



The World of Al-Akhdam in Ali Al-Muqri's Black Taste, Black Odour

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Abstract:

Limited scholarly attention has been given to Al-Akhdam, a Yemeni term synonymous with Al-Muhamasheen, which refers to marginalized people. This minority shrouded in misconceptions, and lacking in-depth scholarly exploration, finds its voice in Al-Muqri's novel, *Black Taste, Black Odour* (2008) which tells the story of a young woman from Al-Mazzina (marginalized) caste who elopes, leading to self-discovery and raising questions about identity and the role of Al-Akhdam community in Yemeni society. This journey reveals their perception of societal exclusion as a fundamental rejection, extending to their core identity – religion, homeland, and history. Through a historical, cultural, and social lens, the narrative explores the mechanisms of their marginalization, specifically focusing on the heightened vulnerability faced by Al-Akhdam women. This paper attempts to raise awareness of the problems faced by Al-Akhdam community and how they are portrayed in literature by closely examining the novel. Employing Subaltern and Critical Race Theory (CRT) frameworks, this analysis examines how power structures, ongoing discrimination, and the historical marginalization of minority groups intersect to perpetuate the social exclusion of Al-Akhdam community within Yemeni society. The narrative avoids stereotypical depictions, instead focusing on the multifaceted experiences of Al-Akhdam. The analysis contributes to understanding the complex mechanisms that perpetuate the marginalization of Al-Akhdam community within Yemeni society. This study aims to guide future efforts towards social justice and equality by showcasing their experiences.

Keywords: Al-Akhdam, Belonging, Identity, Love, Marginalization, Racism.

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عالم الأخدام في رواية (طعم أسود... رائحة سوداء) لعلي المقري

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الملخص:

تسعى الدراسة إلى مقارنة مجتمع (المهمشين) في رواية (طعم أسود... رائحة سوداء)، ويطلق على المهمشين -أيضاً- اسم (الأخدام)، وهم فئة تعاني من التهميش الممنهج والإقصاء الاجتماعي منذ قرون. ونظراً لقلّة الدراسات الأكاديمية التي تتناول معاناتهم، تُقدم هذه الدراسة تحليلاً لرواية "طعم أسود... رائحة سوداء" لعلي المقري (2008)، من أجل فهم آليات تهميش هذه الفئة. وتعتمد الدراسة على منهجية التحليل النقدي، مستخدمة إطار النظريات الفرعية ونظرية النقد القانوني الحرج (CRT). وتكشف الرواية عن التحديات التي تواجهها هذه الفئة على صعيد الانتماء والهوية والمكانة داخل المجتمع المتخيل. كما تُظهر الرواية إدراك مجتمع المهمشين للنبذ الاجتماعي باعتباره رفضاً جذرياً يطال هويتهم الدينية والوطنية والتاريخية. وتُقدم الدراسة تحليلاً معمّماً لآليات تهميش هذا المجتمع، مع التركيز على دور هياكل السلطة والتمييز المستمر والتهميش التاريخي في إدامة هذا الإقصاء. وتُشير الدراسة إلى أن الرواية تتجنب التصوير النمطي للمهمشين، وتركز بدلاً من ذلك على تجاربهم المتعددة. وتُقدم مساهمة في مجال دراسات الأقليات والعدالة الاجتماعية. كما تُسلط الضوء على أهمية الأدب في الكشف عن معاناة الفئات المهمشة وإيصال صوتها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأخدام، الانتماء، الهوية، الحب، التهميش، العنصرية.

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© نُشر هذا البحث وفقاً لشروط الرخصة Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)، التي تسمح بنسخ البحث وتوزيعه ونقله بأي شكل من الأشكال، كما تسمح بتكييف البحث أو تحويله أو إضافته إليه لأي غرض كان، بما في ذلك الأغراض التجارية، شريطة نسبة العمل إلى صاحبه مع بيان أي تعديلات أُجريت عليه.



1. Introduction

The term “*Muhamasheen*” in Arabic refers to an ethnic group in Yemen, derogatorily known as Al-Akhdam that faces marginalization and societal contempt by society. According to Awad (2012), the term “Muhamasheen” has substantial social significance and refers to a group of people who are excluded and exist outside of Yemen’s dominant socioeconomic framework (p.6). Their stories exemplify the severity of their institutional discrimination and prejudice, surpassing even the historical struggles of enslaved Yemeni people (Al-Mahfly, 2019, p. 8). For decades, Al-Akhdam have been plagued by poverty, casting an unbreakable shadow over their lives. Their history is a multi-layered tapestry made of both persistent mythology and verified historical events. The myths surrounding Al-Akhdam extend far beyond their historical origins, permeating every aspect of their daily lives. It influenced their means of subsistence, social customs, religious practices, and even their perceived moral code (Al-Qadi 2007). According to Achille Mbembe(2001), Al-Akhdam(plural form) are inferior to “the slave, the animal, and the native whose body can be degraded, whose life can be mutilated, and whose work and resources can be squandered with impunity” (p. 235). They endure a brutal form of social marginalization, often likened to racial discrimination. However, unlike historical examples of racial oppression in Africa, India, and America, which were rooted in the chattel slavery of Black people, Al-Akhdam’s marginalization stems from a complex web of historical, social, and economic factors.

In Yemen, the exclusion and marginalization of Al-Akhdam community hinge on factors such as their ambiguous ancestry and perceived ethnicity. These factors result in oppressive practices that severely limit their access to opportunities. Their marginalization has likely been exacerbated by historical oppression, which may have been connected to their ancestry as African descendants. Both overt and covert forms of discrimination continue to prevent them from accessing opportunities and resources. This narrative illustrates how these elements interact to produce a cycle of marginalization that is difficult to break free from. Despite the existence of other Yemeni minorities based on religious and sectarian grounds, Al-Akhdam in Yemeni society are the ones who are marginalized and subjected to racism based on color, ancestry, and ethnicity. They are regarded as being at the very bottom of Yemeni society’s socioeconomic scale and only have a very limited number of access points to fundamental services like healthcare, education, and the government. They are frequently denied access to political and economic opportunities and judged as inferior to other Yemenis. Historically, the term “Al-Akhdam” referred to a social category in Tihama and southern Yemen occupying the lowest ranks within the social hierarchy. Traditionally, Al-Akhdam community fulfilled various service roles, including street cleaning and shoemaking (Adra, 2006, p 22). They are also known for their musical and dancing skills.



The deeply ingrained societal mindset regarding the perceived uncleanness of the Akhdam community is primarily responsible for the perpetuation of their social isolation. Al-Sharjabi (1986) states that the significant disdain towards Akhdam and their exclusion from mainstream society is closely associated with the notion of hygiene that has been associated with them (p.286). Similarly, Sabria Al-Thawr (2021) adds that it is now accepted in society to reprimand children and encourage them to be clean by comparing them to the Muhamasheen ("dirty as Al-Khadim") or making similar comparisons in cases of bad or violent behavior, despite the peaceful nature of the Muhamasheen and their patience in the face of constant racial discrimination (Al-Thawr, 2021).

It is noteworthy that some of these biases are reproduced in the behaviours of characters like Aisha and Rabash (AL-Al-Rubaidi, 2018, p 12). This reinforces the notion that the social fabric itself is riddled with these prejudices. Thus, people have developed a strong fear of interacting, mingling, and eating with Al-Akhdam, which has contributed to the perpetuation of their rejection and isolation by society. Al-Akhdam are, in essence, linked to a variety of undesirable behaviors.

