Africans and

blacks, in American literature points to these different vantage points with which African American writers work out their fictional narratives, characters, and perspectives. The subtitle of Morrison's book is "Whiteness and the Literary Imagination," and in her quintessential incisive way, Morrison argues, "it may be possible to discover, through a close look at literary 'blackness,' the nature—even the cause—of literary 'whiteness'" (p. 9). As Morrison goes on to argue, "a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness" and "to any understanding of national literature" (pp. 5-6). "American means white" (p. 47), she asserts, and the black presence only serves to establish this and the whites' superiority. They are the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfilment of destiny (p. 52). Twain's striking differential allotment of value to Jim makes more sense in the light of Morrison's critical assertions above.

Everett's novel reminds us that this social order as portrayed in its fictional world is created by unjust laws, statutes and policies, constitutional sanctions, etc., but it also brings our attention to the fact that the same order is maintained for decades by ordinary citizens as well. Everett, from the very opening scene to the last, has showcased many such instances that jolts us from within: "Those white boys, Huck and Tom, watched me. They were always playing some kind of pretending game where I was either a villain or prey, but certainly their toy. They hopped about out there with the chiggers, mosquitoes and other biting bugs, but never made any progress toward me. It always pays to give white folks what they want, so I stepped into the yard and called out into the night, 'Who dat dere in da dark lak dat?'" (Everett, 2024, p. 17).

Everett's novel has similar structure as that of Twain's. His chapters are short and engaging. He artfully maintains a fast pace in complete fidelity with the original work. James, as mentioned earlier, has fled from Miss Watson's home to learn her plan to sell him to someone in New Orleans. He must bear the burden of separation from his family. Huck, on the other hand, is on the run because of his abusive father. He staged his own death to escape in favour of a better future. Huck and James's chance encounter in the Mississippi leads to a bond of friendship that keeps growing as the plot develops. However, Everett does not include the famous warning with which Twain chooses to open his novel: "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot" (Twain, 1884). Everett leaves it to his readers to make sense of his narrative as the narrative is sure to offer several motives, morals and plot.

Everett skilfully picks up many popular scenes from the original tale, for example, the pair gets separated in the fog the same way as in the original novel, the episode with the con artists, and the Duke and the King also feature prominently in the reimagined version. In the same way, he incorporates many smaller and less significant scenes, for instance, James's near-death experience due to a rattlesnake bite and Huck's hilarious enactment as a girl only to hide his identity. Several scenes are, on purpose, not featured in Everett's novel and he proceeds to take the setting at least two decades forward. Whereas many scenes from the original are dropped from the retelling, there are many scenes that are added to it anew. The scene in chapter 30 is a haunting addition where James exposes the collapse of racial categories and the absurdity of the social order that depends on them. The narrator's layered disguises create a visual paradox "one black man passing for white and painted black, and me, a light-brown black man painted black in such a way as to appear like a white

man trying to pass for black" (Everett, 2024, p. 179). The whole scene mirrors the psychological and structural contradictions of the system that perpetuates the psychic trauma as argued by George privileging the Lacanian perspective that identifies white racial identity as just such a discourse for white Americans, serving to ground white identity in the jouissance of language and fantasy. Hence, in this scene, Everett dramatises the absurd performativity of race and the hollowness of the racial hierarchy that governs their lives and exposes the fracturing of self- image which is bound to happen when the boundaries between the master and the slave are blurred. In this moment, no one is dominating the space.

Hence, *James* expands the discussion of trauma and race within a narrative historically dominated by whiteness. One of the central strategies which the novel presents is the power of the everyday in which James through the ordinary acts breaks the stereotypical conception of a black figure. Though this transformative journey of "Jim" is a carefully constructed performance, but it is also a disguise to navigate a racial order which is violent and unjust at the same time.

