



Bawader, 3rd August 2021

Anti-Black Racism in Yemen: Manifestations and Responses

→ Mohammed Al-Mahfali



An elderly woman from the Akhdam community (The servants) walks at a slum, in Sana'a, Yemen, 14 November 2015. The servants, known in Arabic as Akhdam, are severely marginalized social status as society's outcasts, having a severely impoverished economic status. EPA/YAHYA ARHAB © EPA



Introduction

Yemeni dramatic works have recently come to reflect a sharp divide within Yemeni society with regards to anti-black racism. On one hand, they have underlined clear racist stereotypes and practices against black people and, on the other, they have contributed – albeit indirectly – to showcasing an anti-racist consciousness. Society has been fostering an awareness which seeks to comprehensively challenge this behavior, harmful to both the individual and society as a whole. At the same time, these works have revealed a decline in the artistic and cultural elite’s awareness regarding sensitive issues such as racism. They seem oblivious to the clear racist undertones carried in their work, which insist on cementing negative anti-black stereotypes within society.

This paper seeks to explore the forms and manifestations of racism awareness and supporting literature. It also explores how this resistance is expressed, individual and collective attempts to fight racism, obstacles faced, and ways to overcome them in the future.

Historical Background: Black Muhamasheen – between Racism and Rebellion

Yemeni society is characterized by its complex structure, based on a caste system which provides fertile ground for several negative practices, including racism. Racial hierarchy varies from region to region. In the south, the former socialist regime - which ruled South Yemen until 1990 - tried in vain to put an end to it. In Hadramot for instance, three main classes exist: the Sayyids and the Sheikhs, *Al-Masakin* (the vulnerable), or *Al-Doaf* (the weak),¹ then a final class that includes a number of menial workers, such as working boys,² as well as Bedouins, slaves, and others. The effects of this caste system persist, although they are less severe than in northern Yemen, where Sayyids also sit at the top of the pyramid. They control and benefit from a lot of political, religious, social and economic



Arab Reform Initiative

privilege (by owning power, land, and real estate). In this north Yemeni society, *Qoudat* (judges) come next. They were privileged to be educated before the 1962 revolution. Third is the tribal class, often associated with agriculture. This is the most prevalent class in Yemeni society, followed by the vulnerable classes, those with no strong tribal connections. Then come the classes with no family links, meaning that they have no strong kinship in the tribal system. Then often work as service providers in restaurants, barbershops and slaughterhouses, inferior occupations in the eye of society. At the bottom of the social scale are the black Yemenis, referred to as “Muhamasheen” (the marginalized) in the media or “Akhdam” (“slaves”, lit: servants) by society.³ It is an explicitly derogatory with a racist connotation aimed at this class.⁴ It is used by different groups in different contexts within society.

Such is the social caste system in Yemen, with slight differences from one geographical region to another, and from one historical period to another. However, the common theme across all of this stratification, everywhere in Yemen, seems to be that black Muhamasheen coming in at the bottom of the social ladder and are subjected to verbal and behavioral racism.

One of the dangers of Yemen's caste system is that it strives to maintain a deep divide between classes. It prevents genetic intermingling and preserves racial "purity," so that the blacks remain on the margin of social acceptance across the generations. Marriage into or among Muhamasheen is not allowed,⁵ even between two consenting parties. Families and the guardians of the apartheid stand strong against such attempts and do not balk at committing murder to prevent this from happening.

There are no official statistics on the exact numbers of "black" Muhamasheen. However, according to the latest estimates, as many as 3.3 million people⁶ live in different regions of Yemen where they are subjected to systematic social, cultural, and political racism and marginalization. They have to face cultural discrimination in the form of bullying and verbal vilification. They are denied any political role or administrative function in the State; they are limited to janitorial jobs and other jobs considered as being “low-level” from an economic and social perspective.⁷

As the author Ali Al-Muqri⁸ points out, it is difficult to attribute to them a single



definition. "They are the poor street sweepers working for both the rich and wealthy; those [who live on the fringes of villages and cities and are characterized by the color of their black skin]; the outcasts who are descended from black slaves; another type of gypsies based on their similarities in terms of their rebellious behavior against prevailing ideological, religious, political, and social values, and refusal to submit and integrate into society".⁹ These conflicting definitions provided by Al-Muqri show that they do not seek to provide a specific description or concept as much as they point to the controversy around the blacks. It is clear in the use of the racist term "servants" and their so-called rebellion against values, ideology and integration. This raises a fundamental question: have genuine integration policies ever been implemented? Indeed, there have been no serious formal policies and strategies in this regard over the past decades of Yemen's recent history, and there seems to be no plans in the short or long term to deal with this fundamental issue.

