ISSN 1799-2591
Theory and Practice in Language Studies, Vol. 15, No. 12, pp. 3901-3909, December 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1512.09

Sillinity as Survival: Humor and the Modern Refugee Condition in Three Narratives

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***Abstract*—This paper explores the concept of "sillinity", an intentional lighthearted absurdity, as a narrative strategy in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and contemporary refugee memoirs: Atef Abu Saif's *Don't Look Left: A Diary of Genocide* (2024) and Yusra Mardini's *Butterfly: From Refugee to Olympian—My Story of Rescue, Hope, and Triumph* (2018). While Twain's novel is celebrated for its humor and satire, this study argues that its sillinity operates as an emblem of resilience and survival under precarious conditions. By examining Huck's humor to navigate societal and geographical borders, alongside Abu Saif's and Mardini's use of humor to confront displacement and state violence, the paper highlights sillinity's ability to transcend temporal and geographical boundaries. This analysis positions Huckleberry Finn as a timeless text that offers a nuanced framework for understanding the interplay between humor and endurance in the contemporary refugee narratives and establishes sillinity as a universal tool for reclaiming agency and resisting subjugation.**

***Index Terms*—refugees, humor, sillinity, resistance, displacement**

I. Introduction

Through Humor, you can soften some of the worst blows that life delivers. And once you find laughter, no matter how painful your situation might be, you can survive it.

—Bill Cosbey

A sense of humor... is needed armor.

—Hugh Sidey

Displacement is as old as humanity. People leave off and travel in search of better realities and in hope of establishing better futures. Nonetheless, forced displacement has only been acknowledged in scholarly work post WWII (Orchard, 2016). This shift in scholarly focus emerged due to the unprecedented scale and systematic nature of displacement during and after the war, which highlighted the need for formal recognition and study of its causes, impacts, and solutions. Kendra Strauss defines displacement as "a moment, when something shifts or changes and creates a corresponding realignment in being, action, or thought" (p. 623). Current sociopolitical orders have created serious unrest especially in the global south and in the MENWA region (Middle East and North West Africa) causing a surge in the number of refugees within the past two decades, such as the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis or the persecution of Rohingya in Myanmar (Becker, 2022, p. 3). These refugees are realigned in being, action, and in thought due to a moment that led to their displacement. Though the moment that creates the realignment of being differs in its geographical, political, and social triggers that set it in motion, it has undeniable overlapping outcomes for all displaced individuals. Sascha O. Becker in "Forced displacement in history: Some recent research" provides a brief taxonomy of forced displacement; "[e]pisodes of forced displacement display substantial variation in scale: conflicts—or, analogously, natural disasters—can affect small groups, in the case of selective expulsions along ethnic, racial or religious lines, or can take the form of mass expulsions of millions of individuals" (Becker, 2022, pp. 3-4). In other words, displacement can be caused by natural disasters or violent conflicts, can result in the displacement of a small number of people or of millions, and it varies in temporality as it can be either "temporary, such as when refugees find transitory shelter in a safe country while waiting to return to their home countries, or it can be permanent, as in the case of forced population movements after WWII when European borders were redrawn" (Becker, 2022, p. 4). In this research article we do not intend to provide a holistic ontology or taxonomy of displacement, but we intend to tackle the meaning of displacement in a way that allows for the disintegration of its characteristics as to show, whether forced or voluntary displacement and whether refugee, migrant, or immigrant, that the moment of displacement calls for a

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realignment in behavioral tactics that refugees equip themselves with to survive.

This research article focuses on refugees—precariat individuals who are internally and externally forced into displacement while that displacement is still ongoing. We closely examine displaced people's reliance on and need for innocent humor, what we call "sillinity" which is lighthearted absurdity to be able to escape their harsh realities and survive. We argue that Mark Twain's Huck in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is an emblematic character who jokes and pranks others around him throughout his journey to be able to connect with his surroundings and reaffirm his realigned being. While Twain's novel is celebrated for its humor and satire, this study argues that its sillinity serves as an emblem of resilience and survival under precarious conditions, a theme that resonates with the lived experiences of modern refugees. By examining Huck's navigation of societal and geographical borders, the paper draws parallels to the refugee's use of humor, improvisation, and subversion in the face of displacement, alienation, and state violence. Through this lens, Huckleberry Finn transcends its historical context, offering a nuanced framework to understand the complex interplay between humor and endurance in the contemporary refugee narrative.

In this article, we scrutinize Huck's "sillinity" as a survival tool that is elastic and contagious. It is contagious as it affects other characters around him lightening their burdens and reminding them that life is worth living. It is elastic as it transcends temporal and literal borders becoming an emblem of the modern refugees' condition of displacement showing that sillinity is not only needed for survival but is also a tool of resistance. We scrutinize refugees' sillinity in literature to reflect on the role literature plays in shaping our understanding of survival under oppressive conditions. And finally, we reflect on how sillinity appears in modern refugee narratives, mainly Yusra Mardini's *Butterfly: From Refugee to Olympian-My Story of Rescue, Hope, and Triumph* (2018) and Atef Abu Saif's *Don't Look Left: A Diary of Genocide* (2024), to reflect on and exemplify its contagion and elastic essence.

