

RESEARCH ARTICLE



**THE POLITICS OF WHITE TRASH AND ARAB-AMERICAN
MARGINALISATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RACE, CLASS AND
DIASPORIC IDENTITY IN DIANA ABU-JABER'S *ARABIAN JAZZ***

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ABSTRACT



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Arab-American literature has primarily sought to interrogate issues of gender, cultural hybridity, diasporic belonging, and identity. *Arabian Jazz* by Diana Abu-Jaber reflects on memory, food culture, familial relationships, bicultural identity, and the contestation of Arab-American subjectivity. Existing scholarships have not extensively employed a comparative portrayal of the two diverse yet subjugated communities: the Ramoud family of Arab-American origin and the economically backward White Otts family. Despite the exclusions they endure, Abu-Jaber juxtaposes their harsh lived realities to unravel the levels at which American society revolves around marginality and privilege. The study asserts that the narrative does not associate Arab-Americans with the culturally and historically constituted category of 'white-trash'. The paper aims to analyse how the novel employs a comparative approach to highlight the politics of race, class, and identity in a diasporic setup by juxtaposing the experiences of the two families- the Otts family, and the Ramoud family. The study employs an analytical and qualitative approach rooted in textual and theoretical analysis. It draws on diaspora theories and Whiteness studies to interrogate the novel's convergence of class, race, migration, and aspects of ethnicity.

Keywords: *Arab-American, Class, Diaspora, Marginalisation, Race Politics, White Trash*

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INTRODUCTION

American society has always claimed to uphold the ideals of democracy, social mobility, and equality. However, the history of the nation also exposes the ongoing structures of marginalisation that have shaped the people's identity. These structures have not been governed solely by race but also by the convergence of ethnicity, class, diaspora, and gender. As a result, multiple hierarchies of identity have challenged ideologies of a standard American identity. Scholars have extensively studied the idea of racism, but the politics associated with class is less examined, especially in relation to communities where subjugation complicates dominant conceptions of privilege. Various literary narratives have examined these converging social categories, thereby offering a detailed understanding of how different forms of exclusion operate within a single nation.

The term 'white trash' is a significant expression associated with class politics in the United States. Historically, this term has been used to stigmatise the underprivileged white Americans. However, this label extends beyond economic marginalisation to highlight cultural inferiority, social undesirability, and moral deficiency. Further, it exposes the notion of weakness that has always existed in America. Whiteness does not just serve as a homogeneous category, but has also been understood through class and race differences that create a distinction between the 'undeserving' and the 'respectable'. As a result, narratives on 'white trash' highlight how social power is not just negotiated through race, but also through cultural legitimacy and economic position. This understanding problematises the

notion that racial identity alone ensures social acceptance.

Slightly different yet significant form of subjugation reflects in the experiences of individuals identifying as Arab-Americans. Despite their legal classification as Whites during the twentieth century, the Arabs in diaspora have never received social acceptance in the United States. Issues like religious prejudice, ethnic stereotyping, political conflicts and anti-immigrant prejudice have constantly acknowledged the Arab-Americans as racialised Others whose belonging remains precarious. Their lived experiences reflect the constraints of legal categories in foregrounding lived experiences of exclusion. Thus, the Arab-American identity is shaped not only by migration but also by ongoing negotiations over citizenship, cultural difference, and ethnicity in a society that measures nationality in contestation with hegemonic cultural norms. The ambiguity positions Arab-Americans within a liminal social position that is simultaneously excluded and included in the hegemonic construction of American whiteness.

A broader theoretical perspective on diaspora serves as a significant lens for understanding negotiations. Diaspora transcends beyond physical geographical relocation to encompass ideas of identity formation, displacement, cultural continuity, and memory. Diaspora studies emphasise its dynamic and evolutionary nature, further highlighting that individuals and communities in diaspora are forced to consistently negotiate between ancestral cultural practices and contemporary social conditions. For the diasporic communities, these aspects of negotiations are further complicated by the parallel demands of



cultural preservation and assimilation. As a result, the diasporic identity is more associated with the homeland, but also directly connected to the cultural, political and racial ideologies of the host land. This convergence of class, race, diaspora, and ethnicity serves as a crucial lens for analysing the lived realities of diasporic communities.