Manifestations and Causes of Racism

Regardless of definitions, the fact remains that black Muhamasheen are the biggest victims of systematic injustice and suffering in Yemen throughout history.¹⁰ They are subjected to racism through discrimination, contempt, isolation, abuse, the law's failure to protect them, and the insignificance of their lives in the eyes others. They live in segregated "mahawi" (slums) where they have no access to the most basic services.¹¹) Some argue that racism is due to their bad social situation, but the evidence clearly indicates two reasons: the first is racial, and the second is based on the dark color of their skin, which defines them and distinguishes them from other groups in Yemeni society.¹² It is indeed their black skin that has made society despise them, alienate them, put them in stereotypical boxes, and connect them to bad practices. These factors have prompted their rebellion, fueled by hundreds of years of racism from society.¹³ They have become isolated in shantytowns and communes on the outskirts of cities and residential areas.

Although marginalization in Yemen takes on cultural and social dimensions, black skin remains at its root. Anyone with black skin is exposed to discrimination, and even those with brown skin from other classes are bullied.¹⁴ Therefore, the social



problem created by society with the black Muhamasheen presents as racist on several levels, all stemming from the same underlying problem: a skin color and race issue.

One of the most prominent manifestations of racism is contempt, and the use of discriminatory words such as servant, bald,¹⁵ dirty, or cowards, not only against the marginalized group but also against people of color in general.¹⁶ This promotes bullying everywhere, including in schools, and denies people of color a normal life. Children are often subjected to such racist behavior in schools and tend to drop out. Since the educational environment has become hostile to them, the cycle is repeated and whole generations continue to form a community of Muhamasheen who lack adequate education in a process which perpetuates seclusion, isolation, and marginalization.

Yemen's pop culture is filled with expressions and texts embodying racist stereotypes against black Muhamasheen, going so far as to affect popular imagination; some even believe that they "eat their dead."¹⁷ This leads to a shift from verbal attacks to physical actions. Racist behavior translates into physical violence against blacks such as beatings, murder, rape, and deprivation of property ownership, as well as unpaid service at weddings and in homes, cleaning, and sanitation-related jobs. These practices are exercised not only by society but also by official state institutions. The perpetrators get away scot-free and are not even arrested at times, simply because the victim is black and is considered "less than" and unworthy of their rights.¹⁸

Racism Awareness and Responses

We have recently noted the emergence of individual initiatives and activities that seek to counter racism by stimulating the collective consciousness, carried out by activists from the black Muhamasheen community themselves and by civil society activists and cultural actors. This prompts us to examine the awareness of those who would reject stereotyping, seek equality, and eliminate class privileges that benefit one group at the expense of another. Their awareness of racism also makes us wonder what, in their view, causes society to resist – and vehemently so – any attempts to abolish racism. Some believe that the problem is deeply rooted in



centuries of history, hearkening to the arrival of Imam al-Razi in Yemen in 893 AD,¹⁹ who transformed Yemeni society from a homogeneous agricultural society into a caste society. The Hashemite class was established as the highest and most honorable class of society, and blacks and Jews were at the bottom of the social pyramid, resulting in contemptuous behavior towards blacks on the basis of social and professional standing and skin color. However, some scholars maintain that the caste system in Yemen is rooted in periods predating Islam, saying that the systems were a combination of the ancient tribal system, the caste system and feudal monarchy with noblemen, owners and slaves.²⁰ Others argue that the caste system, which turned into racism, emerged in later periods, especially under the Imams, who have promoted and imposed policies of isolation in Yemen over hundreds of years;²¹ these policies subsequently led to societal ignorance, namely among the marginalized.²² While these causes, particularly those which are religious, are indeed valid, cultural hatred of black skin, viewed as a symbol shame and disgrace,²³ has also played a major role in fostering tribal rivalry and conflicts that led to certain tribes gaining standing above others.