II. Discussion

Humor as a term has been researched extensively, yet critics do not agree on a specific definition due to the wide scale of behavioral and cognitive characteristics that this term encompasses. For Sigmund Freud, a humorous joke is a "playful judgment" that grants a form of "aesthetic freedom" through "a sort of judging released from its usual rules and regulations" (Freud, 1990, p. 5). In *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*, Rod A. Martin describes humor as "a type of mental play involving a lighthearted, nonserious attitude toward ideas and events," while emphasizing that humor also "serves a number of serious social, emotional, and cognitive functions" (Martin, 2007, p. 1). Martin concludes that these characteristics position the study of humor firmly within academic psychology (p. 3). Similarly, Sultanoff (2002) contends that humor is "comprised of three components:" intellectual wit, emotional gaiety, and laughter. Sultanoff further explicates that "we often equate laughter with humor, but you do not need to laugh to experience humor" (Sultanoff, 2002, p. 1). Michael Sliter, Aron Kale, and Zhenyu Yuan, in "Is Humor the Best Medicine?" confirm the claim that humor and laughter are distinct while listing various types of humor. Of particular interest here is "coping humor," that is humor that "can combat the effects of stress" (Sliter et al., 2014, p. 259). Coping humor buffers stress as it facilitates "positive reinterpretation, social bonding, and physiological effects" (Sliter et al., 2002, p. 260). Coping humor aligns with Freud's idea of "playful judgment," it is lighthearted, but most importantly, coping humor is a human social act that is void of feeling.

The distinction between humor and laughter is paramount because monkeys, chimpanzees and other animals can laugh. Thus, coping humor is inherently human and only human. While many critics call the human the laughing animal, it is actually humor that distinguishes the human and not laughter (Bergson, 2014, p. 4a). Henri Bergson in *Humor: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* argues that humor "does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly HUMAN. A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable" (Bergson, 2014, p. 4a). When we find a hat or an animal humorous it is only because we "have detected in it some human attitude or expression" (Bergson, 2014, p. 4a). Bergson further argues that another important symptom of coping humor is "the absence of feeling" as it "seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled. Indifference is its natural environment" (Bergson, 2014, p. 4a). For Bergson, to "produce the whole of its effect, then, the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart" (Bergson, 2014, p. 4b). Thus, for coping humor to manifest itself one needs to detach themselves from the situation that is charged with emotions. Bergson then concludes that coping humor is social in nature. "You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo" (Bergson, 2014, p. 4b). This does not mean one needs to be in a group to find something humorous, for someone might indeed deem something humorous while in solitude. It rather entails that humor is a social construct that echoes our shared experiences and builds on mutual understandings of life and humanity.

Coping humor manifests prominently in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, particularly through the character of Huck. Huck is represented as an innocent child who contemplates morality, existence, religion, slavery, education, and crime (to name a few) in a lighthearted humorous manner. Nonetheless, Huck's humor is too often unintentional and unconscious. For instance, when Miss Watson, Widow Douglass' sister, attempts to teach Huck about heaven (the "good place") and hell (the "bad place") Huck exclaims:

> Then for an hour it was deadly dull, and I was fidgety. Miss Watson would say, "Don't put your feet up there, Huckleberry;" and "don't scrunch up like that, Huckleberry—set up straight;" and pretty soon she would say,

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> "Don't gap and stretch like that, Huckleberry—why don't you try to behave?" Then she told me all about the bad place, and I said I wished I was there. She got mad, then, but I didn't mean no harm. All I wanted was to go somewhere; all I wanted was a change, I warn't particular. She said it was wicked to say what I said; said she wouldn't say it for the whole world; she was going to live so as to go to the good place. Well, I couldn't see no advantage in going where she was going, so I made up my mind I wouldn't try for it. but I never said so, because it would only make trouble, and wouldn't do no good. (Twain, 1998, pp. 15-16)

Huck's reaction to Miss Watson's theological teachings is a classic example of coping humor. His response is an innocent lighthearted and unintentional comeback. Huck is unaware of the humorous effects of his remarks and is also oblivious to what it is he is actually commenting on, which is mainly why Huck is a funny character. Nonetheless, Huck knows that his remarks are what put an end to the conversation. This incident happens in the second chapter of the novel and sets the tone for Huck's views and attitudes. In other words, because Huck's humor effectively relieves him from a suffocating and "deadly dull" situation, it is adopted by Huck from this point on and becomes a coping form of humor—it resurfaces and is employed by Huck when he feels the need to escape a situation that is "too dull" or too intense for him.