Despite their significant population, Al-Akhdam community exists in a state of social invisibility, leaving minimal documented records of their history and experiences. This isolation fosters the development of unsubstantiated legends and narratives surrounding their origins and way of life. The widespread acceptance of these narratives, often devoid of critical evaluation, reflects and reinforces their exclusion within Yemeni society. For example, some unsubstantiated narratives depict Al-Akhdam community engaging in cannibalistic practices. These disturbing tales contribute to their social exclusion and dehumanization. It is claimed that Al-Akhdam's class does not bury their dead but instead eats their corpses. The social exclusion of Al-Akhdam community renders them virtually invisible within Yemeni society. This invisibility fosters an environment where unsubstantiated narratives, however outlandish, can gain traction and contribute to their marginalization. Al-Akhdam community's experience of social exclusion and marginalization has led them to restrict the practice of their social rituals within the confines of their community. This likely stems from a fear of ridicule and mockery by dominant social classes. The pervasive social exclusion experienced by Al-Akhdam community has fostered a sense of vulnerability and fear of ridicule. This has led them to restrict the practice of their cultural rituals within their own social spaces, effectively hiding them from the gaze of dominant social classes. Unfortunately, past experiences have likely shown that these classes, both established and newly emerging, exhibit a lack of respect towards Al-Akhdam's cultural practices, even during sensitive occasions like death. Al-Akhdam community's experience of social exclusion compels them to conduct their burial rituals primarily at night. These rituals, while not inherently different from those practised by other social classes, are shrouded in secrecy to avoid potential mockery and disrespect. This shift to nighttime ceremonies reflects the



deep-seated fear of ridicule and the lack of empathy they encounter from dominant social groups, even during moments of mourning.

Although the exact historical beginning of this group is unknown, they have been living in Yemen for centuries. Some historical studies suggest that the origin of Al-Akhdam dates to the failed Abyssinian invasion of Yemen in the 6th century AD led by Abraha Al-Ashram. According to these studies, Al-Akhdam were among the general population of warriors who came to Yemen and were enslaved after their invasion failed, and some were expelled by Saif ibn Dhi Yazan. On the other hand, some descendants of this community, with their dark skin and African features, believe that they are one of the tribes that inhabited the city of Zabid in Hodeidah Governorate, southwestern Yemen (Al-Qadi, 2007). Despite unclear historical origins, Al-Akhdam community's presence in Yemen for centuries is undeniable. Generations have established roots, yet social integration remains elusive. They face entrenched marginalization, exclusion, and prejudice from dominant classes. This racism manifests in horrific acts like the rape of an Al-Akhdam housemaid, highlighting the severity of their plight. It is not solely tied to them being remnants of immigrants, as Yemen is filled with diverse origins, some dating back to the remnants of the Ottoman Caliphate soldiers, others tracing their roots to Persian armies that came to Yemen after the Abyssinian occupation. There are also Yemenis of Indian or Kurdish origins and other ethnicities. However, derogation, racism, and marginalization are primarily directed toward Al-Akhdam who continue to experience the bitterness of this marginalization in various aspects of their daily lives (Al-Mahfly, 2019, p 11). Al-Akhdam community faces a heightened vulnerability to experiences of violence and abuse, including sexual harassment, verbal assault, and physical harm. While societal norms may condemn such acts in general, their application appears selective. Reports suggest that incidents targeting Al-Akhdam individuals are often met with indifference or even a reversal of blame, placing the victim in the position of being ostracized for seeking redress (Atef, 2019, p 17).

Al-Akhdam community, which was historically marginalized within Yemeni society, has often been relegated to the periphery of public discourse and underrepresented in mainstream literature. *Black Taste, Black Odour*, a narrative by Ali Al-Muqri, provides a window into their life. This paper makes the case that Al-Muqri, in *Black Taste, Black Odour*, creates a compelling story that not only exposes Al-Akhdam's hidden suffering but also subverts prevalent societal prejudices. Through the lens of Subaltern Studies, a study will be conducted to examine how Al-Muqri depicts Al-Akhdam experience and challenges the power systems that have suppressed people who have been marginalized in dominant narratives. A powerful social critique, Ali Al-Muqri's *Black Taste, Black Odour* employs social realism to immerse readers in the ostracized world of Yemen's Al-Akhdam. The novel unflinchingly portrays their plight, exposing social injustices and calling for reform. Through the lens of marginalization (potentially a character like Suroor), it dismantles stereotypes and



challenges the dehumanization of Muhamasheen. By highlighting their experiences and humanity, the novel seeks to dismantle societal structures that perpetuate their exclusion and envisions a more empathetic future where understanding transcends social class and race. *Black Taste, Black Odour* ultimately serves as a powerful voice for the silenced, seeking to bridge divides and foster empathy.

Al-Muqri uses a multi-layered narrative technique in *Black Taste, Black Odour*, utilising evocative descriptions, heartfelt character depictions, and symbolic elements to voice the silent suffering and need for recognition of Yemen's ostracized Community. This research paper has been intended to answer the questions below:

1. How does *Black Taste, Black Odour* depict the social marginalization and lived realities of Al-Akhdam community in Yemen?
2. What narrative techniques does Al-Muqri employ in *Black Taste, Black Odour* to give voice to the silent suffering of the Al-Akhdam community?

2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The study will be carried out by a close reading of the novel, with special emphasis paid to how Al-Akhdam characters are portrayed, how they interact with other characters, and the social and cultural context in which their adventures take place. This paper explores the experiences of Al-Akhdam community in Al-Muqri's *Black Taste, Black Odour* through the lens of marginalization and intersectionality. Marginalization refers to the exclusion from societal norms, "Marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression. A whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination" (Young, 1990, p 53) while intersectionality recognizes how overlapping social identities, like race and ethnicity in this case, create unique experiences of marginalization. Darder (2024) defines intersectionality as "a synthesis of multiple overlapping oppressions and has proven necessary to understanding a wide range of difference and the connections between gender and sociopolitical categories, such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, nationality" (p 191). These concepts are particularly relevant as Al-Akhdam face a complex web of exclusion based on their perceived race and ethnicity. Subaltern Studies is a perfect theoretical framework to analyze the representation of Al-Akhdam in *Black Taste, Black Odour*. A useful paradigm for examining the experiences of marginalized people who have traditionally had their voices muffled by dominant narratives is subaltern studies. Subaltern theory provides a voice to those who are marginalized, oppressed, and taken advantage of in society, culture, religion, and politics. For those who have experienced discrimination of any kind, the subaltern theory is the most effective form of expression. The subaltern perspective has been conveyed in novels, plays, poems, short



stories, and autobiographies written by authors from all over the world, attesting to the subaltern theory's universal significance and appeal.

'Subaltern' was the term used in medieval England to describe a servant or peasant. In England throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, foot soldiers or lower-ranking soldiers were referred to as subalterns. A subaltern is an employee who holds a lower-level or subordinate post. The phrase was first used by Antonio Gramsci in his *Notes on Italian History* (1971) piece that was published in *Prison Notebook*. He clarified that the subaltern is the downtrodden underclass in a society where the dominant class exercises hegemony.

The subaltern classes refer fundamentally in Gramsci's words to any "low rank" person or group of people in a particular society suffering under the hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals of the same nation. (Louia, 2012, p 5).

Antonio Gramsci coined the term "subaltern" to refer to "the inferior rank" of people in society. Yet, the term "subaltern" is now widely used to refer to the colonial subject that was created by European discourse and assimilated by colonial peoples. A person of lesser military rank is referred to as a "subaltern" in British English, a term that combines the Latin meanings for "under" (sub) and "other" (alter) (Abrams & Harpham, 2011, p 237). Someone who holds a lower or inferior position at work is called a subaltern.

