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## A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF THE MARGINALIZATION CONCEPT IN YEMENI CONTEXT

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### Abstract

The current research article is a sociolinguistic study that attempts to read the concept of marginality and how it is thought of from the view point of Yemeni community. It is basically qualitative in nature and it is an insight into the phenomenon of marginalization and oppression. The findings of this study show that in Yemeni society there are two marginalized communities belonging to the lowest class. Linguistically, people adopted various terminologies to refer to these communities: 'Akhdam' community, meaning slaves or servants and 'Mazayinah' community, meaning servants. This marginalization, on one hand is based on skin color discrimination and family profession on the other. Similarly, it has also revealed that some differences were found between these two marginalized communities such as living place, accessibility of services, social relationships and integration in the community.

Keywords: Marginalization, Muhamashin, Mazayinah, Akhdam, Color discrimination, Sociolinguistics.

### Introduction

The study of the sociological aspects of a language is known as sociolinguistics. In other words, sociolinguistics refers to lexical choices and the way language is used in society. Therefore, sociolinguistics examines the impact of certain factors such as ethnicity, gender, class, education, occupation, geographical location and socioeconomic status on the use of language choices amongst people in a given society and how such

factors preserve social roles in the community. According to Labov (1927- present day), the study of language varieties inevitably necessitates a knowledge of linguistics, sociology, psychology and anthropology all together.

Discrimination and marginalization have been dominating almost all the nations over the world. People created social constructs on the basis of which they judge, oppress and exploit others. The concept of marginality is not space bound; nor it is

specific to a certain nation or a certain country. Therefore, all nations suffer from this phenomenon across the globe, and Yemen country is one example of that. Marginalized and oppressed communities are scattered all over the world. No single society is immune of marginalization.

Although Yemen has officially abolished its caste system, discrimination and racism still persist today. Yemen social hierarchy, as other countries, consists of some classes; the upper class, middle class and the lower class. Therefore, social exclusion is a major problem that affects the lower class communities. The lower class contains two marginalized communities; one community is discriminated on the basis of skin color and the other one is on the basis of family professions. The marginalized (Muhamashin) community belongs to the lower class of the society. It represents the largest population of Muhamashin in Yemen. The current research article has covered the following points: discussion, some manifestations of racism against muhamashin community, main differences between the two marginalized communities and finally the conclusion.

### Discussion

Historically, people in Yemen are socially classified on the basis of class. Sekhon (2000) argued that all societies suffer from differentiation that becomes the main foundation of ranking and unequal reach to the resources like power, income, wealth and prestige. Religiously, Yemen is a Muslim country and Islam gives instructions and teachings to people to be equally treated without any type of discrimination. However, Islam has clarified this concept and criminalized its practice amongst people of the same community. Exploiting and judging people on the basis of their skin color or on family profession is totally prohibited in Islam. The parameter of righteousness is very basic as a measuring standard for all people alike without any differences or discrimination of any kind.

Marginalized people have been known as the outcasts or the untouchables, (Gupta, 2018). However, linguistically certain terminologies have been socially constructed and widely used by Yemeni people to refer to the hierarchy system of

the community. Two groups of the Yemeni community have been marginalized and socially excluded from the services and other aspects of day-to-day life. The first category of these communities has been marginalized on the basis of color discrimination. People having black skin have been called differently by various terminologies. For example, the first term is 'Akhdam' (أخدام) which semantically means slaves or servants. Here, obviously the sense of slavery and servitude is attached to the term. This refers to inferiority and contempt. This section of the community was confined to low-paid and inferior jobs and professions such as garbage collection, sewage sanitation cleaning, sweeping streets and mending shoes. The term 'Akhdam' (أخدام) is offensive and derogatory since it expresses contempt towards the marginalized people in Yemeni society and is used racially, (Lacroix, 2019). This word implies discrimination and exclusion of 'akhdam' social group.

The name, Akhdam (أخدام), is given to the lowest class in the Yemeni social hierarchy. According to a local Yemeni consultant, it is estimated that there are about six to eight million 'akhdam' across the country. Similar to the Dalit community in India, Akhdam in Yemen represent the very bottom structure of the society. However, this class is unduly represented politically and thoroughly excluded from all aspects of society. Traditionally, begging, garbage collection and cleaning services are the only jobs available to them in the society. This indicates that they are not regarded as a part of the Yemeni tribal system and are totally excluded and disqualified all over the country, (Lacroix, 2019).

