

Black Experience in Two Worlds: Minority Marginalization in Al-Mugri's *Black Taste*, *Black Smell* and *Zakes Mda's the Zulus of New York*

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Abstract

This study explores the Black experience through a comparative analysis of Al-Mugri's marginalized Akhdam community in Yemen in his novel Black Taste, Black Smell and Zakes Mda's Zulus performers in The Zulus of New York. Examining these groups across historical, emotional, and social contexts, the research aims to achieve a twofold objective. Firstly, it seeks to identify universal themes within the Black experience, highlighting shared struggles faced by black communities despite geographical and cultural differences. Secondly, the study recognizes the distinct challenges faced by each group within their specific societal contexts. Through this comparative approach, the research offers a nuanced understanding of the complexities of the black, acknowledging both the unifying threads of marginalization and the unique realities shaped by each group's historical and social background. Contribution: This study intervenes in Black experience scholarship by examining the intricate marginalization faced by Black characters navigating dual cultural contexts.

Keywords: *Black; Marginalization; Zulus; Akhdam Mda. Al-Mugri.*

Introduction

The experiences Black individuals live across the globe are often marked by a complex interplay of identity, marginalization, and resilience. This exploration delves into the literary works of two prominent authors, Al-Mugri and Mda, who navigate these themes through their respective portrayals of Black communities in *Black Taste*, *Black Smell* and *The Zulus of New York*. While geographically and culturally distinct, both narratives offer a profound exploration of the challenges faced by Black individuals, specifically focusing on social exclusion, discrimination, emotional deprivation, historical realities, and the multifaceted construction of identity. By examining these literary works, the study embarks on a journey to understand the universality of the Black experience, while acknowledging the unique complexities that arise within distinct societal contexts. Through a comparative analysis, this exploration aims to illuminate the enduring struggles against marginalization, the affirmation of identity, and the enduring spirit of resilience that characterizes the Black experience across diverse worlds.

This investigation adopts a multifaceted approach to achieve a thorough understanding of how Al-Mugri and Mda represent the Black experience within their respective literary universes.

The study employs *comparative analysis* to examine how each author explores similar themes, such as marginalization, identity formation, and resistance, within their distinct contexts. This comparative lens illuminates both the universality of the Black experience across geographical and cultural divides and the unique complexities that arise within specific societal settings.

The study delves into the *historical and cultural contexts* that inform each author's work. This contextualization provides a deeper understanding of the specific sociopolitical forces and systems of oppression that shape the experiences of Black individuals depicted in each narrative. Additionally, the analysis explores how the authors engage with historical events or cultural practices, revealing whether they challenge or perpetuate dominant narratives about race and identity.

The investigation *utilizes critical race theory and intersectionality* as frameworks to analyze how race intersects with other social identities, such as gender, class, and nationality, shaping the experiences of the characters.

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This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of marginalization and how individuals navigate the construction of their identity within these intersecting power structures.

Moreover, the study investigates how these works have been received by critics and audiences. This examination attempts to reveal the historical and contemporary significance of the narratives and how they contribute to broader conversations about race and identity within their respective cultural spheres. Additionally, the analysis considers the potential impact of these works in raising awareness and promoting social change related to the issues faced by Black communities.

The study uses this multifaceted approach to comprehensively understand how Al-Mugri and Mda depict the Black experience in their respective literary worlds.

Limitations and Future Studies

While this study offers a valuable comparative analysis of the Black experience in Al-Mugri's *Blak Taste*, *Black Smell* and Mda's *The Zulus of New York*, it acknowledges certain limitations. Firstly, the focus on literary works inherently restricts the scope of the analysis. The novels, though insightful, cannot encompass the entirety of the Black experience in Yemen and the United States. Additionally, the chosen works potentially limit the historical range explored. *The Zulus of New York* centers on the 19th century, while *Blak Taste*, *Black Smell* was set in a contemporary era. This timeframe may not capture the full historical context of marginalization faced by Black communities in these locations.

