

## Abdullah's Motive in *Interlok*: Social Reality or Intentional Racism Provocation?

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### Abstract

This article examines the character portrayal of the Indians in Abdullah Hussain's *Interlok*; in order to determine Abdullah's true motive. Did he write the novel to depict social reality that happened in the early stage of Malaysia's foundation, or he did it to provoke and insult Indians? By analysing the depiction of the Indian character within the novel, the article seeks to prove that Abdullah's sole purpose of writing the novel is purely to unite the multi-races in Malaysia, and not because of any hidden agenda or malicious intent. *Interlok* reflects the unity of three biggest races in Malaysia and he succeeds in portraying it. The findings proved that the author has no hidden agenda. His only motive is portraying the process of interlocking three different but unique entities into one big and powerful group; We Are All Malaysians. Negative accusations and allegations given by some groups of people are baseless and false.

**Keywords:** Pariah, *Interlok*, Social Reality, Racism Provocation, Politically Motivated

### Introduction

*Interlok* is a novel by Abdullah Hussain which he wrote to participate in the Peraduan Novel Sepuluh Tahun Merdeka in 1970. *Interlok* won the consolation prize and was published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in 1971. The objective of the competition was to set themes and issues concerning unity. There were no winners for the first and second prizes. The third prize went to the novel *Sandera* by Arenawati. Other works which were awarded consolation prizes along with *Interlok* were *Pulanglah Perantau* written by Aziz Jahpin, *Merpati Putih Terbang Lagi* by Khadijah Hashim, *Badan Bertuah* by Ismail al-Falah and *Meniti Buih* by Alias Harun (Zakir, 2012). In 2010, *Interlok* (Pelajar 2005) was chosen as form five KOMSAS's novel in Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan schools.

The novel, which depicts the lives of three families—Malay, Chinese, and Indian—in pre-independence Malaya, was intended to promote understanding and unity among Malaysia's diverse ethnic groups. However, its portrayal of the Indian community, particularly

the use of the term "Pariah," sparked outrage, leading to debates about whether the controversy surrounding *Interlok* was politically motivated. *Interlok* summarily separates these three groups, with book one representing the lives of the Malays in Malaya through the story of Seman, book two representing the lives of Malaysian Chinese through the story of Chin Huat, and book three representing the lives of Malaysian Indians through the story of Maniam. Coming from their respective homelands, China and India, Ching Huat and Maniam struggled to overcome obstacles before settling down in Malaya. Both of them had to leave their country due to their unfortunate living conditions in their own respective countries: Ching Huat experienced failed crops due to attacks from grasshoppers while Maniam was not able to find a job as there were too many people in India. Ching Huat and Maniam were described as being closer to their own community and rarely socializing with the locals. This situation led them to be caught within the predetermined social structure of colonial Malaya: the Chinese were usually associated with business or mining activities, Indians were estate coolies, while the Malays—through the portrayal of Seman—were village people living their lives as farmers.

The novel has been the subject of significant controversy, particularly concerning its depiction of the Indian community. Core to this controversy is the portrayal of a Pariah character, which has been criticized for its negative implications. This article critically examines the representation of the Indians in *Interlok* and its implications for the novel's reception and impact. In 2010, when *Interlok* was introduced as a compulsory text for form five students, it sparked protests from the Indian Malaysian community. Critics argued that the novel's portrayal of Indians, especially the use of a term historically associated with untouchability, was demeaning and offensive. The controversy quickly escalated, with demands for the novel to be removed from the curriculum or for the offensive term to be expunged.

The inclusion of *Interlok* in the Malaysian school curriculum sparked significant controversy, with many viewing it as an inappropriate choice for educational purposes. Critics argued that exposing students to the novel could exacerbate racial tensions and reinforce negative perceptions about the Indian community. The educational impact of the novel was a major concern, with critics fearing that it could perpetuate prejudice and deepen ethnic divides.

One of the justifications of why this study was conducted is because the polemic and all of the controversies behind it are part of a very important literary corpus. Although this polemic has ended and settled more than a decade ago; 13 years to be precise, the true intention of the writer in portraying unity amongst three biggest races in the early years of our independence; must be defended, especially by the literary activists themselves.