Huck's coping humor opens up opportunities for newness. It is a type of humor that is needed, used, and resorted to unconsciously in dire situations to be able to better adapt with new forced circumstances—what we will be calling "sillinity". This form of humor is not a turn away from the conventual definition of coping humor presented above but a return to it. Sillinity is social, human, and devoid of emotional weight, but most importantly it is innate and usually unintentional. Humor is "a universal aspect of human experience, occurring in all cultures and virtually all individuals throughout the world" (Martin, 2007, p. 3). Its universality lies in its deeply rooted connection to human nature. Rod A. Martin in *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* observes:

> Infants begin to laugh in response to the actions of other people at about four months of age…The innateness of laughter is further demonstrated by the fact that even children born deaf and blind have been reported to laugh appropriately, without ever having perceived the laughter of other…There is evidence of specialized brain circuits for humor and laughter in humans, which researchers are beginning to identify by means of neural imaging studies. Thus, being able to enjoy humor and express it through laughter seems to be an essential part of what it means to be human. (Martin, 2007, p. 4)

The innateness of sillinity creates a balance between critique and entertainment. This form of coping humor helps the individual connect with their inner child and feel safe through deriving a form of "psychological distance" which in turn "helps the individual in detaching emotionally from stressors…[t]his distancing will enable a reduction in the perceived severity" of the situation (Mishra, 2024, p. 3). This psychological distance that sillinity makes possible, is what many displaced individuals resort to in order to protect their agency and their subjectivity of the self (in the Lacanian sense). Refugees, for instance, often resort to sillinity as a coping mechanism that helps them detach from dire realities, if only momentarily, to be able to reconnect with their inner self. This moment of sillinity offers up spaces in which individuals, especially when experiencing displacement and refugeedom, are allowed to reaffirm their humanity and their right to fight for survival.

Aditi Mishra and Shruti Dutt in "Examining the Interplay of Coping Mechanisms and Humor Styles in High-Stress Scenarios" argue that "[s]hared mirth nurtures friendship that is grounded on the sense of shared being which results in mutual engagement and support" (Mishra, 2024, p. 4). Mishra and Dutt elaborate that during challenging times, humor "can help people overcome the struggle of self-expression, to better mingle with one another and show care and compassion" (Mishra, 2024, p. 4). "Humor has been described as producing a cognitive-affective shift or a restructuring of the situation so that it is less threatening, with a concomitant release of emotion associated with the perceived threat" (Abel, 2002, p. 366). When working through a "demanding situation, people can use their humor as a means of asserting control over the situation or even the adversity of life itself, and this helps them to take command and feel empowered and like they can cope well" (Mishra, 2024, p. 4). Accordingly, "migration studies' failure to recognize migrants as humorous individuals risks feeding into processes of exceptionalization and dehumanization through setting the migrant up as an obscure figure that lacks 'essentially human' qualities" (Franck, 2022, p. 1). In other words, humor "is a part of everyday life" and thus it is an integral part of displacement—refugees use it "to interact with each other and with the outside world" (Franck, 2022, p. 3). In this sense, Huck's sillinity serves as a prototype of refugees' resistance. As a displaced figure, Huck navigates his journey with a lighthearted resilience that mirrors the experiences of modern refugees.

When Huck struggles with deciding whether he is doing the right thing in helping Jim escape slavery, he questions American morality and compares it to a dog, concluding that if his morality was indeed a dog, he would poison it and kill it because it is dysfunctional:

> So we poked along back home, and I warn't feeling so brash as I was before, but kind of ornery, and humble, and to blame, somehow—though I hadn't done nothing. But that's always the way; it don't make no difference whether you do right or wrong, a person's conscience ain't got no sense, and just goes for him anyway. If I had a yaller dog that didn't know no more than a person's conscience does I would pison him. It takes up more room than all the rest of a person's insides, and yet ain't no good, nohow. (Twain, 1998, p. 240)

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Huck's humor highlights his struggle understanding conscience and morality, which he views as an overbearing and useless organ, subtly critiquing the moral contradictions of the American society. For Huck, conscience takes up too much space inside a human body for something that fails at guiding people effectively. His sillinity here exposes the defects in the American community's moral compass while offering a moment of humor.