Language and the politics around it also become one important element in Everett's story. The deliberately mispronounced speech that Twain assigns Jim comes with a dash of incapacity that has been imposed on the character. Everett carves a new course for his central figure James who is shown to have the capability of correcting his earlier and dysfunctional linguistic potential. He is shown in control of producing a version of English according to his will and choice. He has the ability to produce clear and refined speech, which is a pleasure that is reserved for his own private self and not meant for public spaces. For James, this hidden skill finds its full expression in his writing and in communication with his trusted black circle. James's journey through life is so moving, heartbreaking, and

heartwarming. It evolves with time and also brings our attention to the American South, a space where black lives put up a performance to avoid any confrontation and to fulfil those undue expectations that have been associated with them by the mighty and the powerful. In the territory of a white person, black characters learn to shift into dialect, producing a version of made-up blackness that minimizes the possible threat and ensures survival.

As mentioned above, Twain depicts Jim as naive, comic, and superstitious, while Everett's James is smart, intellectually curious, widely read, and immensely reflective. In his inner world, he continues to have imagined debates with Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire and John Locke, and he also shows a persistent desire to tell his own story. This intellectual progression becomes a crucial part to foreground the novel's challenge to indicate constructions of identity and trauma in African American racial dimensions. Another strong and defining characteristic hints at James's deep awareness of his surroundings that involves his disappointment with the self-entitlement that is displayed by white writers. He criticizes them to pretend to write about the Black folks with full authority and authenticity. But interestingly, at the same time, he is also suspicious of the stories produced by Black writers.

The core argument of my study is that Everett's *James* reorients the racial and traumatic discourse by highlighting the progression in James' character that transforms the original narrative. James's care and concern for the safety of his children, as well as their young companions is a significant departure of Everett's adaptation. This care and concern especially become visible in the scenes where James quietly teaches them the coded language performance necessary for their protection. Rather than depicting this as a mere survival strategy, Everett frames these moments as acts of protection and love, revealing James's

profound humanity. His guidance is not reflective of maintaining a status quo of the enforced subservience. It is rather about equipping the next generation with the tools to survive a world structured against them. In this way, *James* shifts the focus away from the portrayal of mere vulnerabilities and traumas of James and his fellow community and brings into light small powerful moments where love and concern for each other become a prism through which their humanity and resilience can be highlighted. Hence, the novel demonstrates a sustained and genuine concern that James has for his loved ones, and this concern operates not solely as a private emotion but as a narrative strategy that reframes the representation of marginalised lives in theAfrican American context. His attentiveness to their safety foregrounds his resolution to interrupt the cycles of vulnerability that have shaped his own world view. This very act of prioritising his children's future serves as a defining point through which the novel resists reducing James and by extension his community. Everett here underscores not only the generational weight of Black performance but also highlights the inner strength of his central figure alongside his vulnerabilities which serve to function as an assertion of his resilience, responsibility, and moral deliberation. Thus, he brings to light a fuller sense of humanity and a dynamic character arc vis-à-vis Twain's portrayal of a static James reminding us of Morrison's assertion that "black presence" is used as a vehicle to establish "White superiority" (1992, p. 52).

In James, the central figure is shown to have the capability to brave through many situations that in Twain's original novel is only Huck's prerogative. Saving Huck from drowning to detailing him on vital knowledge of the river where James "helped Huck get the canoe from the cave to the river," his inventiveness proves powerful (Everett, 2024, p. 61). Everett's skill in retelling and inverting Twain's original novel becomes evident in the scene where it is shown in clear terms that the

royalty makes a cunning plan to sell James off. In Twain's original version, Huck creates the impression that Jim not only agrees to be the property of the Kind and the Duke but also seems to have no objection in tying himself to the mast of the raft to travel through the daylight without being stopped by slavers.

James, in the middle of the novel, is shown to reflect on his own condition where he is constantly on run. He goes on to say: "I could always run. But running and escaping were not the same thing" (Everett. 2024, p. 146). This points to deeper psychic dynamics that can be best explained by Lacan's notion of jouissance. James's perpetual running does not bring him any closer to safety or his desired freedom; instead, it is a constant cycle of repetition, a survival strategy that bring both relief and exhaustion. In Lacanian terms, this aligns with the jouissance, the paradoxical experience in which a subject is caught between the desire for freedom and the restless excess produced by the very structure that sustains them. Therefore, James is unable to fully break from the conditions that shape his subjectivity. In this sense, James's reflection reveals how trauma operates as it compels action without offering resolution, producing a cycle in which survival itself becomes entangled with the very forces that are liable to cause harm.