The novel is an attempt made by the writer to re-map the nation's citizenship and nationhood through its depiction of race and ethnic adaptation, and conflict in Malaya during the period of 1900 to 1957. It is during this time that the whole idea of Malaysian nationalism took shape and came into realisation. This period, which sets the background for the novel, sees the intercultural contact between the Malays and the Chinese and Indian immigrants brought in by the British.

This study will provide benefits and importance to society in terms of providing new knowledge regarding the polemic. To some extent, this study will clarify and clean up the controversy that shrouded the polemic at that time. This study will also enlighten the mass society that a novel and a writer cannot be arbitrarily insulted and belittled. Defending the novel and its writer is our social responsibility.

### *The Pariah Depiction in Interlok*

In *Interlok*, the term "Pariah" is used to describe a group of characters from the lower caste of the Indian community. This portrayal has sparked considerable debate due to its association with historical oppression and discrimination faced by untouchables. The novel's depiction of the Pariah in one of the plots is pivotal in understanding the broader themes of caste and social hierarchy explored in the novel.

For many Indian Malaysians, this term is a symbol of the historical oppression and discrimination faced by untouchables in India. The novel's use of this term was seen as deeply offensive and derogatory, reinforcing negative stereotypes about the Indian community and perpetuating historical injustices. Critics argue that *Interlok* relies on stereotypical portrayals of the Indian community, reducing its members to symbols of victimhood and suffering rather than presenting them as complex, multi-dimensional characters. The portrayal of Indian characters in a manner that emphasizes their subservience and marginalization has been criticized for perpetuating negative stereotypes and failing to capture the diversity within the community.

The novel has been criticized for its cultural insensitivity, particularly in its representation of Indian cultural practices and social dynamics. Critics argue that the depiction of Indian culture and social structures in *Interlok* lacks nuance and depth, leading to a one-dimensional and often inaccurate portrayal. This cultural insensitivity is seen as undermining the novel's credibility and contributing to its negative reception among Indian Malaysians.

### *Historical and Social Context*

The term "Pariah" originates from the Tamil word for the lowest caste in the traditional Indian caste system, historically subjected to severe social exclusion and discrimination. The term "Pariah" in literature carries significant historical and cultural connotations, often evoking themes of social exclusion, marginalization, and caste. The word originally refers to the "Paraiyar" caste in India, traditionally considered one of the lowest in the caste hierarchy, often referred to as "untouchables." Over time, "Pariah" has evolved in the English language to denote someone who is socially ostracized or an outcast.

In its original context within the Indian caste system, the term "Pariah" represents a group of people who were historically subjected to extreme social ostracization and discrimination. This caste, associated with certain occupations deemed impure by higher castes, was segregated from mainstream society, leading to generations of poverty, limited opportunities, and social stigmatization.

As the term entered English usage, "Pariah" became a metaphor for any individual or group who is marginalized or excluded from mainstream society. In literature, it often

symbolizes the struggles of those who are rejected or oppressed, highlighting themes of inequality, injustice, and the human need for acceptance.

In global literature, the figure of the outcast, often depicted as a "Pariah," serves as a powerful symbol of alienation, marginalization, and the struggle for identity. The Pariah is not merely a character relegated to the fringes of society; they embody the profound social, cultural, and psychological consequences of exclusion. From caste-driven ostracism in Indian literature to racial segregation in American narratives, the Pariah's story is a universal theme that resonates across cultures and time periods.

In Indian literature, the concept of the Pariah is often explored in the context of the caste system. Works like *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand directly address the plight of those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. The novel tells the story of Bakha, a young man from an "untouchable" caste, and his daily struggles with social exclusion and discrimination. It depicts the humiliation that is suffered by the Pariahs, represented by the character of Bakha, a young toilet cleaner who works in Bulashah. Pariahs expose the drawbacks of the caste system, which has existed for thousands of years in India. Mulk Raj Anand criticizes this practice and the injustices suffered by the Pariahs. 'Pariah' in its true sense refers to social outcasts. They are not a part of the caste system and Hindus are forbidden from touching Pariahs, hence the name; Untouchables. However, through the diversity of religions in India, Pariahs are able to get paid for working and spending their money, just like others. Therefore, Pariahs are able to possess whatever they wish, if they can afford it, like everyone else. In fact, the novel tells that Bakha's father had once owned a buffalo given to him by a wealthy Hindu merchant. Anand's portrayal of Bakha's life sheds light on the dehumanizing effects of caste-based discrimination and the pervasive sense of social alienation experienced by those labeled as "Pariahs."