The concept emphasizes the historical prevalence of power imbalances, where dominant groups have historically subordinated others based on factors like class, caste, gender, race, language, and culture. Subaltern intellectuals like Homi K. Bhaba and Sausa Santos later coined the phrase to refer to oppressed minorities, lower-class people, women, and weaker sexes, among other marginalized or subservient groups. The wealthy, privileged, or those in positions of authority always oppress and take advantage of the subaltern. "Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up ... even when they appear triumphant, the subaltern groups are merely anxious to defend themselves" (Gramsci, 1971, p 207). This means Subaltern Studies place a strong emphasis on the study of oppressed, marginalized, and subjugated groups of people who lack consciousness, power, and mindset. They are not allowed to participate in any way; instead, the hegemonic dominating class uses and exploits them. They are mute because they lack authority. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak responds to her question in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988): "They cannot speak," but the subaltern has a voice that is carried with their pain and suffering. It is expressed in their demeanour, speech, and manners, and it frequently explodes in the form of rebellion. The focus of subaltern studies is on articulating silence and listening to this "small voice." Leela Gandhi says: "Subaltern studies' defined itself as an attempt to allow the people' finally to speak within the jealous pages of



elitist historiography and, in so doing, to speak for, or to sound the muted voices of, the truly oppressed" (1998, p 2).

Utilizing Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework, this analysis delves into how Al-Akhdam community is portrayed in Ali Al-Muqri's book *Black Taste, Black Odour*. CRT will use themes like intersectionality and racial formation to analyze how the novel portrays the social and historical construction of Al-Akhdam as a caste on the margins. The experiences of Al-Akhdam characters and the power systems that support their marginalization will be examined through close reading of selected passages. Furthermore, to contextualize the marginalization of Al-Akhdam minority in Yemen, the analysis will include pertinent historical history. Through the application of Critical Race Theory to *Black Taste, Black Odour*, we can comprehend the systematic basis of the marginalization of Al-Akhdam people on a deeper level. The book is a potent monument to their unspoken pain, but it may also provide glimmers of resistance and hope in their fight for acceptance and recognition. As a theoretical framework, critical race theory "comes from a long tradition of resistance to the unequal and unjust distribution of power and resources along political, economic, racial, and gendered lines" (Taylor & Gloria, 2023, p 1). It resulted from a racist judicial system that was put in place to oppose prevailing racial oppressive practices (Museus, 2013).

A theoretical framework that fuses postcolonial theory will serve as the foundation for the analysis of the Muhamasheen community in the novel. Beyond examining the literary output of formerly colonized countries, post-colonial theory focuses on examining what occurs when two distinct cultures—especially when one believes it is superior to the other—collide. Beyond the confines of literary works, the idea delves into the political, social, cultural, and economic issues that both colonizers and colonized people face. One of the key objectives of post-colonial theory is to empower those who are marginalized while also restoring their dignity.

3. Discussion and Analysis

The discussions and analysis have been divided into the subsections below:

3.1 . The Humanitarian Vision of Yemeni Novelist Ali Al-Muqri

Al-Muqri is a unique and unconventional Yemeni novelist whose work "marks a sharp departure from the works of his contemporaries in terms of its themes, technical devices, and discursive strategies" (Rashed, 2020, p.1). His novels explore the depths of human agony, desire, obsession, and misery, and they are based on extensive and universal life experiences. "What is peculiar about his philosophy of life is his humanitarian vision that is apparent in all of his works; the vision that humanity should surpass all the differences; and misunderstandings that arise due to ignorance and misunderstanding" (p.3). He dedicates his art to all those



who have been silenced and overlooked. In *Black Taste, Black Odour*, Al-Muqri delves into the world of Al-Akhdam which resembles a semi-isolated colony and carries a sense of sorrow to the reader. Its inhabitants are people with black skin, who have historically been held as slaves in one manner or another, and they continue to live in a sort of slavery that is worse than that even if it is no longer legal. Their existence is undeniable and unerasable despite their stigmatization by most of the Yemeni society (Al-Rubaidi, 2018, p.15). The narrative chronicles Al-Akhdam group's history and suffering in a style that Algharby Imran calls nimble but religious leaders like Imam Mohammed Al-Adini call obscene. Algharby Imran adds, "The novel exposed the religious concepts that perpetuate racism among human races" ("Dalalat al-lawn", n.d.). He further adds that the writer excelled in delving into the depths of societal consciousness with a humane spirit, making it a realistic novel that exposes backward beliefs. On the other hand, Imam Mohammed Al-Adini, the mosque's preacher, said, "The novel contains vulgar language that does not rise to the level of literature that refines souls. It is primarily instinctual and has insulted an era, a group, and a conservative Yemeni society in all its categories" (Editorial Board 2022).

3.2 The Narrative's Title & Al-Akhdam's Term

The novel's title, *Black Taste, Black Odour*, sets a stark tone, employing concise and evocative language. This choice suggests a deliberate approach to both form and content. The title's power lies in its use of semantic deviation, hinting at a deeper meaning beyond the literal interpretation of the words. Traditionally, scent is described as pleasant or unpleasant and tastes sweet or bitter. However, in this novel, the boundaries blur. Black, a color typically associated with sight, is evoked through the unconventional senses of taste and smell, suggesting a deeper symbolic meaning. This departure from the familiar—using taste and smell to evoke the color black—aims to forge new linguistic connections. Black, typically associated with sight, takes on suggestive connotations of ugliness, horror, primitiveness, and sorrow. The title's meaning is contextualized and revealed throughout the narrative. These metaphorical formulations of the title and their embodiment have been recurring. It can be represented by what Bahja expresses her sorrow over the death of Suleiman, the liberator of Al-Akhdam or the Black "We want someone who respects us as we are, respects our culture, respects our colour, and respects our black taste and scent" (Al-Muqri, 2008, p.88). Abdulrahman also demonstrates empathy towards the workers, joining their world and tracing the scent of the black body. He asks, "What should I do when it was I who found myself one day, at the age of 12, drawn to the black flavour and the black scent?" (p.119). The vocabulary of the title celebrates the central words: taste, scent, and black color. The title carries an implicit connotation of implied ambiguity, suggesting the turmoil and division experienced by Al-Akhdam. Therefore, the black taste and black scent are metaphors for life, tradition, and social system specific to the Black community, opposing the oppressive social order under which Al-Akhdam



live at the margins (Ouksel & kaddour, 2020, p 122). Through the formation of the title and the repeated use of the word "black" twice in the title, as well as the design of the cover, the reader perceives the author's keenness to embody detachment and aversion, as well as to highlight distinctiveness and privacy. The novel's cover offers a potent visual metaphor. A photograph depicts a Black woman, her back turned to the viewer and the world, draped in a red dress. This imagery suggests a yearning for isolation, a tangible manifestation of the protagonist's desire to separate from the surrounding society. Al-Akhdam's profound desire for social isolation is likely driven by historical marginalization and ongoing injustices. Their plight echoes the struggles of Black communities worldwide, from African Americans to victims of South African apartheid. Al-Muqri's novel, *Black Taste, Black Odour*, exposes this harsh reality, highlighting the derogatory label ("Al-Akhdam") that embodies the contempt this group endures.

The title, *Black Taste, Black Odour*, employs negative connotations associated with the color black to suggest the community's ostracized status. This initial alienation is further emphasized in the opening scene. The narrator's surprise upon hearing Rabash, Al-Akhdam, deliver "philosophical lines about treachery in the court" is evident in the statement, "And I hear these words from one of Al-Akhdam ... resembling the nests of Al-Akhdam" (Al-Muqri, 2008, p 34). This astonishment exposes a societal expectation of intellectual inferiority within Al-Akhdam community. Moreover, the narrator's comparison of Rabash to "nests of Al-Akhdam" reinforces a negative image associated with their living conditions.