To address these limitations and enrich the understanding of the Black experience in two worlds, several avenues for future research present themselves. First, incorporating works by other authors from both Yemen and the United States would provide a more comprehensive perspective. Delving deeper into the historical context through archival research or historical studies could further contextualize the experiences depicted in the novels. Additionally, supplementing the literary analysis with sociological studies or oral histories would offer a more well-rounded understanding of the social realities faced by Black communities. Furthermore, future studies could focus on specific aspects of marginalization, such as racism, economic disparity, or cultural identity, for a more granular analysis. Finally, exploring the contemporary experiences of Black communities in Yemen and the United States would offer valuable insights into how marginalization has evolved or remained constant. By acknowledging these limitations and pursuing these future avenues of research, scholars can gain a richer and more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted Black experience across geographical and cultural divides.

Review of Literature

Across various sectors of society, including education, economics, and the legal system, the Black community faces persistent marginalization. This marginalization can be seen in educational institutions, where negative stereotypes surrounding Black English disadvantage students of African descent.

The concept of marginalization itself is multifaceted and has been extensively explored by scholars from diverse viewpoints. These perspectives encompass cultural, social, philosophical, and even geographical lenses. This intensive research has contributed to a broader understanding and widespread recognition of the term.

Understanding marginality is important in comprehending the actions and perceptions of dominant groups (Peter, 2009, pp. 12-16). It is a complex concept that can be seen through processes of transculturation (Sven, 2013, pp. 141-156). The process of marginalization is intricate, involving various layers and origins of oppression. (Elyssa, 2005, pp. 194-202). The social phenomenon of marginalization is intricate, and characterized by a multitude of factors that contribute to the systematic suppression of individuals or groups.

One notable aspect of marginalization is that it is **a widespread issue globally**, even among those who experience its detrimental effects. For instance, the marginalization of ethnic communities has been linked to radicalization among Somali Muslims in Kenya. (Abel, 2020, pp. 5001- 5013).

Some authors, like Zakes Mda, are interested highly in writing about the themes of otherness and marginalization. Zakes Mda, who has African origins, is highly affected by following up the roots and the historical seeds of marginalization. Zakes Mda delves into the theme of marginalization not only in his work *The Zulus of New York* but also, in his novel *Ways of Dying*. This latter novel explores the concept through the lens of South Africa's transitional period, offering a critical and dynamic historical perspective. (Richard, 2000, pp.189-199). Mda's novel, *Ways of Dying*, centres on the harsh realities of Black communities in South Africa during the apartheid transition. The narrative delves into the pervasive experience of violence and death, shedding light on the immense burden carried by these individuals in the face of such societal turmoil (Haarhoff, 2020, pp.190-205).

Works like Al-Mugri's *Black Taste*, *Black Smell* and Zakes Mda's *The Zulus of New York* exemplify the recurring theme of marginalization in literature. Both authors delve into the experiences of those pushed to the fringes of society. Al-Mugri's novel focuses on the plight of vagrants, whose lack of housing renders them invisible in public discourse (Al-Subari, 2021, pp.115-118). Mda, on the other hand, explores how marginalization impacts ethnic groups, specifically their intellectual development and ideological growth. (Mda, 2019)

Marginalization of Black African communities extends **beyond geographically** distinct regions, affecting individuals in the East. the West. Budarick, (2017), for example, tries to raise **the voices of the marginalized Africans** in Australia. His study examines the creative efforts of African-Australian media producers across various media platforms, including print, broadcasting, and the Internet. These producers work within ethnic minority, community, and public service media sectors (pp.37-57).

The study by Al-Subari (2021, pp.207-217) highlights the miserable marginalization of the Black in Al-Mugri's *Black Tats*, *Black Smell* and explores the negative impact of this othering.

Previous research has explored themes within these novels, such as marginalization, social complexities, and identity formation. This study, however, takes a more comprehensive approach. It focuses on the shared experiences of Al-Mugri's Akhdam and Mda's Zulus, examining these experiences through a three-dimensional lens: historical, social, and emotional.