Another instance where Huck employs sillinity to create relief and help others resist injustices is when he decides to tell Mary Jane, the daughter of a deceased rich English man, that the Duke and the Dauphine are not her real uncles but frauds deceiving her and her sisters. Huck starts by telling Mary Jane, "I don't want nothing more out of YOU than just your word—I druther have it than another man's kiss-the-Bible" (Twain, 1998, p. 199). Instantaneously, though, he tells her to not "holler. Just set still and take it like a man," forgetting that he just announced he does not trust men—ridiculing societal gender biases (Twain, 1998, p. 199). Huck also resorts to sillinity to ease his fear of exclusion when the boys in town gather up to play "robbers" and decide each robber in their gang must have a family for the gang to use that family as leverage, to threaten the gang member if needed:

> They talked it over, and they was going to rule me out, because they said every boy must have a family or somebody to kill, or else it wouldn't be fair and square for the others. Well, nobody could think of anything to do—everybody was stumped, and set still. I was most ready to cry; but all at once I thought of a way, and so I offered them Miss Watson—they could kill her. (Twain, 1998, p. 21)

Huck's humorous sacrifice of Miss Watson criticizes how children are disregarded and not taught the value of familial bonds or integrity. Simultaneously, the humorous remark lightens the mood and provides a coping mechanism for Huck. Later in the novel, Huck also engages sillinity to criticize figures of authority. When Jim asks what kings are and what do they do, Huck answers: "[t]hey just set around—except, maybe, when there's a war; then they go to the war. But other times they just lazy around; or go hawking" (Twain, 1998, p. 68). The blend of Huck's candid remarks and innocent tone amplifies the humor while subtly criticizing abuse of authority, illustrating how sillinity is a tool that questions constructed social ideologies.

Huck's sillinity is also often resorted to when Huck grapples with America's slave system and its underlying systematic and institutional racism. When he asks Tom Sawyer not to tell on him for plotting to free Jim, he is completely surprised that Tom offers to help him, as helping Huck indicates that Tom is willing to turn his back on his white supremacist societal norms. Huck exclaims: "I let go all holts then, like I was shot. It was the most astonishing speech I ever heard—and I'm bound to say Tom Sawyer fell considerable in my estimation. Only I couldn't believe it. Tom Sawyer a NIGGER-STEALER!" (Twain, 1998, p. 235). According to Huck's understanding, Tom's agreement to help him do something considered "bad" according to society, indicates that Tom has no principles—which are considered a marker of the white community's characteristics. Similarly, when Jim willingly forfeits his freedom to help Tom who might bleed to death, Huck affirms that even though Jim is black from the outside, "I knowed he was white inside" (Twain, 1998, p. 279). Huck's observation reflects his internalized racial biases but also suggests that it is absurd to define humanity through race, illustrating sillinity's ability to tackle heavy themes with levity. Finally, when Huck manages to get to the doctor to ask him to help Tom with his wound, he tries his best to cover up the fact that he and Tom are involved in the runaway slave incident that occurred that evening. Nonetheless, anxious to prevent suspicion Huck ends up saying Tom had a dream, and his dream shot him: "'He had a dream,' I says, 'and it shot him'" (Twain, 1998, p. 281). Huck's sillinity here provides comic relief, lightening the mood while navigating the tense circumstances of the characters. Through these examples, Huck's sillinity emerges as a tool that balances humor and critique. While Huck's sillinity is rooted in his innocence, it extends beyond the personal to reflect broader assessments of morality, authority, and systemic oppression.

Huckleberry Finn is the emblem of the modern refugee condition because his sillinity is elastic and is adopted by the modern refugee as a survival toolkit. Huck is a displaced figure whose innate tool of resistance sustains him in his journey in search of a better home away from oppressive figures of authority. The fluidity of his silliness arises from the transcendent nature of his journey. Put simply, Huck, as a classic character created by one of America's most influential nineteenth century realists, transcends geographical and historical borders. His sillinity, thus, becomes elastic, affecting those inside and outside Mark Twain's text. Huck's sillinity is an integral aspect of the essence of refugeedom in the twenty first century, as modern refugees engage with sillinity to be able to transcend their realities into spaces they create for themselves, where they would feel more in touch with their true selves.

One major similarity between Huck and the modern refugee in the narrative form is their shared status of displacement, another, equally significant, is that their resistance to systematic injustices and their ability to maintain their sense of self in the face of radical change is often without direct confrontation. Mark Twain's Novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, bridges a gap in the scholarly examination of humor and displacement, setting a precedent for understanding the role of sillinity in the experiences of refugees and displaced figures. Sillinity serves as a lens for understanding how people manage their survival and identity during times of upheaval, through the preservation of cultural memory and through the negotiation of new social and political realities. Sillinity allows the displaced to resist dehumanization through creativity and humor. It helps the refugee figure reinstate a sense of community and belonging that usually dissolves during forced dislocation. Sillinity during displacement helps refugees return to a moment of self-recognition which brings them comfort and warmth, better equipping them to face the cruelties of an exodus. Bellow, we closely examine two memoirs—Yusra Mardini's *Butterfly: From Refugee to*

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Olympian-My Story of Rescue, Hope, and Triumph (2018) and Atef Abu Saif's *Don't Look Left: A Diary of Genocide* (2024)—as archetypal texts that show the high synergy between Mark Twain's narrative techniques and those employed in modern refugee narratives, where sillinity is employed as a tool of resistance.