The term "Al-Khadim," seemingly derogatory to outsiders, holds a distinct meaning within Al-Akhdam community. Suroor challenges societal definitions, asserting it signifies freedom in their language. He argues the burden of changing its connotation lies with those perpetuating negativity (89). While rarely resorting to anger, Al-Akhdam fiercely defend their dignity and reject imposed racial slurs. When President Salem of South Yemen was assassinated, they started protesting and chanting slogans. "Salem ahead, ahead. We're not slaves" (p.88). Paradoxically, some Al-Akhdam may cling to the "Al-Khadim" label as a form of defiance, rejecting the impositions of the dominant culture. Suroor observes the irony: those who purport to liberate them perpetuate the derogatory term. "Let us be liberated," he says, "to become free. But why can't we remain as we are, with our names: Al-Akhdam, Lahouj, Shammur ..." (p 89). Clinging to their distinct identity, Al-Akhdam resist full assimilation into mainstream Yemeni culture. This cultural preservation can be seen as defiance against power structures that aim to erase their heritage. Notably, within their language, "Khadim" signifies freedom. This, for some like Suroor, reflects an awareness of their rights, even if those rights are embodied by a demeaning title. Despite political shifts, Al-Akhdam remain marginalized, excluded from society's core, and branded by the racist connotations of "Al-Khadim".



3.3 Love Beyond Boundaries: Marginalization, Discrimination, and Resilience

To establish the narrative context, a brief plot summary is essential. The novel revolves around Abdulrahman, nicknamed "Ambo" (a term used by Al-Akhdam community to denote people with fair skin). He becomes embroiled in a controversial relationship with Al-Daghlou, a young woman from a Mazzina (marginalized) caste. This social group considered the lowest rank in the village hierarchy, traditionally performs menial tasks like butchering and hairdressing. The two lovers find a safe shelter in Mahwa¹ where their love is not constrained by any restraints or boundaries. Mahwa Zain presents a paradox: while promoting a sense of freedom, it simultaneously perpetuates its internal system of marginalization. In Mahwa Zain, the novel beautifully portrays feelings of love that transcend the boundaries of discrimination and nationalism. This is the neighborhood where Al-Akhdam lives. It is here that their story begins in this wretched and strange society, where many do not realize the daily misery, they live in. But it is also a free society that does not know class or distinction and does not adhere to the laws and moral standards that others claim to adhere to. After a week of his arrival in Mahwa Zain, Abdu al-Rahman discovered that roles had changed. Just as the free people of Yemeni society reject the integration of Al-Akhdam among them, the new society rejects the existence of Abdulrahman among them, marginalizing him and avoiding talking to him aloud. Even Al-Daghlou was unable to fully integrate into the community of Mahwa Zain due to the whiteness of her skin. Caught between the clash of masters and servants, her escape leads only to another battleground, leaving her utterly lost. Abdulrahman gradually assimilated into his new community, adopting their customs and traditions. Here, the narrator provides a hint to the reader through the following text: "Every night, I walk a considerable distance until I reach the hut. The dogs that live on the outskirts of Mahwa Zain and the outskirts of the city have become accustomed to me, so they don't bark much when they see me and don't attack me" (Al-Muqri, 2008, p 47). The narrator chooses the dog as a symbol to express the feelings of familiarity and harmony between him and the residents of Mahwa Zain. This is because dogs are associated with traits of loyalty and friendship that are easily understood by the reader. The narrator may also have mentioned the dogs twice to emphasize their familiarity with the Arab people and their acceptance of the narrator as one of them. The text could also be interpreted as a commentary on the importance of building relationships with others, regardless of their differences. Abdulrahman's ability to connect with the dogs, despite their initial wariness, suggests that it is possible to overcome barriers and establish trust and friendship with others.

(¹) Mahwa, derived from the word contains. The word can also refer to closed communities in both a symbolic and literal sense, such as containment, limitation, and social isolation. It refers to a place where Al-Akhdam live. 'Mahwa' in Arabic means doghouse.



Discrimination is not merely social; it infects even the state's official symbols. This systemic prejudice extends to education, evident in Suroor and his sister's refusal to teach Aisha's son. The fact that Suroor and his sister won't instruct Aisha's son is an example of how Al-Akhdam aren't given equal access to education. Their future options are limited, and their marginalization persists as a result. Suroor's justification (p 74-75) reveals the core issue: the curriculum equates blackness with negativity in science, linking it with darkness, ugliness, and evil. This not only reinforces stereotypes but also hinders the development of a positive identity for students of color. Suroor's refusal to teach Aisha's son exposes a critical issue: how can Black children thrive in a system reinforcing biased stereotypes? He views this as a cultural crisis, not just societal (pp.74-75). Al-Akhdam's social isolation is exacerbated by the widespread unfavorable perceptions of black people, which are evident in the curriculum. Due to their perceived race, they are viewed as "different" and "inferior". One could see the negative educational implications surrounding the color black as a representation of the marginalization of Al-Akhdam. Within society, they are "othered" both physically and metaphorically.

Suroor argues that dismantling stereotypes and building a truly inclusive learning environment requires addressing a deeper cultural issue. He highlights how Arabic culture associates negativity with the color black ("black day," "black spot") and positivity with white ("white day," "white lie") (p 113). Suroor's observation reflects a broader cultural bias, where blackness is associated with negativity. This, as Ashcroft argues, aligns with the historical construction of "black" as synonymous with racial exclusion (p 223). Consequently, Al-Akhdam community faces marginalization based solely on their skin color. Furthermore, Robert Young emphasizes the historical dominance of "white culture" as the standard for various aspects of society, including government, law, and the arts (2003, pp. 2-3). Suroor's observations and these scholarly perspectives underscore the need to challenge these ingrained biases to achieve true inclusivity.

3.4 Betrayal, Marginalization, and the Quest for Dignity

The marginalization of Al-Akhdam community extends beyond social and educational spheres, deeply impacting their personal lives and aspirations. Their expressions of love, patriotism, and desires for a dignified life are often met with scepticism and even accusations of betrayal, stemming from entrenched prejudices and biases. The novel opens with Rabash al-Abd's trial, a jarring juxtaposition of a left-wing intellectual defending himself against seemingly archaic charges. Witnessing this ignites a burning question in Abdulrahman's mind: what fuels Al-Akhdam community's deep-seated alienation, explored through Rabash's experience. He says: "I've come to know Al-Akhdam's inherent refusal against those around them" (p 9). The trial of Rabash Al-Abd serves as another stark illustration of the Al-Akhdam community's suffering. Accused of treachery, rape, and violating a noble family's honour solely because of his love for a white woman, Rabash's case exposes the deep-seated racial prejudice that fuels Al-Akhdam's marginalization and agony. Rabash's membership in the



Yemeni Socialist Party, known for its advocacy for social justice and equality, adds another layer of complexity to Al-Akhdam's marginalization. He is accused of treachery against his own country, highlighting the deep distrust directed towards their community. This sense of alienation is palpable, as Rabash himself goes so far as to claim the homeland itself embodies treachery. The all-encompassing power structure, embodied by "Ambo," views any expression of love, call for justice, or assertion of identity by Al-Akhdam as a betrayal. Even the most basic yearning for human dignity is perceived as an act of treachery. "We are all traitors, Your Honor. Man is a treacherous being. However, he loses himself and his essence at the moment his treachery is proven. When he starts engaging in a new act of betrayal, he regains his existence and his essence immediately" (p 5). Significant queries concerning the nature of oppression and human resilience are brought up by this quote. It draws attention to the psychological costs of living under a system that denies fundamental rights and the extremes people would go to in trying to restore their sense of worth. Paradoxically, continuing to strive for dignity in the face of being called a traitor is perceived as a means of regaining one's identity.