By analyzing these dimensions within the distinct social contexts of each work, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of their marginalization. While previous studies may have explored these themes individually, our approach integrates the emotional impact of these historical and social realities. This allows us to gain a deeper understanding of how these characters experience their marginalization in both Yemen and the Western world.

Discussion

The authors, Al-Mugri from Yemen and Mda from America, delve into the experiences of black individuals in their respective novels, *Black Smell*, *Black Smell* and "*The Zulus of New York*." These stories shed light on the challenges and marginalization black people face in society. Through their narratives, the authors provide insights into the struggles and identities of these individuals, presenting their experiences in various contexts. In *The Zulus of New York*, Zakes Mda employs historical fiction to deepen our understanding of black people's lives and identities. The novels offer a multi-dimensional perspective on their experiences and how societal perceptions influence their self-perception (Mda, 2019; 2018). Al-Mugri's portrayal of the marginalized Akhdam community in Yemen is a powerful depiction of their difficult living conditions and the discrimination they face from the wider society. Through his novel, Al-Mugri aims to shed light on the lives of the Akhdam and raise awareness among readers, thinkers, activists, and anyone concerned about social justice. (Al-Subari, 2021, p.215).

Historical Experiences

Zakes Mda's captivating novel, *The Zulus of New York*, (2019) blends historical truth with fictional elements to illuminate the forgotten story of Zulu performers from the late 19th century.

The narrative follows a group of Zulus brought to England and later America by "The Great Farini" to perform in circuses and "freak shows" following the Battle of Isandlwana. Mda delves into the complexities of this era, exploring the exploitation these performers faced, the clash between cultures, and their remarkable resilience amidst Victorian-era spectacles and societal prejudice (2019).

He masterfully weaves fictional characters into a historically accurate setting, offering readers a glimpse into the lives of these Zulus and their experiences in New York City. The story goes beyond highlighting their exploitation, exploring themes of love, finding identity, and surviving in a hostile environment (2019).

Through his narrative, Mda aims to restore the humanity and dignity of these forgotten performers by blending factual accounts with fictional characters. *The Zulus of New York* offers a thought-provoking exploration of a lesser-known chapter in history, providing a unique perspective on the challenges faced by individuals viewed as mere "curiosities" in a world vastly different from their own.

The historical facts alone lack the emotional impact necessary for true understanding. By stepping into the shoes of historical figures through fiction, Mda gains a deeper empathetic connection with them and their experiences. Ultimately, he suggests, understanding history is crucial for fostering empathy and fostering connection with the human stories woven into the fabric of the past (Msomi, 2019).

The identities of these Zulus have been lost in the annals of time and Mda aims to restore their humanity through the telling of their story. He moves between historical reality and fiction to do this (Mda, 2018). While he is perhaps too preoccupied with how the past shapes native identity, this focus translates powerfully into the novel. Through meticulously crafted descriptions, the narrative showcases how historical experiences can transform, reinforce, and even revitalize a sense of self (Abu Jweid and Al-Khmisi, p. 498).

The love story of Imbu, one of the characters in Al-Mugri's novel, unfolds the historical experiences of the Akhdam community in Yemen. It carries the weight of a long history burdened by discrimination and social injustice. To understand their current situation, we need to delve into the historical context that shaped it. (Human Rights 2005& Joshua Project 2024).

Roots of Discrimination of the Akhdam community are believed to be linked to Ethiopian invaders from the 6th century who faced defeat and expulsion. The remnants of their forces were subsequently enslaved by the Yemeni population, marking the beginning of descent-based discrimination that has persisted for centuries (Human Rights 2005& Joshua Project 2024).

Confined to Lowly Work: Historically, the Akhdam community has been forced to take on menial and low-status jobs, such as cleaning latrines and shoe-making. These occupations have become inextricably linked with their identity, further reinforcing their marginalization within Yemeni society for centuries (Human Rights 2005& Joshua Project 2024).