Endogamy is a main characteristic of Akhdam community. That is intermarriage; marriage only within the same class is possible whereas marriage outside the class or exogamy is impossible because of purity and pollution. The caste system is established on the concepts of pollution and purity. However, akhdam are considered the most polluting and lowest rank of the society, (Thachil, 2001). Due to the sense of inferiority, people belonging to other classes thought of akhdam as neither clean nor pure. Therefore, marriage or even regular interaction of

'akhdam' with other segments of the society is not possible. Other derogatory connotations relevant to this term include the concept of pollution or lack of purity because akhdam possess bad habits and are involved in inferior type of menial jobs and works (Adra, 2006).

Another term has been widely used in the Yemeni society to refer to these oppressed people. The term is 'Muhamashin' (مُهَمَّشِين) which literally means the marginalized or the neglected ones, judged as the lowest class of the social hierarchy. This term has the sense of negligence and it refers to people living on the margins of the city. There is close connection between margins and muhamashin. This term refers to the slum areas and the outskirts of cities where these black people used to live. Muhamashin have been exposed to discrimination, exploitation and poverty. During war, muhamashin have suffered a great deal and were left homeless and displaced.

#### **Manifestations of Racism against Muhamashin**

The Muhamashin (مُهَمَّشِين), as the term exactly indicates, have been deliberately marginalized and pushed out of the center to occupy the margins of social, political and economic life in the Yemeni society. Intolerance and prejudice against them by upper classes, basically those with white skin, is a noticeable manifestation of racism towards them. For example, insulting muhamashin verbally using the term 'Akhdam' is considered an abuse and offence. This term is like a curse that keeps reminding them of their origins and belonging to Muhamashin community and that they have no relationship with other communities. However, on this linguistic foundation, a lot of societal prejudices have been formulated against them, (Al-Mahafly and Homaid, 2019).

As for political marginalization, Muhamashin have been absented and were excluded from any political or administrative role. And their presence is noticed only in the form of cleaners and servants despite their participation in the National Dialogue Conference sponsored by the United Nations that took place in Yemen in 2012. Also, the head of Muhamashin Union was a member of the dialogue conference and demanded for allocating 10% of the

jobs to the marginalized people. Yet the final constitution was devoid of any quota that represents them. This means that though the Yemeni society begins to adapt with the notions of racism, it has not yet laid the foundations to overcome it in the future. Hence, on this basis they are deprived of lots of social rights. For example, they do not have the right to argue about their societal concerns because they only exist to serve others, (Equal, 2018).

Another form of discrimination is exclusion from land ownership. Although the Yemeni constitution and law guarantee the right of every citizen to own land, the society practice, especially in tribal areas prohibits muhamashin from owning or possessing land, and only allows them to work on it, (Al-Mahafly and Homaid, 2019).

A lot of muhamashin are subjected to various kinds of violence such as torture, beating, and insults, in light of the silence of the law and state agencies. Also, systematic rape, including males and females from muhamashin community, the judicial system and security are very lenient with the criminals; it is so, because the victim is disregarded a human being up to this racist perspective, (Al-Mahafly and Homaid, 2019). It is reported by some organizations concerned with observing abuses against the marginalized that the security and judicial agencies are informed, but they do not take serious action against the criminals; because the victim is from Muhamashin category.

It is not limited to sexual harassment, insults, torture and rape only. Rather, it takes on greater dimensions, as the criminals are not satisfied with their heinous acts, but they attack the houses of the victims and destroy them sometimes, and force them to leave their houses. Harassment and sexual acts are unacceptable by society, but if happened to the marginalized people, then the society not only overlooks that, but rather punishes the marginalized who have been victimized or offended. Majority of the people thought that Akhdam women lack honor and they were sexually targeted and harassed, (Adra, 2006).

The second oppressed community of the society is not marginalized on the basis of color

discrimination. On the contrary, it is marginalized on the basis of the kind of family profession though they have white skin color. This class of the society is called 'Mazayinah' (مزايينه). It comes from the lower class of the society. Similar to the word 'Khadim' (خادم), the term 'Muzayin' (مُزَيْن) is closely related to the profession inherited and practised by these marginalized people. Semantically, the term 'Muzayin' (مُزَيْن) means a decorator or a hairstylist. Yet, it has a negative meaning which literally means servants. In other words, certain professions are very specific for them. They generally perform jobs such as butchers, barbers, weavers, iron smiths, cleaners or sweepers and food servers. They have been socially classified on the basis of their jobs or the family professions such as butchery or ceremony servers. They also chant and sing in certain occasions and ceremonies. Besides, they recite poetry to glorify the upper classes, (Lacroix, 2019). Practicing such professions is regarded a shame or social stigma by most of the upper class people. In case any person broke this construct rule and practiced these professions, they would be ostracized from the family and the tribe as well. These professions are considered bad and offensive to high and middle class people. Therefore, only the marginalized can do such professions.