Putting Rabash on trial for loving a woman who is not from his group, reveals how the purportedly unbiased legal system upholds societal norms and keeps Al-Akhdam people apart from fundamental ideas of justice and equality. He was accused of "betrayal and violating the sanctity of a noble family" (p 6). Al-Akhdam's plight extends beyond the denial of basic human rights. They are also denied the very possibility of dreaming of love across racial lines. Rabash's trial, where he defends himself for loving a white woman, becomes a potent symbol of Al-Akhdam community's deep-seated resentment towards a system that enforces such rigid social boundaries. Witnessing the constant erosion of his dignity and humanity within his homeland, Rabash comes to a radical conclusion. A land that marginalizes him and denies him basic rights loses its claim to his loyalty. In his eyes, a system that perpetuates such betrayal deserves to be challenged, even if it means being labelled a traitor himself. This disillusionment extends to his fellow Al-Akhdam, who are also ostracized and deemed outsiders within their nation.

Strangely enough, Al-Akhdam are not allowed to enter the courtroom, "even if it is to attend sessions for the trial of their own families. They only enter it when they are accepted as servants there, to sweep the halls and rooms of the papers discarded by the scribes and litigants, and to clean the dirt scattered from shoes and mouths" (p.10). The quotation highlights the extent of Al-Akhdam's agony. It is a sign of the disintegration of the Yemeni identity and the way the oppressive system held onto the people who were not free. Their suffering is intolerable to the extent that Death has become a normalized occurrence, a potential escape from the oppressive reality of their lives. This bleak outlook suggests a community devoid of hope for social equality with the white population. Their existence is a constant struggle, marked by frustration and a grim acceptance of death as a constant possibility. The cause of death – illness, stabbing, or bullet wound – becomes irrelevant



in the face of Al-Akhdam's relentless suffering. Their world is so bleak that death is embraced as a release, a finality to their unending pain. It transforms from a fearful inevitability to a welcome escape, a grim testament to the depths of their despair.

They were not terrified of death when they learned of the death of a man or woman who reached their thirties or even a few years younger. They believed that it was sufficient for the servant's lifespan and better for them than enduring a life plagued by diseases that attacked them throughout their lives. The diseases become increasingly difficult to bear after the age of twenty-five and even harder after thirty. (p 73)

3.5 Social Hierarchy and Demanding Equality

Al-Muqri's *Black Taste, Black Odour* establishes social hierarchy as a central theme from its opening pages. Abdulrahman's mother discourages marriage with anyone from the lower "Al-Mazaina" class. This prejudice is reinforced by a cautionary folktale – King Shamsan's transformation into a worm after marrying a woman (Marjan) from Al-Mazzina caste. The folktale, steeped in social bias, highlights how deeply ingrained these discriminatory views are, as Abdulrahman's mother attempts to mold his identity based on these demeaning stereotypes. The explanation hinges on the notion that Al-Mazaina women are "incomplete" and "inferior" to King Shamsan's station. This narrative reinforces a rigid social hierarchy where love is subservient to class, and marrying outside one's rank is punishable by a grotesque metamorphosis (p 13). This folktale, rather than serving as a historical record, acts as a critique of a deeply flawed societal structure. It exposes the longstanding prejudice in Yemeni culture that has ostracized Al-Akhdam community for generations. The narrative discourages any interaction with Al-Akhdam through the ludicrous threat of worm transformation, effectively justifying and perpetuating their exclusion.

Through Suroor, the narrative emphasizes Al-Akhdam's exceptionally low social position, even differentiating them from slaves. "We are not slaves; the slaves are far better than us. They are superior to us in degree," he declares (p 8). This statement underscores the brutal reality – Al-Akhdam occupied the lowest rung of the social ladder, and denied the rights and dignity afforded even to slaves. This statement emphasizes how extremely marginalized and hard-hit they are. Within the system, slaves may have a clearly defined purpose and value, but Al-Akhdam appear to be in an even more perilous position. Due to their exclusion from governmental posts and military duty, most of them labor in tasks that Yemeni society views as menial, like street cleaning and household labor. Their economic marginalization perpetuates their isolation from mainstream society and keeps them mired in a cycle of poverty. In that diverse community, we encounter different revolutionary characters, including the old woman who was singing one night and chanting the famous lines of Ghazal Al-Maqdishiya: "Swā swā yā 'ibād Allah, mutasāwiyah ... Mā had wuld hur wal-thānī



wuld jāriyah.” The translation of these lines is: “Together, oh servants of God, we are equal ... No one is born free while another is born a slave” (p 60). These powerful lines emphasize the demand for equality and reject the idea of inherent inequality based on social status or birth circumstances.

3.6 The Bitterness of Existence: Tragedies, Injustices, and Religious Exclusion

The narrative continues to get the reader acquainted with the bitterness in Al-Akhdam’s world, a world that is full of tragedies and sorrows. Abdulrahman (2008) says:

Ibn Shams died after urinating blood for two weeks. He was around eight years old. Kadiah died after a persistent cough that lasted for months, and they said it was tuberculosis. A sad year began, with winter as usual filled with horrifying news of children’s deaths. Summer came along with bilharzia and malaria. (p 73)

Al-Akhdam’s marginalization has become so pervasive that, as previously mentioned, even death appears preferable to their current reality. So, what is the value of life, as Suroor sees it, if one is living on the margins and denied even the most basic human rights? Suroor holds the authorities responsible for the tragedy of Al-Akhdam when he questions, “How can we not die when we drink contaminated water from swamps and eat mostly from garbage? We burn in the smoke of lanterns and waste incineration. Will there ever come a day when we have houses, electricity, and water pipes reaching our homes, like other people?” (p.74). He reveals the great injustices that Al-Akhdam have endured for hundreds of years “They leave us with nothing for centuries, and then they easily claim that they will integrate us into society. Should we applaud the state while living in squalor? How can that be?” (p 88). The narrator does not revisit a distant past in the novel because the distant past holds only memories of oppression and persecution for Al-Akhdam. Instead, they yearn for the recent past, the days of the independence of South Yemen and the presidency of Salem Rubai Ali who treated them with respect and provided them with government jobs that suited them. He would imprison anyone who mistreated them, earning their love and support. They held numerous demonstrations in his support, chanting their beloved slogan: “Salem ahead, ahead. We’re not slaves” (p 88).

The marginalization of Al-Akhdam community extends beyond social and official spheres, permeating even the realm of religion. This is exemplified by the poignant scene where Suroor, a Khadim, is deeply affected by a sermon on brotherhood and equality. Filled with a sense of belonging, he attempts to lead the prayer at the city’s mosque during the Imam’s absence. However, this act of piety is brutally interrupted as someone physically assaults him, highlighting the deeply ingrained prejudice that denies Al-Akhdam even the right to participate in religious practices.

I seek refuge in Allah! In these times, we are led in prayer by Khadim! The rest of the worshippers paid attention to him! and joined in, pushing him towards the door of the



mosque while he cried out, "Where is the equality... and where is the saying of the Prophet that there is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab over an Arab. Neither is the white superior over the black nor is the black superior over the white -- except by piety? Where... where ... ? (p 70)

Suroor's attempt to lead the prayer can be seen as an act of defiance against the racially motivated religious exclusion faced by Al-Akhdam. While ostracized by society, this incident suggests Al-Akhdam possess an awareness of their fundamental rights, including religious participation. However, the congregation's hostile response exposes the deeply ingrained prejudice within the dominant "Ambo" community. Their actions illustrate how negative and dehumanizing stereotypes about Black people have been systematically instilled within the white population.