Despite distinct geographical settings, both Zakes Mda in *The Zulus of New York* and Ali al-Muqri in his *Black Tate, Black Smell* utilize historical fiction to shine a light on the marginalized experiences of black communities. Mda delves into the late 19th-century exploitation of Zulus in Western societies, exposing the dehumanizing practices of human zoos and cultural clashes. Al-Muqri, on the other hand, explores the plight of the Akhdam people in contemporary Yemen, tracing their historical marginalization back to their origins and the societal roles they have been forced into. Through these fictional narratives woven with historical truths, both authors offer a powerful critique of racial prejudice and a platform for marginalized voices, fostering empathy and understanding across geographical and cultural boundaries.

Emotional Experiences

This novel, written by Ali al-Muqri, explores the complex issue of marginalized communities through the story of "Mambo," who escapes societal restrictions and finds love within the ostracized communities. The couple, yearning to break free from the dehumanizing "othering" they face, seek solace in separation from mainstream society. They believe this self-imposed segregation at "Al-Oshash," the ramshackle dwelling place of the Akhdam people, will protect their love. However, their isolation stems from a harsh reality. Their community cannot tolerate their inter-group relationship, deeming it a transgression.

On the other hand, in Zakes Mda's *"The Zulus of New York,"* a passionate love story blossoms between Em-Pee, a skilled Zulu warrior, and Acol, a Dinka princess. However, their love faces a formidable obstacle. Acol's circumstances, likely due to her captivity, prevent her from engaging in a free and equal relationship, leaving Em-Pee's affection unrequited despite its intensity (Mda, 2019).

However, a glimmer of hope emerges with the marriage of Jumaa, a maid, and the doctor. This "black and white" union signifies the possibility of transcending societal boundaries and finding love despite societal divisions.

While both narratives explore love blossoming amidst marginalization, the contexts and expressions of this struggle differ greatly. Al-Muqri portrays internal divisions within ostracized groups in Yemen, while Mda depicts the stark contrast between Zulu performers and a society that views them as mere curiosities. This comparative exploration underscores the universality of marginalization's impact on love and belonging, yet also emphasizes the distinct challenges faced by marginalized communities in different social and historical settings.

Social Experiences

The novel of A-Mugri delves into the harsh realities faced by marginalized communities in Yemen, particularly the "Akhdam" (Arabic word means servants) and the "Muzinin" (another marginalized group).

Al-Mugri portrays the isolation and rejection of these minorities through the experiences of the black characters in the story.

Abdo Aisha, a young black child who has an unknown father, symbolizes the systemic exclusion. He is denied education and subjected to a narrative that portrays blackness as inherently negative, linking it to darkness and undesirable traits (Al-Mugri, 2011).

Rabash, another character, embodies the pain of betrayal. He feels a sense of betrayal from everything he holds dear - religion, homeland, and history - due to the discriminatory treatment his community faces (2011).

Sorour, on the other hand, expresses radical resentment. He proposes extreme measures, suggesting the mummification and display of an Akhdam as an exhibit, highlighting their perceived extinction by society (2011).

In his 2018 novel, *"The Zulus of New York,"* Zakes Mda fictionalizes the story of Zulus brought to England and later the United States during the 1880s. William Leonard Hunt, a showman known as The Great Farini, exploited these individuals, forcing them to perform as "human curiosities" or "freak shows" in his popular circus. (2018).

The story is based on historical events that took place at the height of Zulu fascination after they defeated the British at the Battle of Isandlwana.

The minority of Al-Akhdam and muzinin are subjected to entrenched social segregation and relegated to the lowest rung of the social hierarchy (Al-Subari, 2021, p. 215) Confined primarily to menial labor in major

cities, the Akhdam face rampant discrimination, persecution, and exclusion from mainstream Yemeni society. Socially constructed stereotypes portraying them as inferior, unclean, and immoral further marginalize them, with intermarriage with non-Akhdam individuals strictly forbidden (2021).