Refugees resist dislocation and displacement in various ways to be able to persist. In "(De)Bordering by Laughter. What Can Different Kinds of Laughter Reveal About the Experiences of Everyday Bordering Among Asylum Seekers and Refugees?" Tiina Sotkasiira and Sanna Ryynänen elucidate that one of the main challenges that face refugees as asylum seekers are the bordering practices that are meant to "exclude and marginalize asylum seekers and refugees" in host societies (Sotkasiira, 2024, p. 476). The writers then add that humor and laughter are "de-bordering" activities that are meant to remove societal borders (Sotkasiira, 2024, p. 276). Humor, for the displaced is a tool that flips control and power upside down. It is a tool that helps refugees negotiate and make sense of their forced displacement (Hernann, 2016, p. 58). Humor amongst displaced individuals is, thus, essential because it provides a "cathartic release of anxiety or anger while bringing people together and reinforcing the boundaries between in- and out-group" (Hernann, 2016, p. 58). For Achille Mbembe in *On the Postcolony*, humor is not intended to inflict damage nor is it capable of damaging "the material base" of ruling systems, but it rather exposes the truth that such powers try hard to hide (Mbembe, 2001, pp. 108-111). Thus, Humor does not only resist aggressive regimes (the aggression here is directed towards the refugee figure and not necessarily against other groups) and provide a moment of relief, but for the refugee humor records the historical present that many willingly ignore and actively try to erase. Consequently, many humourology scholars deem it a language—Andrew Hernann, for example, calls humor "an unofficial speech genre" (Hernann, 2016, p. 60). As explained earlier, humor helps the displaced reconnect with their individuality and humanity, and hence, reinstate their agency and sense of belonging. "Earlier anthropologists" examined how "stateless societies" use humor "to remain integrated" as it "maintains order and enhances group solidarity" (Hernann, 2016, p. 64). Humor nurtures a sense of communitas, "easing individual stress and loneliness while also alleviating communal existential anxiety" (Hernann, 2016, p. 72). As the displaced adapt to navigate their new realities they "rely on replacements of one thing by another" (Strauss, 2022, p. 624). Too often, they replace safety, warmth, agency, and the familiar with humor; displaced humor or sillinity. Humor, for those on the run, is displaced because it is no longer a natural expression of cheerfulness but a tool for survival. For refugees, humor is a familiar language that helps them reclaim agency in the face of instability. In this sense, sillinity transforms fear and disorientation into moments of relief, permitting the displaced to assert their humanity amidst dehumanizing conditions.

An example of a contemporary narrative that engages with sillinity as an integral part of the modern refugee's condition is Yusra Mardini's *Butterfly: From Refugee to Olympian—My Story of Rescue*, *Hope, and Triumph* (2018). Yusra and Sara Mardini are two Syrian refugees forced to leave Syria in 2015. The two sisters leave their family behind and embark on a treacherous journey across the Aegean Sea in hopes of reaching Germany. Yusra, only seventeen at the time, published an autobiographical narrative about her displacement. Her life story became an international sensation because Yusra and her sister swam their way to the Greek Island of Lesbos. The narrative details with chilling effects the horrors of displacement, but is simultaneously rife with humor. Yusra's older sister, Sara, takes it upon herself to ensure that Yusra and the others are always laughing because she knows humor and laughter can sustain resilience. Sara's humor is then picked up by the others transforming the narrative into a brilliant satirical critique from the point of view of a group of teenagers. For example, when the group discusses which option would be best to reach Europe, they are anxious and indecisive. Ahmad, their father's cousin and their companion on the run, says: "'Alright'…We'll take the boat. The swimmers will save us, of course" (Mardini, 2018, p. 77). Ironically, the swimmers do save them.

When everyone is extremely tense and scared as they board the dinghy, Sara makes fun of the muscular smugglers and fashions humorous jokes giving people nicknames related to cartoon shows that she is sure her sister would understand: "this little guy looks just like Mowgli from The Jungle Book" Sara announces (Mardini, 2018, p. 82). Yusra bursts out laughing, which annoys the smuggler, but Sara refuses to stop; "Is laughing against the rules or something?" (Mardini, 2018, p. 82). The anxiety they are all experiencing reaches its peak when their dinghy's engine breaks midway to Greece. Instantly, both Mardinis jump into the water to help steer and push the dinghy. The girls spend a long period of time in the water and are unable to push the rubber boat because of the rising tide. Everyone on the boat is silent and terrified until Sara decides to break the tension by drawing attention to her pants:

> 'Hey, Ayham,' calls Sara after about twenty minutes. 'Can you do something about my jogging pants?' says Sara. 'They keep falling down.'
>
> 'I've got a knife,' says Ayham. 'We'll cut them off at the bottom. Pass me your leg.'
>
> Sara spins around to face the open sea and lifts her right leg up out of the water towards him. Her trousers sag around her thighs, exposing her underwear. Despite everything, Bassem and I can't help but giggle. She's laughing too. I reach out with my free hand and hoist up the waistband to save her more embarrassment. (Mardini, 2018, p. 107)