3.7 Beyond Humanity: The Dehumanization of Al-Akhdam

Suroor who has been released from prison knows the harsh treatment experienced by Al-Akhdam in Yemeni society. The Sheikh forced Suroor into a fictitious marriage with one of the maids and then proceeded to have relationships with her. When Suroor objected, he was wrongly convicted of theft and imprisoned (p 54). The harsh treatment faced by Al-Akhdam led them to commit different types of stigmatized and morally questionable crimes. These crimes include homosexuality, deviance, theft, and murder (p 54). Sexual obsession becomes one of the outlets for escape and release from pent-up frustration. In prison, the prison administration receives directives to imprison them without legal judgments or even to kill them without trial. This occurs after demolishing their homes, displacing them, subjecting them to torture, and sexually assaulting them. Additionally, their daughters and wives are kidnapped and raped (p 55). Suroor continues to document the harsh treatment faced by Al-Akhdam in prison, stating, "The Khadim, Aish, passed away from a heart attack immediately upon being informed of the execution date. Despite that, they carried his lifeless body to the execution yard after two hours and fired three shots at him" (p 55). Aish's death from a heart attack upon hearing his execution date highlights the brutality of the system. The fear and stress of the impending execution are enough to kill him, negating the need for a formal execution. However, the authorities still carry out a symbolic execution by firing shots at his lifeless body. This act signifies a complete disregard for human dignity and a desire to inflict further punishment, even in death. Since their entire lives are one big jail, Al-Akhdam's lives inside and outside of prison are identical. Their delight is overshadowed by the injustices they must endure. Through Suroor's voice, the omniscient narrator painstakingly documents the minutiae of the dehumanizing and horrible life that Al-Akhdam endure:

We sleep with our dirt without bathing. We defecate and urinate in the same places where we eat, and children play there. We only change our clothes when they are worn out from



the dirt, torn, and falling off our bodies on their own. If we don't find a replacement, we remain naked with nothing to cover us. Even if we walk almost naked in the city, no one cares about us or clothes us.... I live as if I am dead, ready to accept death, whether it comes with illness, a stab, or a bullet. (p 74).

This cultural framework, based on racial and color discrimination, marginalizes Al-Akhdam and instills in their consciousness images and meanings of enslavement and subservience, leading them to despise their own identity. Suroor (2008) says:

I am a piece of paper on the ground, a handful of dust, a pile of straw, ... I am... I am nothing, I am a hanging shoe, a discarded shoe thrown in the garbage, I am the residue of leftovers, my siblings are empty boxes, and the empty boxes are my homes _ no _ I am their home, I am an empty box, A crushed box on the road (p 119).

Through a sequence of demeaning metaphors, this excerpt from *Black Taste, Black Odour* presents a sharp picture of Suroor's perspective of himself. Al-Muqri illustrates Suroor's complete marginalization in Yemeni culture by using imagery connected to waste. Suroor describes himself as "a pile of straw," "a handful of dust," and "a piece of paper on the ground." These parallels highlight his sense of disposability and insignificance. Like these ubiquitous sorts of rubbish, he is easily ignored and tramped upon. To highlight his social marginalization even further, Suroor compares himself to "a hanging shoe, a discarded shoe thrown in the garbage." Shoes are usually connected to mobility, travel, and social interaction. But a shoe that is thrown away is useless and thrown away. Suroor's lack of agency and sense of social rejection are reflected in this metaphor. Suroor uses the metaphor of "empty boxes" to describe his feeling of homelessness. By referring to these boxes as his "siblings" and even "homes," he draws attention to how completely meaningless his life is. Empty boxes reflect Suroor's lack of security and a sense of belonging because they provide neither cover nor comfort. The switch in which Suroor takes on the role of the "home" for the empty boxes highlights his function as a container for the trash of civilization. The fact that Suroor says "I am nothing" repeatedly highlights how hopeless he is. He feels completely unimportant and invisible concerning the greater social structure. In this regard, Ralph Ellison says: "I am an invisible man" (p 5). The experience of marginalization is powerfully portrayed in this quote. An African American man who goes by "unnamed" feels ignored and unheard by white culture. He is made "invisible" by the racial presumptions and biases of people around him rather than any physical characteristic. There's also a tinge of rebellion in this statement, a desperate refusal to accept his existence—even if it's a life filled with worthlessness.

Suroor, the cultured Khadim does not accept this humiliating classification, because race is the main criterion in determining the identity of this margin, which differs in its origin and ethnicity. He says: Suroor, the



erudite Khadim, vehemently rejects the dehumanizing label imposed by "Ambo." He recognizes that racial categorization is the sole factor used to define this marginalized group, regardless of their origin or ethnicity. Suroor's defiant statement —"This is Ambo's talk, they say, they differ in their opinions. If we are of African or Yemeni origins, are we from humans or jinn? Did Allah (God) create us, or did we come from the donkey's back? This doesn't matter, no." (83). —challenges the very foundation of their ostracized status. By questioning their divine creation and resorting to absurdity ("donkey's back"), he exposes the illogicality and cruelty inherent in racial prejudice.

While Suroor's outward expressions might suggest resistance against the authority of the dominant "Ambo" class, a deeper examination reveals a pervasive sense of resignation and subjugation. The view held by society that Al-Akhdam are fundamentally "incomplete" and inferior is revealed in the exchange between Abdulrahman and his mother. "Al-Mazaina are deficient in all creation. Who would marry their daughters if Allah created them deficient? Do they marry Al-Mazaina like themselves, or do the jinn marry them?" (p.14). Al-Akhdam community is considered incomplete, denying them reciprocal interaction with "white" people, viewed as embodying civility. Their social standing is deemed so low that they can only interact with equals or even jinn (spirits). This relegates them to the absolute bottom of the social hierarchy, even below slaves. As Suroor said, "We are not slaves. Slaves are much better than us because they are higher in rank" (p.85). Internalized oppression further binds Al-Akhdam. Their ingrained sense of submission, likely stemming from generations of condescension and belittlement, perpetuates patterns of domination and self-deprecation. This resonates with Frantz Fanon's concept of "ontological resistance" in *Black Skin, White Masks* (p.78). Fanon argues that the dominant gaze denies Black people their inherent existence and value. Similarly, Al-Akhdam's sense of inferiority mirrors a societal refusal to acknowledge their full humanity.

3.8 Al-Akhdam Women's Double Marginalization and the Burden of Stereotypes

Ali Al-Muqri's *Black Taste, Black Odour* lays bare the harsh realities faced by Al-Akhdam women. They navigate a double marginalization: an exclusionary social hierarchy that relegates them to the fringes of Yemeni society and potential gender bias within their community. The case of Al-Daghlou (p 95) serves as a chilling illustration. Abducted and violated by the very authorities entrusted with upholding the law, her tragic fate becomes a stark symbol of the vulnerability Al-Akhdam women face – not just from external forces, but also from those who should be their protectors. Denied even basic security by those entrusted with public safety, Al-Daghlou's fate becomes a chilling embodiment of the profound suffering and the insurmountable quest for safety and freedom faced by Al-Akhdam women. Al-Daghlou describes her position and that of her people: "They placed us on the edge of the city," (p.59) symbolizing the low status of the Akhdam and the unwillingness of the free people to include Al-Akhdam among them and excluding them far from Yemeni life.