Using the term 'muzayin' pragmatically indicates disintegration, social segregation, and oppression in Yemeni society. This term refers to racial and violent connotations that cause conflict in the community because it inspires and stimulates the sense of abhorrence and vengeance. The term is frequently adopted in social and personal situations, particularly associated with objections to marriage, (Lacroix, 2019). Within the community of 'mazayinah', there is a sub-section called 'Dawashin' (دوشانين). They have been racially discriminated due to the work they do in the tribe. Therefore, their work is confined to beat drums in festivals and ceremonies, sing and recite poems glorifying their tribe leaders and other masters in search of getting some money rewards. The etymological meaning of this term 'Dawshan' (دوشان) semantically means a person whose voice is louder in singing and delivering poetry. Also, it means a person whose work is a drummer. According to Dr. Iryani (1996),

Dawshan (دوشان) in Yemen is a person chosen by the tribe to perform the function of highlighting the glories of the tribe, its news, preserving its genealogy, as well as narrating its epics and stories on some occasions.

#### **Main Differences between the two Marginalized Communities**

There are some major differences between these marginalized communities: Muhamashin (including Akhdam) and Mazayinah (including Dawashin) in Yemeni society. Living places, social relationships and integration in the society and accessibility to services are the major differences between muhamashin and mazayinah community. Though the two marginalized communities belong to the lowest class, some differences have been found obviously between them. As for their place of residence, akhdam were not socially accepted in the society. This helped to seclude themselves from the society and live in isolated clusters in huts built of straw, tin or other materials. Velassery (2005) noted that such category of the marginalized people were destined to live in the outskirts and were not socially accepted as an integral part of the society. Their main task, however, is to serve the upper classes. They largely live in very hot areas especially the governorates of Hadramout, Aden, Hodeidah, Abyan and Lahj. Hence, they are vulnerable to fatal illnesses and epidemics. Moreover, the result of living in difficult situations without electricity, there is neither hygienic water, nor healthy food, nor sanitation. Besides, they are deprived of health and education services, (Al-Mahfaly and Homaid, 2019).

On the other hand, mazayinah have been socially integrated within the society because their skin color is white. They live normally with other upper classes in the society. Different than the 'akhdam,' mazayinah are protected from other tribes for revenge and are not liable to be targeted or endangered by aggressive clans. Instead, when war starts between two tribes or more, 'mazayinah' are sent as envoys or mediators to reach an agreement for ceasefire. This happens due to inferior look that 'mazayinah' lives are considered less valuable in the society, (Lacroix, 2019).

Another important difference is accessibility to services; akhdam have been seriously affected by the consequences of social and economic discrimination. For example, they face many troubles to get their children admitted in schools and are deprived of access to employments because the vast majority consider them as the lowest group of the Yemeni social structure. Therefore, akhdam are forced to endogamy in their marriages and are socially and politically marginalized for being stigmatized in society, (Nevola, 2018). Moreover, they were limited to low-paid menial jobs, marriage to and from other classes or exogamy is not allowed. As a result, this leads to deprivation, sense of inferiority, social and political distancing, isolation and lack of national belonging. In contrast, mazayinah entertain some advantages not given to 'akhdam' such as pursuing education, professions and careers. However, they are not allowed to marry outside of the 'mazayinah' community and many are constrained to low-rank jobs such as barbering and butchering, (Lacroix, 2019).

### Conclusion

Mentality of any society has been shaped and constructed socially due to certain parameters. This mentality legitimizes discriminatory and violent acts against certain marginalized sections of the society. The mindset of people has been shaped and framed by the society practices in a way that despises and humiliates the black-skinned people and workers of inferior jobs. Would it be their fault to be born with a dark skin color? Would it be their decision to choose the color of their skin? It is something that is out of their disposal and their control. The pragmatic use of terminologies such as 'akhdam', 'muhamashin', 'mazayinah' and 'dwasihin' highlight the major issues of social, political, racial and economic discrimination and marginalization within Yemeni society. These marginalized communities were largely endogamous, landless and were not equally treated as other classes.

This research article has revealed that according to the hierarchal structure of the Yemeni society, there are two marginalized communities that have been discriminated and oppressed due to skin color and on specific professions basis.

Moreover, certain differences have been shown between these two marginalized groups. The most important of which are the residential area, services accessibility, social relationships and community engagement and integration.

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