If cultural patterns are not understood by all as a result of widespread ignorance, declining educational space, and a media domination that focuses on cultivating followers, one of the consequences of war, cultural, artistic, and intellectual works should be that they be able to take a deep dive into this culture, confront the foundations and manifestations of racism, and then strive to create cultural and social awareness against racial discrimination.²⁴ Modern media, and especially social media, has played an undeniable and significant role in shaping the current awareness, making it a means of detecting and resisting racism.

Yemeni dramas are – deliberately or unwittingly – consolidating a stereotype that fosters racism and communicates the wrong messages to its wider audience. For instance, some Yemeni television series and programs broadcasted so far this year have contributed to the consolidation of certain manifestations of racism within society, with some actors taking on roles of black characters. Their faces were painted black to act out characters discriminated against, by mocking them or representing them as criminals. These racist undertones would have gone unnoticed had it not been for the awareness of some Yemeni activists on social media, who highlighted these violations and launched targeted campaigns to



boycott such programs.

Dramatic production is a form of culture. It is an extension of the collective consciousness rooted in social structure. This is not the first time that drama and art in Yemen have taken on racist manifestations, but it is almost the first time that individual resistance has emerged from activists to uncover, reject, expose, and explain the dangers of racism.

Blackface was the first theme targeted by these campaigns.²⁵ They introduced the concept of Blackface, which seemed new to people, and explained the racist dimensions and risks involved, such as consolidating mockery in people's consciousness. A few sample scenes were highlighted from the series "Cappuccino" on Yemen Youth TV Channel, in which an actor and actress wore blackface and played satirical roles through language and other actors reacted to their characters with vilification, disgust, and insult.²⁶ This may encourage reactions of disgust towards black people.²⁷ The show "Khalf Shames" (Behind the Sun) on Al Saeeda channel also featured a Somali pirate in blackface. According to the reactions of activists, the series committed two racist crimes, the first of which is blackface, the second being that black skin is associated with crime: "In films, black people have long been embodied as criminals or victims of crime - a common form of racial discrimination against blacks in culture, media and film - rather than as leading characters."²⁸ From the perspective of these campaigns, the real issue is the black color itself and cultural patterns that are deeply rooted in people's consciousness. Otherwise, there would be no racism towards a group that is the largest, most persecuted minority in Yemen.

This is the reflection of a real problem in the awareness of concerned parties. Besides the stereotyped characters, there is no black representation in the media. Millions of blacks are not only marginalized but also officially bullied in various television productions. The situation is far worse for black women. There is "no real representation of black women in Yemen. There are not many black female artists or media personalities on Yemeni television. This is indicative of a deliberate exclusion and harsh norms that limit them to degrading stereotypes. It only serves to reiterate the racist and supremacist view towards black women, as well as the fabricated ideal of beauty."²⁹ Blacks are deliberately excluded due to cultural patterns deeply rooted in the consciousness of the perpetrators. If black



people are included in any way, they are cast in bad parts, to be made fun of and mocked rather than depicted as integral to society as a whole.

Initiatives and Solutions

The Yemeni state denies the existence of racial groups in society. It asserts that Yemeni society is homogeneous and exempt of any racism among its members.³⁰ This type of discourse has led some like Nasser to believe that the State does not foster systemic marginalization or racism as it does not rely on written racist laws.³¹ However, the reality is not so simple. Indeed, Yemeni legislation does not directly contain laws that discriminate on the basis of race or color. Nonetheless, there are no clear texts stipulating that racism and discrimination are punishable by law. The door is thus left wide open to perpetuate discrimination and cover up for perpetrators.

Compared to the extent and significant and far-reaching impact of racism, activism within the community remains inadequate. However, the activities of young activists aimed at countering this phenomenon are a good start to enhance public awareness and lobby for change.