Al-Akhdam women carry the weight of double marginalization. Ostracized as part of a marginalized community, they face further disadvantages due to their gender. Al-Muqri exposes this brutal reality, highlighting how Al-Akhdam women are viewed by some husbands as disposable commodities, to be bartered or discarded at will (p 91). This appalling treatment underscores the profound vulnerability Al-Akhdam women face within their communities. Ali al-Muqri's disturbing portrayal of the "Sack game" (50) serves as a potent metaphor for the demeaning perception of women within certain segments of Al-Akhdam society. This practice, where a man and woman fight inside a sack before public intercourse, suggests that some husbands view their wives primarily as objects of gratification. It not only exposes the vulnerability of these women but also hints at a potential cultural practice that warrants further investigation.

3.9 Beyond Stereotypes: The Humanity of Al-Akhdam

The narrative stays away from clichéd depictions of Al-Akhdam. Rather, it portrays them as a diverse group with aspirations and a desire for a better life. The story explores the intricacies of their interpersonal relationships while emphasizing the community's love, resiliency, and defiance. It is essential to humanize Al-Akhdam to dispel preconceived notions and promote compassion for their situation. Suroor burns with a fervent desire to liberate Al-Akhdam community from the shackles of servitude and the oppressive systems that have obscured their identity. He grapples with this yearning for freedom, questioning their ingrained obedience to their oppressors: wondering "Why do we follow these oppressors even when we want to be liberated? Isn't it our right to choose the shape of our freedom?" (p.89). This internal conflict underscores the complexities of defying a deeply entrenched power structure and highlights Suroor's determination to forge a path toward self-determination for his people. Suroor's discontent with the status quo is evident in his struggle against the dominant culture's-imposed identity. The constant presence of "whiteness" and his repeated calls for "freedom" suggest a yearning for self-determination and a rejection of the limitations placed upon Al-Akhdam community. The novel portrays acts of defiance against oppressive social hierarchy. These include the agricultural engineer's marriage to a marginalized woman and defying societal expectations by choosing to live with her in a makeshift shelter. Their tragic fate, succumbing to illness shortly after marriage, underscores the harsh realities faced by such inter-class relationships.

The doctor's love for Jumaa transcends societal boundaries, driving him to aid Al-Akhdam community and defy child mortality norms. Similarly, restaurant owner Abdullah challenges social class barriers by desiring to marry a Khadema woman. However, racial tolerance requires deeper analysis. Suroor's reaction on his wedding night to the doctor's words is likely more nuanced than a simple resolution of resentment. "This is a black and sweet night. What do you think, Suroor?" Suroor replied and repeated his sentence twice: "This is a



sweet black and white night.” (p 112-13). Generations of oppression leave deep and multifaceted emotional wounds on Al-Akhdam community. This is captured in a poignant exchange. One character describes the night as “black and sweet,” a seemingly contradictory statement that encapsulates the complexities of their experience. Suuroor's response, “This is a sweet black and white night,” repeated twice, suggests a yearning for a different reality – one where their blackness, symbolic of marginalization, is not a source of bitterness but a part of a beautiful and harmonious whole.

3.10 Techniques

Ali Al-Muqri's novel, *Black Taste, Black Odour*, immerses readers in the harsh realities of the Al-Akhdam community. Al-Muqri delves into the multifaceted experiences of the Al-Akhdam, shedding light on their struggles and societal position. To achieve this powerful impact, he employs a range of effective literary techniques as follows:

a. Symbolism

Ali-Muqri infuses the novel with potent symbols to represent Al-Akhdam's plight. *Black Taste, Black Odour* is a title that uses strong symbolism. Black, which is frequently associated with absence and darkness, may represent the shadows cast over Al-Akhdam neighborhood. The combination of the two senses—taste and Odour—indicates that this oppressed population is denied basic human experiences. Black can also stand for negativity and the hard circumstances Al-Akhdam had to face. Furthermore, it could represent social exclusion, with blacks denoting the “unclean” or unwanted. Lastly, the color black can allude to suppressed feelings and inner conflicts, possibly symbolizing Al-Akhdam's struggle with social acceptance and identity. Al-Muqri infuses the setting with potent symbolism. The “massive hill composed of filth, garbage, swamps” that characterizes Mahwa Zain becomes a symbol of the hardships Al-Akhdam endure. Their forced existence on the periphery reflects their marginalization in Yemeni society. Yet, this harsh environment also becomes a testament to their resilience. Al-Akhdam survive and persist in the face of adversity. The following quotation has a bundle of symbols: “The Khadim, Aish, passed away from a heart attack immediately upon being informed of the execution date. Despite that, they carried his lifeless body to the execution yard after two hours and fired three shots at him” (Al-Muqri, 2008, p 55). The Khadim: The term “Khadim” itself could be symbolic of Al-Akhdam community's subjugation and forced service within Yemeni society. Aish's death could then represent the death of hope or the futility of resistance for the marginalized. Sudden Death: Aish's heart attack upon hearing the execution date could symbolize the crushing weight of oppression and the powerlessness felt by Al-Akhdam. Postmortem Execution: The act of carrying Aish's lifeless body to the execution yard and firing shots at it could be a symbolic act of dehumanization. It highlights the disregard for Al-Akhdam's lives and the potential for cruelty within the system. Three Shots: In some cultures, the number



three holds symbolic meaning. Three shots could symbolize finality, a mockery of a proper execution, or a religious reference depending on the context of the novel. The main character, Surroor, stands in for Al-Akhdam community's tenacity in the face of adversity. The young woman's decision to run away may have been a last-ditch effort to rebel against social norms.

a. Social Realism

The novel employs social realism, a literary approach that portrays the harsh realities of everyday life. This technique evokes empathy in the reader and compels them to confront the injustices faced by the community. The novel's use of graphic language and its disregard for social conventions aim to portray a harsh reality. This explicitness, including the use of coarse terms and descriptions of sexual acts, challenges traditional narrative styles and avoids euphemisms. One interpretation suggests that this focus on raw sexuality serves as a form of self-expression for the characters, potentially a response to the dehumanizing experiences of slavery and injustice. "The subject of sex is considered an element of marginal writing and divergence, intended to portray the state of society and its imbalance or to depict the aspirations of the marginalized to break away from tradition" (Saleh, 2015, p 236). The linguistic composition deliberately records everyday dialogue and colloquial language, including all its vulgar vocabulary, without the need for veiled or indirect expressions. Indeed, this complete frankness appears to be an intentional objective in the narrative discourse. It aims to achieve the element of shock for the readers and draw their attention to the deplorable reality of AL-Akhdam in Yemeni society. It suggests that this reality can only be accurately and honestly expressed through a language that mirrors its degradation, clarity, and boldness. It serves as a necessary introduction to understanding reality with precision and integrity.

b. Code-Switching

The use of code-switching, where characters shift between standard Arabic and the Yemeni dialect, reflects the social hierarchy and marginalization of Al-Akhdam. Standard Arabic might be associated with authority and education, while the dialect becomes the language of the ostracized community. This technique reinforces the power dynamics and the struggle for identity within a dominant culture. The author's deliberate use of code-switching, evident in the dialogue between the protagonist and the Khadema (domestic worker), adds a layer of realism and social commentary to the narrative. While the standard Arabic language is used for the most part, the protagonist's question "What is the name of your city?" is met with a response in the colloquial dialect "We call it Mahwah, mush exactly a city, but Mahwah Zain" (Al-Muqri, 2008, p.37). This shift in language not only reflects Khadema's background but also subtly highlights the power dynamics at play. Khadema's code-switching with terms like "mush" (not) and "Zain" (good) further emphasizes the natural use of language within her social context. The guest's response with affirmations in the dialect ("aywh") suggests



an attempt to bridge the social gap, although his standard Arabic question earlier indicates a position of relative power.