The Akhdam community is entrenched in poverty, forced to accept menial jobs like sweeping, shoemaking, and sanitation work, offering little income and limited upward mobility. Unemployment, especially among women, is significantly higher than national averages, often pushing individuals to resort to begging for survival (Al-Warraaq, n. d.).

Their living conditions are deplorable. They reside in slums lacking basic amenities and proper housing, as depicted in Al-Mugri's story.

The love story in Mda's novel blossoms amidst a harsh reality: the exploitation and objectification of Africans in Western societies during the late 19th century. The book serves as a powerful critique, highlighting the horrors faced by Africans who were forcibly removed from their homes and displayed as mere "human curiosities" in degrading human zoos. This historical context casts a long shadow on the lovers' relationship, adding another layer of complexity to their fight for love and freedom (Mda, 2019).

Perception

A report from Publisher's Marketplace indicates that the film rights for Zakes Mda's novel *The Zulus of New York* have been acquired by Mandla Dube, a South African director and cinematographer known for his work on the Netflix film *Silverton Siege* produced by Pambilimedia (Ibeh, 2022).

The Zulus of New York has been commended for its exploration of the complexities of identity and how individuals negotiate their cultural heritage in a foreign land. The novel provides insights into the struggles, triumphs, and resilience of the Zulu community as they strive to carve out a place for themselves in the bustling metropolis of New York. (2022)

Ali al-Mugri's novel *Black Taste, Black Smell* has been widely acclaimed for its portrayal of the marginalized Akhdam community in Yemen. The novel has been praised for shedding light on the historical issues faced by this community, including their marginalization, oppression, degradation, humiliation, and racial exclusion (Al-Subari, 2021& Qaid, 2017).

It is recognized as one of the first literary works in Yemen to give voice to the Akhdam and Muzinin, highlighting their struggles and the severe situation of their suffering. It presents a humanistic vision by raising the muted voice of the Akhdam in Yemeni society, emphasizing their rights as guaranteed by Yemeni law and constitution (Al-Subari, 2021).

Conclusion

Mda and Al-Mugri painted a stark picture of marginalized lives existing on society's fringes. By illuminating their experiences, they expose the harsh realities of exclusion and the constant struggle for acceptance. *Black Taste, Black Smell* delves deeper, highlighting the systemic nature of this marginalization, and showcasing the disdain and injustice faced by the Akhdam community in everyday life. Readers of these narratives witness the yearning for belonging and the arduous battle against discrimination. Ultimately, these works serve as a powerful reminder of the human cost of marginalization and the unseen scars it leaves on individuals and communities.

Mda and Al-Mugri's novels stand as powerful testaments to the enduring struggles faced by marginalized communities. Both explore the experiences of individuals forced to exist on the periphery of society, yearning for acceptance and grappling with the limitations imposed by societal prejudice. *The Zulus of New York* portrays the dehumanizing realities of being viewed as an "other," while *Black Taste, Black Smell* delves into the internal divisions within ostracized groups and the systemic nature of discrimination faced by the

Akhdam. Yet, amidst the harsh realities, both narratives offer glimmers of hope. Love stories emerge, defying societal boundaries and offering a testament to the human spirit's resilience.

Ultimately, these works serve not only to illuminate the complexities of the Black experience but also to foster empathy and understanding. By giving voice to the unseen and unheard, Mda and Al-Mugri urge their readers to confront the consequences of marginalization and the importance of fostering inclusivity. Their stories serve as a call to action, reminding the world of the shared humanity that binds peoples of different colors and the need to dismantle the systems that perpetuate these injustices.

In conclusion, by delving into the experiences of Al-Mugri's Akhdam and Mda's *Zulus* through historical, emotional, and social lenses, this study sheds light on the multifaceted Black experience. The analysis reveals both the universality of struggles faced by black communities across geographical and cultural divides and the distinct challenges rooted in each group's unique societal context. This comparative approach fosters a deeper understanding of the complexities of blackness, recognizing both shared hardships and the nuanced realities within different social settings.

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