Bakha's daily existence is defined by humiliation, exclusion, and the constant reminder of his social inferiority. Anand uses Bakha's experiences to critique the caste system and expose the deep-rooted prejudices that sustain it. The novel not only highlights the physical and social alienation of the Pariah but also delves into the internalized sense of inferiority that Bakha struggles to overcome. The figure of the Pariah in Indian literature serves as a vehicle for discussing broader themes of social justice, human dignity, and the possibility of change. It challenges readers to confront the realities of discrimination and consider the moral and ethical implications of maintaining such divisions in society.

In Western literature, the term "Pariah" has been used more broadly to describe characters who are socially outcast for various reasons, whether due to race, class, gender, or personal actions. For example, in *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Hester Prynne becomes a Pariah in her Puritan community after bearing a child out of wedlock. The novel examines the harsh judgments and social ostracization imposed on Hester, exploring themes of sin, guilt, and societal hypocrisy.

Hester's alienation is both physical and psychological; she is forced to wear the scarlet letter "A" as a constant reminder of her sin and is shunned by her community. However, rather than being crushed by her outcast status, Hester transforms her experience into a source of inner strength and moral resilience. Hawthorne's portrayal of Hester challenges the rigid moral codes of the society around her, questioning the fairness of societal judgment and

the true nature of sin and redemption. The *Scarlet Letter* is considered a masterpiece of American literature and a foundational text in the study of psychological realism. It continues to resonate with readers due to its exploration of universal human experiences and its timeless themes.

This depiction of the Pariah as a figure of moral complexity and resilience is a recurring theme in Western literature, where the outcast often serves as a critique of societal norms and the hypocrisy of social institutions.

### **Themes and Symbolism**

The figure of the Pariah in literature is symbolic of broader social issues, often serving as a critique of the structures that perpetuate exclusion and discrimination. Key themes associated with the Pariah include:

#### *Social Injustice*

Literature often uses the Pariah to highlight the injustices present in society, whether through systemic racism, class disparity, or gender discrimination. The Pariah becomes a lens through which the reader can examine these issues more critically.

#### *Alienation and Identity*

Characters who are Pariahs often grapple with a deep sense of alienation, leading to explorations of identity, self-worth, and the human desire for belonging. This internal struggle is a common thread in many literary works featuring Pariahs.

#### *Resistance and Resilience*

Despite their marginalized status, Pariah figures in literature often embody resistance and resilience. Their stories frequently depict the fight for dignity, recognition, and justice, challenging the status quo and offering a voice to the voiceless.

The term "Pariah" in literature is a powerful metaphor for the experience of being an outcast. Whether in the context of caste in India, racial segregation in America, or other forms of social exclusion, the Pariah serves as a vehicle for exploring profound themes of inequality, alienation, and the human condition. Through these narratives, literature not only reflects the harsh realities faced by those deemed as "Pariahs" but also challenges readers to confront and question the societal structures that perpetuate such exclusion.

In *Interlok*, the Pariah character represents the marginalized segment of the Indian community, reflecting the socio-economic challenges faced by untouchables during the colonial era. The Pariah in *Interlok* is portrayed primarily through Maniam. Critics argue that this portrayal reinforces negative stereotypes and perpetuates a one-dimensional view of the Indian community. The representation of the Pariah in *Interlok* has been criticized for its reliance on stereotypes.

#### *Political Manipulation*

If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. The 'lie' is played over and over again until it is finally assumed to be true because we were told it was true. (Mohamad Fauzi Sukimi 2012:37). That's the situation with *Interlok*. In context of

*Interlok*, the novel has been perceived wrongly and contrary to the actual situation. The controversy over *Interlok* was viewed as being politically motivated. Some critics argue that the outrage over the novel was exploited by political manipulators to seek supports and to advance their agendas. *Interlok* comes at the right place at the wrong time.