C. Internal Monologue

Delving into characters' thoughts through internal monologues allows readers to understand their motivations, frustrations, and yearning for a better life. This technique humanizes the characters and compels readers to connect with their emotional journeys. The novel concludes with a poignant image: cranes hesitating, and concrete buildings encroaching upon Al-Akhdam settlements, symbolizing the relentless march of progress with no regard for the displaced inhabitants. Suroor's soliloquy captures the community's existential crisis: "It always reassures me that one day they will remember that there was something meaningful here, something called Almahwyin. What good is the memory? Will they ever compensate?" (p 118). This internal conflict reflects the struggle for self-definition within a dominant white culture that has systematically oppressed Al-Akhdam. Their very identity, questioned with a haunting "Who are we?" (p 119), becomes a casualty of marginalization. The novel's open ending leaves the reader pondering the fate of Al-Akhdam community, facing the prospect of erasure, and yearning for recognition.

d. Folk Proverbs

The narrative incorporates a rich tapestry of Yemeni folk proverbs, woven into the narrative scenes. These proverbs offer a window into the cultural landscape and belief systems that shape the characters' experiences. "He who has befriended Al-Khadim has become regretful. The Khadim is more impure than the Jew, washing after the dog and breaking after the akhdam" (p 88-89). The vessel can be washed if a dog licks it, but if Al-Akhdim eats from it, its impurity can only be removed by breaking it. "Despite the dog's association in Muslim religious culture with impurity, which requires heavy purification, Al-khadim in this proverb is considered even more impure, emphasizing unjustified communal bigotry" (Al-Thawr, 2021). The novel exposes the pervasiveness of societal racism through a depiction of a popular saying that labels Al-Akhdam community as "impure" (Al-Muqri, 2008, p 45). This unfounded prejudice is further institutionalized by practices that exclude them from certain professions, such as working in restaurants. Proverbs like these perpetuate patterns of domination, marginalization, and the systematic exclusion of Al-Akhdam. The incorporation of Yemeni folk proverbs adds a layer of cultural authenticity and offers insights into the characters' beliefs and societal norms. However, the author's use of these proverbs might be critical or ironic, prompting readers to question their validity in the context of Al-Akhdam's experiences.

e. Juxtaposition

Al-Muqri uses juxtaposition to highlight the harsh reality of the exclusion of Al-Akhdam. The incredibly detailed environment of Mahwa Zain contrasts sharply with public spaces, which are probably



meant to symbolize the prevalent Yemeni culture. The purposeful omission of information about the surroundings of Al-Akhdam represents their extermination from the national story. It becomes a potent symbol because, in the eyes of the dominant culture, Yemenis are invisible and unimportant due to their physical marginalization, which also extends into the metaphorical sphere. Al-Muqri forces readers to confront the dehumanizing impacts of social isolation and the pressing need for Al-Akhdam community to be recognized by using this technique.

f. Setting as Character: Mahwa Zain, a Crucible of Identity

In Al-Muqri's *Black Taste, Black Odour*, the setting transcends mere scenery and transforms into a character itself. This is particularly evident in the name of Al-Akhdam settlement, Mahwa Zain. "Mahwa," derived from the Arabic verb for "containment," reflects their physical marginalization on the city's outskirts. Yet, "Zain," a woman who defended the community, imbues the name with a sense of inclusion and support. This paradoxical essence mirrors Al-Akhdam's complex reality – trapped yet yearning for self-determination. Zain's dwelling, a "massive hill composed of filth, garbage, swamps," becomes a potent symbol. Though the narrator, Abdulrahman, doesn't shy away from depicting the harshness, the very act of naming the place signifies a recognition of their lived experience, a refusal to allow them to be erased. Al-Akhdam themselves call their shelters "dwellings" (Mahwa), acknowledging their impermanence – a stark contrast to the stability associated with the word "home." They are the "transient Almahwyin" (al-Muqri, 2008, p. 35), forever relegated to the periphery.

Beyond its physical limitations, Zain's dwelling becomes the crucible for self-discovery. Free from societal constraints, Al-Akhdam community forges its identity within these walls. It's a haven for introspection, where "marginalized and neglected inner emotions" converge. This concept of dwelling space mirroring identity extends beyond the personal sphere. The stark "absence of details" in public spaces reflects Al-Akhdam's symbolic erasure from the dominant culture's national identity. Their marginalization in the physical world extends to the realm of national identity. By imbuing the setting with such depth and complexity, Al-Muqri compels the reader to engage with Al-Akhdam experience. The harshness of their environment becomes a testament to their remarkable resilience, while the very act of naming their dwelling – Mahwa Zain – is a potent act of defiance. *Black Taste, Black Odour* transcends a simple story of marginalization. It becomes a profound exploration of how physical space shapes and reflects the struggle for self-definition. Through Al-Akhdam's experience, Al-Muqri compels us to recognize the spaces, both physical and metaphorical, where identity is formed and challenged.

Al-Muqri's *Black Taste, Black Odour* is a powerful and thought-provoking novel that utilizes a range of techniques to expose the harsh realities faced by Al-Akhdam community. Vivid descriptions paint a stark



picture of their persecution, poverty, and despair, leaving a lasting impression on the reader. By delving into the characters' inner thoughts and emotions, Al-Muqri fosters empathy for their plight. He further amplifies the impact through unsettling metaphors, like the "Sack game," which highlights the dehumanizing treatment endured by Al-Akhdam women. These techniques transcend mere storytelling, compelling readers to confront the brutal truths of Al-Akhdam's life and sparking critical reflection on the social issues the novel portrays.

4. Conclusion

Ali Al-Muqri's *Black Taste, Black Odour* is a powerful social critique exposing the plight of Yemen's marginalized Al-Akhdam community. The evocative title sets the stage for a narrative that delves into themes of discrimination, oppression, and social hierarchy. Al-Muqri underscores the importance of self-perception and societal recognition in challenging the ingrained stigma associated with Al-Akhdam. By advocating for a change in both internal and external perspectives, the author calls for a reclamation of identity and dignity for this marginalized group.

Al-Muqri's narrative reveals a stark social division between Al-Akhdam and the dominant Yemeni society. The marginalized Al-Akhdam exist in a parallel world, segregated from the mainstream population. This segregation manifests in various aspects of life, including social interactions, religious practices, and political engagement. The Al-Akhdam's sense of alienation and their longing for liberation are central themes in the novel. The historical context of their marginalized status, as provided by Abdullah bin Malik, further illuminates the complexities of their social position.

The novel offers a glimmer of hope for a changing societal perception of Al-Akhdam. Interracial marriages and shifting attitudes suggest the potential for a cultural revolution. However, deep-rooted prejudices and social dominance persist, limiting the full integration of Al-Akhdam into Yemeni society. The novel's realistic portrayal of their struggles highlights the ongoing challenges faced by this marginalized group.

Through the lens of characters such as Rabash and Aisha, the novel exposes the harsh realities of social exclusion and the silent suffering endured by the Al-Akhdam community. Al-Muqri's clear and straightforward style effectively conveys the complexities of Al-Akhdam identity and their interactions with the dominant society. Furthermore, the novel illuminates the internalized racism prevalent within the Al-Akhdam community, as well as the external discrimination they face.

In essence, the narrative serves as a powerful call to action, urging readers to consider their role in addressing social injustice. While it does not offer explicit solutions, it fosters empathy and awareness, paving the way for potential remedies. By compelling readers to feel accountable, the story encourages a reevaluation of social norms and may inspire a drive for positive change. Ultimately, the book honors the resilience of the Al-Akhdam community and advocates for a more equitable society.



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