In addition to these individual efforts, activist Fawzi Al-Habchi lists initiatives seeking to break down these walls, namely: the Yemeni Observatory for Human Rights, which implements the Program to Support Community Coexistence with the Marginalized;³² the National Federation of the Marginalized, which conducts various activities to counter racism through legal support, lobbying, and advocacy; and Kifaya Association, which supports community dialogue to further peace and coexistence.³³ Although this anti-racist activism seems limited and based on individual initiatives,³⁴ it bodes well for developing awareness among a new generation that could bring about change. Such individual efforts can also come together to form institutional hotbeds seeking to advance and achieve these goals in order to efficiently counter racism as it impacts these groups and the wider community.

Acknowledging racism as an existing societal phenomenon and as a crime to be fought³⁵ is a key step towards combating racism. This requires a comprehensive national strategy for the short, medium, and long terms in order to ensure the full



Arab Reform Initiative

integration of the marginalized and the eradication of racism. Efforts should start with the abolition of titles and the constitutional criminalization of racism,³⁶ the amendment of current legislation, and enactment of new legislation criminalizing all forms of racism. All related racist behaviors in schools by students, teachers, or administrators should be made punishable by law.³⁷ The rhetoric of renouncing racism should also be disseminated through short films, articles, seminars, workshops, and debates. The media should be prevented from using black skin as material for mockery.³⁸ The engagement of black Muhamasheen in employment and decision-making is also paramount to reflect the values of justice and equality and for the end of racial discrimination. These groups, namely the youth, should also be educated on the issues of culture, politics, and rights in order to enable them to advocate for their rights and face this challenge.³⁹

The journey against anti-black racism in Yemen seems difficult but it is not impossible. The ongoing activism and mature voices speaking up on social media reflect an intellectual structure and human potential needed for change, thus facilitating the transformation of this individual consciousness into future institutional action. This process must rely on a strategic vision that promotes the principle of equal citizenship beyond race, color, and belief. The vision should also strive to achieve national objectives that reflect the concepts of human rights, the values of the modern world, and the interests of all without exception.

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Endnotes

1. Sayyids are Hashemites affiliated with the Prophet's House (Bayt Al Nabi). Sheikhs are a category of tribe. The term Sheikh was taken from Tribal Chieftain or Tribal Sheikhs but refers to a specific category of tribe in this context. *Al-Doaf* (lit: the weak) are those who do not have strong kinship to strong tribes, so this nomenclature is given to those of with weak kinship. See:
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4. Almahfali, M. & Humaid, E. (2019). *Minorities in Yemen, reality and challenges*. Insaf Center for Defending Freedoms and Minorities, p. 16.
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8. Ali Al-Muqri is a Yemeni novelist, currently based in France, who has written several novels on problematic issues in Yemeni society, including the black community in his work “Black Taste, Black Odour”, short-listed in the Poker Awards and highlighting the Akhdam class in Yemeni society. His novel depicts the tragic social status of this group and dives deep into the origins of the issue. See: International Prize for Arabic Fiction. <https://www.arabicfiction.org/ar/Black%20Taste%2C%20Black%20Odour%20-ar>
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16. Al-Awadhi, Warda. (2021). Personal interview with the scholar, 19 May 2021.
17. Al-Naamani, Mohammad. (2021) *الخدم كواجهة سردية - الخدم كواجهة سردية* (Muhamasheen in Yemen and the Rumor of Eating their Dead!!). *Al-hewar al Mutamaden*. 4 September 2006. <https://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=74585>
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22. Bahkal, Mahmoud Rizk. (2021).
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24. Al-Mazabi, Hael Ali. (2021). *ضد التمييز العنصري* (Against Racial Discrimination). Unpublished book. p.15
25. - “Blackface” is a term that has a very negative connotation and is closely related to an unresolved history of racial exploitation, apartheid, and the ridiculous stereotypes attributed to people of African descent in the USA. White artists were painted black to play black roles. Their performances were very offensive. Black people were portrayed as ridiculous and stupid in order to make the audience laugh. - Cole, C.M.(1996). Reading Blackface in West Africa: Wonders Taken for Signs. *Critical Inquiry*, 23(1), pp.183-215, p. 195.
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About the author

Mohammed Al-Mahfali

Affiliated Researcher, Centre for Advanced Middle Eastern Studies- Lund University, Sweden

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