This perception of the controversy act as a tool for political maneuvering rather than genuine cultural or educational concern contributed to the negative view of the novel and the debate surrounding it. Critics, including S. M. Zakir (2012), suggest that the debate over the novel was utilized by political actors to gain ethnic support and further political agendas. SM Zakir has argued that the controversy surrounding *Interlok* was significantly influenced by political motivations rather than being solely about the novel's content or cultural sensitivity. He suggests that the reactions to the novel were shaped by the broader socio-political context in Malaysia, where ethnic and political considerations often intersect. He argued:

"Mereka ini (penentang) mungkin tidak membaca, tidak memahami dan memilih secara berat sebelah. Dan mungkin membantahnya demi kepentingan politik masing-masing".

SM Zakir has been critical of what he perceives as an over-sensitivity among certain segments of the Indian Malaysian community regarding the use of the term "Pariah" in *Interlok*. He argues that while the term is indeed sensitive, its use in the novel should be understood in the context of the social realities it portrays rather than as an insult to the Indian community. SM Zakir explained that the description of the caste system in Indian society in the novel was only made as a character background. Zakir believes that the outcry over *Interlok* was not purely a response to its portrayal of the Indian community but was also driven by political actors seeking to exploit the issue for their gain. He contends that the controversy provided an opportunity for various political parties and groups to mobilize their constituencies by presenting themselves as defenders of ethnic rights and dignity. This exploitation of ethnic sensitivities for political purposes contributed to the intensification of the debate

According to Zakir, the controversy was a classic example of ethnic mobilization, where issues related to race and identity are used to galvanize political support. He argues that the Indian Malaysian community's reaction to *Interlok* was shaped by political leaders and organizations who framed the issue as one of ethnic discrimination. This framing was strategically employed to rally support and reinforce political positions, rather than purely addressing literary or educational concerns. The rage and outcry coincided with Tenang by-election in Johor.

Zakir also critiques the Malaysian government's response to the controversy, which involved amending the text of *Interlok* while keeping it in the curriculum. He suggests that this compromise was influenced by political pressures from both the Indian Malaysian community and other stakeholders. The government's attempt to balance these competing interests reflects the political nature of the controversy, where decisions were made not solely based on educational or cultural merits but also on the need to navigate complex ethnic and political dynamics.

While defending the novel's literary value and historical context, Zakir acknowledges that *Interlok* might have reflected the biases and limitations of its time. However, he argues that the political dimension of the controversy overshadowed a more nuanced discussion about the novel's content and its role in Malaysian literature and education. I want to quote S.M Zakir's opinion on *Interlok* (in Semangkuk Interlok e-book) that for me is vital in order to refute the negatives allegations:

**"For 40 years, Interlok had never been deemed offensive** nor had it been considered as touching on racial sensitivities, or the author been reprimanded for the use of the word 'Paria'. **Out of a sudden**, the appearance of this word twice in a novel of over 120,000 words was considered offensive."

Zakir (2011).

He then added:

"Sebarang tuduhan yang mengatakan bahawa *Interlok* sebagai novel perkauman adalah 'tindakan untuk menutup isu kegagalan politik dengan memainkan sentimen perkauman' yang tidak bermanfaat. Pada masa yang sama ia menjulang kembali doktrin pemisahan kaum kolonial British dalam membentuk sikap kepentingan kaum atau antagonisme etnik yang telah merosakkan hubungan masyarakat demi kepentingan ekonomi-politik golongan elit politik, pemodal dan aristokrat. Kini doktrin ini digunakan pula oleh pihak yang berkepentingan untuk mencari populariti dalam Masyarakat atas tujuan-tujuan yang lebih khusus. Tindakan menyuburkan sikap perkauman ini membawa masyarakat mundur ke belakang.

Selain itu, ia sebenarnya boleh dikatakan sebagai perjuangan sentimen yang tidak melihat kepada isu sebenar yang membelenggu masyarakat seperti isu kemiskinan, pendidikan, kesihatan, peluang pekerjaan dan sebagainya. Perjuangan sentimen yang bermain dengan isu-isu kecil yang sebenarnya adalah 'hanya ruang sama ada mencari publisiti atau populariti yang tidak berguna, ataupun cuma helah untuk menutup kegagalan menangani masalah sebenar kemunduran sosial masyarakat'."