While a girl's exposed underwear might be deemed shameful or even provoke discussions about her compromised honor in Levantine culture, Sara's actions do not dismiss cultural norms but instead repurpose them as material for humor in a calamitous situation. This unintentional act of sillinity, where dignity is offered as a sacrificial object, parallels Huck's offering of Miss Watson as collateral damage for the boy gang in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The protagonists, in both instances, destabilize societal expectations—Sara reclaims dignity through laughter, while

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Huck, repurposes Miss Watson's societal role to navigate his dilemmas. These acts underscore the ability to overcome anxiety by redefining the norm and criticizing it. Sara and Yusra Mardini's reliance on sillinity continues even after the initial survival phase. Their first night in Greece they sleep in a small church. When they wake up, they are haggard from the sea crossing. Sara's "face is red and covered in scratches and blue bruises. Her hair has come out of its bun and sticks up in wiry strands around her head. The ragged remains of her trousers are streaked white with dried salt" (Mardini, 2018, p. 130). Yusra stifles a laugh and says: "My God…What happened to you?" (Mardini, 2018, p. 130). Then, as they walk around the streets of Lesbos. Yusra sees a statue of a "woman in long, flowing robes faces out to sea with one foot forwards. In her right hand she holds aloft a burning torch." Immediately, Yusra exclaims that it must be "the Statue of Liberty" at which Ayham grinningly says "Yeah, that boat must have gotten us further than we thought," so Yusra "whacks his arm" and everyone laughs (Mardini, 2018, p. 134). Humor employed by refugees in situations of displacement becomes an act of sillinity—a subversive tool that enables them to maintain agency and resist the dehumanizing forces around them while fostering solidarity.

Humor as a means of survival, particularly amongst Syrian refugees in Lesbos, is closely examined by Anja K. Franck in "Laughable borders: Making the case for the humorous in migration studies." While walking through Mytilene, Franck, accompanied by a group of researchers, encounters a group of Syrian men sitting down in a doorway. The men were preparing to have a meal they have ordered from a nearby restaurant that serves "delicious fried fish on the back of brown paper bags" (Franck, 2022, p. 6). Qasim, "a medical doctor from Aleppo", invites the researchers to join the group for dinner, at which the Syrian refugees "crack jokes about the conditions under which they are now entertaining guests. Under normal circumstances, they chuckle, invited guests are not eating from paper bags" (Franck, 2022, p. 6). During their conversation the Syrian men erupt in laughter at one of their friends "urging the man to open his mouth to show us the missing tooth in his upper jaw. We stare at him – and the others – puzzled by this reaction from the group. Qasim laughingly explains: 'When we stepped ashore on the island, he was so happy he waved his hands in the air and knocked out his own tooth!'" (Franck, 2022, p. 8). These moments parallel Yusra and Sara Mardini's humor. In the context of displacement, humor "should not be underestimated. To the contrary, they can function as tools for temporarily reclaiming time and space, in ways that instill a sense of normality" amongst refugees (Franck, 2022). They go about everyday life activities, eating, sleeping, and conversing with others around them, but as nothing about their everyday life activities is normal, humor is what helps them recover a sense of normality.

The journey of Yusra and Sara Mardini from Hungary to Budapest, charged with tension, is similarly punctuated by humor. Hungary is a high-risk destination especially for Syrian refugees, so the group decides to camp in one of the fields so they can carry on to Budapest in the morning. Yusra notices that one of the young girls in the group "looks close to tears" (Mardini, 2018, p. 151). Yusra approaches the girl and wittingly tells her she has "been looking for a new stylist" and asks the girl to plait her hair (Mardini, 2018, p. 151). The girl gets to work and Yusra manages to distract her. In another instance, while on a train headed to Budapest, the two sisters are caught and hurled into a police truck, where they meet another captured refugee:

> 'Hello,' says the man on the seat, grinning and flashing his white teeth in the dark.
>
> I jump out of my skin. Sara giggles. In the light from the cabin window I can just make out the man's multicoloured t-shirt and red trousers. The engine starts. The man points over his shoulder towards the two policemen in the cab.
>
> 'Look, look, look, look, look, look,' he says in a thick Afghan accent.
>
> I stifle a giggle. The truck turns a corner and rolls down the road. The man pulls out his phone and grins again. He fiddles with the phone until a wheedling pop song blasts out of the tinny speakers. He raises his hands in the air.
>
> 'Look, look, look, look, look, look,' he says over the music.
>
> We're all laughing out loud now. Hysteria takes hold inside the van. It's like a release. The laughter gives me courage and strength, makes me feel as if I can take on whatever might be coming next. (Mardini, 2018, p. 178)

The refugee already inside the police truck uses cheerful antics to lighten the grim situation. The moment of humor, which leads to laughter, here, is a moment in which refugees reclaim their subjectivity and humanity. It is a "momentarily 'turning away' from power" that represents a "disinvestment with the order" (Franck, 2022, p. 8). Yusra and Sara refuse to let the police officers intimidate them. They rather persist in acting normal and they spend their time in the police truck laughing. For Yusra, laughter is a "release" that opens up spaces where she can recollect herself and feel empowered.