Everett's novel ends with another salient revision that not only highlights extended torture that Jim receives at the hands of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn in the guise of freeing him in a moral climax of *Huckleberry Finn,* but also serves to place Huck as a vulnerable young boy himself who means well for James but is also naturally driven to prioritise his own safety. In Twain's novel, the defining moment of Huck's ethical development occurs when he faces the most difficult decision of his life that is the revelation of the whereabouts of Jim to his legal owner. Huck finally rejects the racist values he has been taught since childhood and chooses loyalty to Jim, while also believing that

this decision will condemn him and hollow him spiritually. Everett's reworking of this scene in *James* significantly offers a different course on account of its meaning and emotional weight. The novel draws attention to the fact that Huck's supposed sacrifice is only symbolic and his imagined descent into "hell" is hypothetical and is not one of the lived experiences. Thus, *James* reminds us that its protagonist also genuinely faces the threat of damnation by enduring it daily.

The last chapter in *James* opens with these lines: "As happens with the frightened and the unprepared, we scattered. Some of us would be caught. Some of us would be killed. Probably some of us would go crawling back" (Everett, 2024, p. 316). This brings us to the novel's uncertain ending, a narrative choice that reflects the broader vulnerable conditions surrounding African American lives. This ambiguous ending of the novel is contiguous with what precedes it, for the novel consistently foregrounds racial violencemand the demand to perform an identity to stay safe at the hands of white masters. The moral epiphany celebrated in the original becomes, an inventory of the limitations of white moral imagination as presented by Everett.

Thus, Everett makes a strong point that trauma and race are not only represented but are fundamentally redefined through James's evolving perspective. The narrative transformation shifts the focus from Huck's moral struggle and toward James's ongoing confrontation with a world that replicates hell-like conditions. Despite its humour and lightness of being, the novel ultimately presents a more realistic and far bleaker understanding of the racial experience that exposes the unbridgeable gap between theoretical sacrifice and the lived trauma endured by James.

By insisting on his own name, James in the final scene of the novel again asserts his refusal to be confined by the diminutive identity imposed on him. This is also symbolic of James's

stepping into a long-awaited freedom that he has effectively orchestrated for himself. After managing a successful escape for his family and others, he goes on to reject the name that had once bound him to the logic of enslavement and instead claims 'James' as an assertion of his evolved self. When the local sheriff inquires whether any of them is "Nigger Jim," James refuses the imposed name and asserts his own: "I am James" (Everett, 2024, p. 316).

This insistence on being called by his proper name marks a shift in James's understanding of himself before and after enduring a lifetime of racial performance. The final scene emphasizes that although race has defined his interior life, James emerges with a capacity to recognize the system's contradictions, act decisively against them, and imagine a self no longer contained by them. In this way, the ending does not resolve the psychic pressures of race so much as demonstrate James's resilience in in the face of all odds, allowing the narrative to close on a moment of self-authored possibility.

Conclusion

As the analysis above shows, I have examined Percival Everett's *James* (2024) by drawing on Sheldon George's work on trauma and race, especially his reworking of the Lacanian psychoanalytic notion of "Jouissance" and Toni Morrison's ideas on whiteness and the literary imagination. I have argued that in recreating Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Everett's *James* (2024) engages with the vulnerability and psychic trauma of its central figure. The character of James evinces a great deal of resilience through his small acts of care including his efforts to ensure his family's safety within the limits of his capacity. Hence, Everett not only reverses the order of things in his reimagined tale but also changes the vantage point in favour of the ordinary yet transformative acts through which racial and traumatic experiences are negotiated.

References

Everett, P. (2024). *James*. Doubleday.

Garner, D. (2024, March 11). 'Huck Finn' is a masterpiece. This retelling just might be, too. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/11/books/review/percival-everett-james.html

George, S. (2016). *Trauma and race: A Lacanian study of African American racial identity*. Baylor University Press.

Larkin, L. (2015). *Race and the literary encounter: Black literature from James Weldon Johnson to Percival Everett*. Indiana University Press.

Nadal, M., & Calvo, M. (Eds.). (2014). *Trauma in contemporary literature: Narrative and representation*. Routledge.

Twain, M. (2014). *The adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Penguin Classics.

Warren, K. W. (2011). *What was African American literature?* Harvard University Press.