(Zakir 28: 2011)

Translation:

"Any accusation that says that *Interlok* as a racist novel is an 'action to cover up the issue of political failure by playing on racist sentiments' is not useful. At the same time, it re-emerged the British colonial racial separation doctrine in forming an attitude of racial interest or ethnic antagonism that has damaged community relations for the economic-political interests of the political elite, capitalists and aristocrats. Now this doctrine is used by interested parties to seek popularity in the society for more specific purposes. This act of fostering racial attitudes is taking society backwards.

In addition, it can actually be said to be a sentimental struggle that does not look at the real issues that plague society such as issues of poverty, education, health, employment opportunities and so on. The sentimental struggle that plays with small issues is actually 'just a space to either seek useless publicity or popularity, or just a

trick to cover up the failure to deal with the real problem of society's social backwardness'."

*Interlok* became a victim of racial debate when Indian politicians and non-governmental organizations representing Indians called for *Interlok* not to be used as a literature text in schools because of the use of the word 'Paria', which occurs twice in the novel, where it is said that Maniam was from the Pariah caste when he came to Malaya. Several parties have alleged that *Interlok* is factually wrong when depicting Maniam as coming from the Pariah caste as it is stated in *Interlok* that he sells his cows to come to Malaya, whereas Pariah are not allowed to own property.

The argument that Pariahs cannot afford this and cannot own property is totally incorrect. Mulk Raj Anand has much more accurately depicted the situations of the Pariahs and explains that Pariahs can earn an income, and therefore can own property according to their means. Thus, what is presented in *Interlok* about Maniam as coming from the Pariah caste and selling his cows to gather funds in order to come to Malaya and live a better life is plausible. In fact, in India itself, some individuals from among the Pariahs have become successful and well-known through their own effort and struggle to forge better lives for themselves.

According to S.M. Zakir, Pariah does not carry a negative connotation in the context of racial diversity. Paria is actually not as bad as it is portrayed, in fact it has positive side too. According to him:

Paria exposes the drawbacks of the caste system, which has existed for thousands of years in India. Mulk Raj Anand criticizes this practice and the injustices suffered by this group of people. Pariah, in its true sense, refers to social outcasts. They are not a part of the caste system and Hindus are forbidden from touching them. However, through the diversity of religions in India, Pariahs are able to get paid for working and spending their money, just like others. Therefore, Pariahs are able to possess whatever they wish, if they can afford to, like everyone else.

Besides Zakir, there are many other entities that defend *Interlok*. Mohd Hanafi Ibrahim said: The text *Interlok* fulfils the purpose of establishing unity among the various races of Malaysia. The recipe to establish unity is by mutually understanding the historical foundation of the formation of the Malaysian race. *Interlok* could be utilised to instil elements of patriotism and citizenship, by emphasising the spirit of love and loyalty to the country. This novel should be benefited to cultivate, in future generations, a balanced and harmonious living in terms of intellectual, emotional and physical abilities.

Opinion from another academician, Prof. Dr. Ambigapathy Pandian said:

*Interlok* is a good novel. It is so well written and didn't have any problems. According to himself as an Indian academic expert, he criticized the actions of some parties who tried politicizing and manipulating the issue for their own benefit. According to him the reader actually needs to read from the first page to the very last page in order to understand what the writer wants to convey through *Interlok*.

### Abdullah's Motive

*Interlok* was Abdullah Hussain's vision that he aligned with the theme of a novel –writing competition held in conjunction with the tenth anniversary of Malaysia's independence. It shows the vision of the formation of an ideal national identity for the multicultural society of Malaysia in the existing multicultural space. Indirectly, this narrative is aimed at defining and understanding multiculturalism, and cannot be deemed to be incorrect, seeing as *Interlok* is a work of fiction, not a political doctrine. What exists in *Interlok* is artistic freedom in creating fictional realism. It presents a narrative that is not subject to definitions or political doctrines. Instead, he draws the outlines of a vision of a multicultural society in the context of forming a fair and just identity for all. Basically, *Interlok* is not there to stress anything, nor to indoctrinate anyone, but to act merely as a mirror to reflect an ideal vision without forcing anyone to accept or reject it.