Once in the Hungarian prison, Sara and Yusra are patted down and stripped of their belongings. Notwithstanding, the girls laugh it off:

> 'that was fun,' I say once she's gone. 'What was all that about the shoelaces?'
>
> 'Yeah, she took mine too,' says Sara. 'As if I could kill myself with a shoelace. What a joke. I told her if we wanted to kill ourselves we would have stayed in Syria'. (Mardini, 2018, p. 180)

The girls' humor in these episodes carry implications of the internalized awareness of the cruelty of displacement. It is evident that the girls' humor identifies the "indecency and indignity" which displaced individuals are forced to experience, but it also "represented a refusal to 'normalize' [such practices] and be drawn into the very politics that

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enabled them in the first place" (Franck, 2022, p. 10). Humor exposes the absurdity of life in precarious conditions, and represent refugees' refusal to succumb to these conditions, a refusal rooted in sillinity.

Another contemporary narrative in which sillinity is employed as a form of resistance is Atef Abu Saif's *Don't Look Left: A Diary of Genocide* (2024). A Palestinian refugee from Gaza and former Minister of Culture in Palestine, Abu Saif's diary expands on the themes of his earlier work, *The Drone Eats with Me: A Gaza Diary* (2015). Rather than a direct sequel, *Don't Look Left* is a continuation, showing that as the ongoing war and displacement of Palestinians persist, so do Abu Saif's diaries and his use of sillinity as a form of resistance. For example, after twenty-three days of bombardment, there was a frenzy in Gaza because of the return of phone signal. "The street is once again full of people. Hundreds of them. Nearly everyone is out there. It looks like Eid. Everyone is on their phone calling other parts of their family, as so many are divided. Everyone is happy, even if only for a few minutes" (Abu Saif, 2024, p. 82). Abu saif adds, no one "cares that the attacks are continuing and the explosions getting louder. Everyone is taking a break from everything else that is happening and just checking their own relatives are okay. It should be a time for mourning and grieving, but for a moment it is time for reunions over the phone" (Abu Saif, 2024, p. 83). Comparing a war zone to Eid celebrations is a layered form of humor, which makes the gleam reality in Palestine clearer. This short moment of reunions and its accompanied momentarily happiness expose the tenderness of the displaced and their desperate need for moments of relief.

On October 30th, 2024 Abu Saif drives his friend Mohammad and his son Yasser back to their flat in Saftawi. Their mission is to retrieve the gas cylinder so the family can cook hot meals. Abu Saif waits for them in the car ready to drive off the minute they are out of the building. Abu Saif "suggest[s] that, on exiting the building, Yasser carries a mattress and a pillow with him so the drone operator thinks [they] are evacuating the apartment" (Abu Saif, 2024, p. 86). As they are anxiously running, carrying their own belongings, Abu Saif jokingly says they "look like they've just robbed a bank" (Abu Saif, 2024, p. 86). Abu Saif's sillinity is not meant to dispirit Muhammad and Yasser, but is meant as a refusal to acknowledge the authority of the Israeli Defense Forces, echoing Huck's refusal to acknowledge and obey authority in Mark Twain's text to maintain his agency. Lisa Bhungalia in "Laughing at power: Humor, transgression, and the politics of refusal in Palestine" argues that Palestinians' use of humor as a tool of resistance presents a new form of "political grammar" where "[t]o laugh or smile in the face of power is not necessarily an expression of opposition; it is a refusal to recognize the authoritative figure itself" (Bhungalia, 2020, p. 388). Bhungalia further contends that Palestinian humor "constitutes a mode and practice of refusal to normalize conditions of subjugation…wherein power is not opposed but disavowed" (p. 189). In a similar way, another instance where Abu Saif's sillinity is employed to disavow colonial power is when Israeli jets drop leaflets on Gazans urging them to move south. "The leaflet takes a high-minded, threatening tone. 'You are being used as human shields,' it" says (Abu Saif, 2024, p. 145). To which Abu Saif responds: "[t]hanks for that…You're the ones invading us, killing us, ethnically cleansing us, and you're the ones taking the moral high ground. We're not the BBC or CNN, I want to tell them" (Abu Saif, 2024, p. 145). In this instance of humor, Abu Saif not only disarms the leaflet of its power but also ridicules the subject of the joke, bringing in its allies for further mockery. Palestinian refusal to normalize subjugation entails a refusal to acknowledge colonial power and a refusal to grant news outlets recognition.

In addition to challenging authority, Abu Saif's humor also highlights the absurdities embedded in Palestinians' everyday experiences under occupation. On Monday the 13th of November, 2024, Abu Saif, like many other Gazans, takes to the streets to see how their city is doing:

> Walking on, I'm stopped by another man. He introduces himself as Alaa, someone who was at high school with me. 'You were one year ahead of me,' he tells me. He smiles and asks if the drone is still eating with me. He's referring to the title of my previous war diaries. 'It never stopped,' I reply. 'There's nothing left on the table, surely,' Alaa laughs. 'It's eaten us out of house and home'. (Abu Saif, 2024, p. 133)

Humor better captures constant Palestinian precariousness in Abu Saif's autobiographical entries. Alaa is happy to see a school friend, and an important Palestinian writer, alive. Nonetheless, both refugees here cannot engage in normal pleasantries, as they cannot ignore the death and destruction that surrounds them. Instead, they choose to joke about it because sillinity has the ability "to serve as a therapeutic critique of the fraught conditions in which the subjugated are enmeshed" (Bhungalia, 2020, p. 395). These fraught conditions take Abu Saif by surprise when, on Thursday November 30th, 2024, he meets a friend and a literary figure who is burning his collection of books to help provide for his family. Abu Saif writes:

> I met my two friends, Hani Al-Salmi and Ashraf Sohwail. Hani is a novelist, specialising in young adult fiction. We all sit together near his little kiosk, where he serves customers hot drinks. In the last few years, this 45-year-old writer has fallen on hard times and become unemployed. Now, with no energy supply, he has found it difficult to do simple things like bake bread. For weeks now, he has been trying to collect wood for his fire to cook. This has proven hard, he tells me, and recently he has been forced to burn the books in his library.
>
> So far, Hani has burned 200 books. 'My kids need bread,' he explains. 'What use are books if I let them die of hunger?' Then he smiled: 'Naturally, I'm saving my favourites till last, hoping the war will end before I get to them'. (Abu Saif, 2024, p. 190)

The drones' survival and the burning of the books while Palestinians lose home, family, and dignity are symptoms of over seventy years of subjugation. Humor, thus, offers an accurate grammar for capturing precariousness and

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displacement leading to a new mode of political rhetoric (Bhungalia, 2020, p. 392). Middle aged men joking about drones eating with them, and a writer humorously dismissing the burning of his book collection are not instances of defeat. Humor here becomes a performance in which the subjugated "laughs or smiles when she is expected to cower, to be mute, to be overtaken with fear. To refuse reduction to a mute object 'bereft of humanity' is to defy the normative scripts of that encounter. It destabilizes the colonial performance itself" (Bhungalia, 2020, p. 399). Sillinity is not an acceptance but a resistance. It is a tool that denies subjugating powers their desired effects. By adapting Huck's sillinity, Yusra Mardini and Atef Abu Saif, channel its re-interpretive potential to challenge the broader structures of power that define displacement.

III. Conclusion

In this paper, we have closely examined precariat displacement and its universal characteristics that lead to a realignment in being, action, and in thought. We explored how Huck's moment of displacement generated a coping sense of humor, we call "sillinity", which is a form of humor that is elastic, contagious, and rooted in resistance. Through detailed analyses of texts by Mark Twain, Atef Abu Saif, and Yusra Mardini, we have traced the residues of Huck's sillinity in modern refugee narratives. Huck's sillinity, as a refusal to conform to societal expectations, makes him an emblem of the modern refugee condition—a figure who navigates a world that seeks to control and define him, yet finds ways to resist and proclaim his humanity. Mark Twain's engagement with sillinity in the nineteenth century underscores its continuing relevance for all displaced individuals. This elasticity allows sillinity the flexibility to stretch across the literary canon, geopolitical borders, and temporal limitation.

As demonstrated in various examples throughout the article, sillinity surpasses its literary origins, escaping governance and offering refugees a tool for political defiance and self-assertion. Sillinity is not mere escapism but a deliberate survival strategy that displaced individuals rely on to de-border excluding practices and to regain agency and control over their chaotic realities. This form of humor is a social, human, and emotionless moment that is innate to human nature. Sillinity is far from being purely entertaining, it rather creates a balance between critique and entertainment, allowing displaced writers, like Atef Abu Saif and Yusra Mardini to challenge the normalization of violence and othering. By using humor as a tool to disarm authority and undermine its power without direct confrontation, sillinity becomes a subtle yet powerful mode of resistance. Through sillinity, refugees transcend dire circumstances, reclaiming time and space to experience a fleeting sense of normality. This form of humor helps displaced individuals defy the political grammar of displacement, offering an alternative space where fear and submission are replaced with solidarity, human connection, and an enduring affirmation of dignity.

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