“Nation must have its own literary culture that can bind the people of that nation together. *Interlok* presents to the audience an alternative view in the issue of nationalism and race relation.”

Farish Noor (2009)

The novel requires the reader to be attentive and critical in matters that are considered to be sensitive. In order to understand the messages embedded in the story, the reader must read the entire novel and understand the novel's main purpose. By paying attention to words deemed as “racist”, many critics have failed to understand the spirit in which the novel is written. *Interlok* celebrates the diversity of races, and emphasises the importance of individual customs and norms in the process of building a new-born nation. The novel encompasses the hope of the novelist of the unity of all Malaysians– “1 Malaysia”– long before the slogan became reality.

The relationship between three ethnics as a result of the Japanese Occupation clearly suggests Abdullah's idea of a harmonious interracial relationship which stabilises the relationship between the locals and the immigrants by making these characters share and overcome the same misery, Abdullah successfully portrays his view and notion of nationalism that encompasses all the people of Malaya without any prejudice concerning skin colour and race.

Abdullah Hussain deliberately provoke Indians in Malaysia? Most academics and literary enthusiasts do not believe so as they argue that the novel portrays good moral values such as unity, loyalty and patriotism (Syed Mohamed et al, 2011). Teo Kok Seong, linguistically suggests that the word Pariah refers to “a social entity in the caste system and is not intended as a generalisation” (Dzulkifli, 2011, Suzieana and Nurjehan, 2011).

Teo further explains that the word is written “in the form of narration–not as part of a dialogue or monologue–which means that it is used to expose a fact about the caste system”.

In an article published by Utusan Malaysia titled “Give a fair hearing to Abdullah's '*Interlok*'”, the word Pariah is used by the author to describe the lead character's position in the caste system; (Johan Jaafar 2011).

Rais Yatim strongly stated that “Pariah” phrase should be maintained, as a novel should be read and understood in the context of its plots and subplots (Zulkifli, 2011). According to Raja Rajeswari Seetha Raman, there are phrases in the book that elevate the Indians; Seman, calls Maniam “Tuan” out of respect (Suzienna, Nurjehan).

In “Dusta jika anggap *Interlok* tidak baik” (*Utusan Online*, 2011), Lim Swee Tin reportedly said that those who claim that the novel’s content is degrading, disrespectful and misleading, are in truth lying to the public.

In his book, John Arthur describes racism as “racial contempt in the form of an attitude of either hostility or indifference toward people’s legitimate interest in virtue of their race” (2007:15). On the other hand, a racist is a person whose “attitudes include unjustified hostility toward a racial group” (2007:23) “accompanied by character and moral defects” (2007:25) that ultimately result in an act of violence towards a racial group. The significant “character and moral defects” would be that a racist is prejudiced; this can best be described as having “closed mind, violently rejecting any alternative view, refusing to criticize or allow others to criticize his assumptions, read and listened not to learn, but to acquire information and found additional support for prejudices and opinions already in his mind” (John Arthur quoting Allan Bullock, 2007:20). Based on these definitions, I contend that those who suggested the novel is racist are themselves racists. Thus, I strongly agree with Syed Mohamed et. al. 2011 opinion about the polemic.

### **Conclusion**

The representation of the Pariah in *Interlok* has elicited significant debate, reflecting broader issues of caste, ethnic identity, and social sensitivity. While the novel provides a historical portrayal of social dynamics in pre-independence Malaya, its depiction of the Pariah character has been criticized for reinforcing negative stereotypes. While the controversy surrounding *Interlok* was clearly influenced by political motivations, the question remains whether the novel itself was politically motivated. The answer is no. Abdullah Hussain wrote *Interlok* in a post-independence Malaysia, a time when the nation was grappling with its identity and the legacy of colonial rule. The novel was intended as a reflection on the historical experiences of Malaysia’s diverse communities, not as a political manifesto. The findings proved that the author has no hidden agenda. *Interlok* reflects the unity of three biggest races in Malaysia and he succeeds in portraying it.

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