Existing research on *Arabian Jazz* has significantly contributed to an in-depth understanding of the Arab-American hybridity, memory, food culture, gender, diasporic consciousness and identity. However, very little research has been conducted on the comparison between the two families in the novel. The current study juxtaposes the Ramoud family with the Otts family, a comparison that has remained largely unexplored. The novel does not present the two families as undifferentiated victims of oppression. Instead, it situates them within historically distinct yet similar systems of discrimination and exclusion. The Otts family primarily experiences subjugation due to class differences. On the contrary, the family is forced to negotiate exclusion through the converging forces of ethnicity, diasporic identity, race and immigrant status. Employing a comparative analysis facilitates an in-depth understanding of Abu-Jaber's methods for critiquing American social hierarchies despite historical differences. The current study fills this gap by comparing the Arab-American marginalisation and the politics of white trash.

A crucial strand of criticism interrogates the novel as a narrative centered on cultural negotiation and diasporic identity. Sirene Harb and Hind El-Hajj, in their article titled "Straddling the Personal and the Political: Gendered Memory in Diana Abu-Jaber's

Arabian Jazz," emphasise how the novel reflects on the ongoing negotiation between political history and personal memory. Their study also highlights how the memories of Melvina and Jemora are inextricably linked to broader questions of displacement, belonging, and migration. This validates how the author transforms individual experiences into a comparative examination of Arab-American identity. The close connection between personal experiences and political realities further establishes memory as a crucial channel through which the novel attempts to analyse identity alongside challenging assimilation [1].

Another recent work worth mentioning is Ashley Diedrich's article titled "The Confines and Freedoms of Female Identity in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz*." The article primarily interrogates the close-knit association between White identity and class in the novel. Diedrich opines that the Otts and Ramoud sisters can be perceived as narrative counterpoints whose contradictory social statuses expose various aspects of the limitations experienced by women [2]. On one hand, the Otts sisters are restricted by social stigma and poverty connected to the title of 'white trash'. On the contrary, the Ramoud sisters are forced to negotiate their bicultural identity. Diedrich's article is highly relevant, as it shows how class plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences of the two families. The study also highlights how economic subjugation tampers with the universal idea of White privilege. However, the article limits itself to analysing female identity and not the political relations between Arab-American racialisation and class-based White marginalisation.



The analysis of the parallel narratives of the two families in the novel requires multiple theoretical perspectives. The novel is rooted in themes of migration, class inequality, ethnic identity, diasporic belonging, gender, and racism. Interrogating these themes requires an interdisciplinary framework that highlights the convergence of these experiences. The socio-economic subjugation highlighted through the Otts family brings to light the politics involved in classed whiteness. The experiences of the Ramoud family emerge from ethnic, immigrant, and racial positioning. The two diverse forms of exclusion emerge from distinct historical experiences but have intersected with issues of unequal citizenship and social hierarchy.

Critical Whiteness Studies attempts to challenge the prejudice that whiteness has always been a uniform category of privilege by presenting how class has historically constructed hierarchies within whiteness. Matt Wray in *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* provides a broad discussion on 'white trash' and asserts that poor White Americans for a very long time have experienced a liminal positionality. Despite their complexion, they continue to experience social stigma, cultural exclusion, and economic deprivation [3]. The term, white trash does not just serve as an epithet. Still, it has performed a cultural and political role in marking certain white communities as subordinate to the dominant ideal of respectable middle-class whiteness.

David Roediger in *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* suggests that whiteness was never a homogeneous identity. It has always been shaped by social power,

labour, and class formation [4]. The text also highlights how racial privilege does not possess the ability to eliminate internal class divisions, but plays a crucial role in obscuring them by portraying whiteness as a homogeneous social category. The ideologies of Wray and Roediger comment on the existence of poverty amidst White Americans as both a moral failure and an outcome of structural inequality. Their ideologies are crucial to understanding the Otts family's condition, including their economic hardships and social marginalisation. Their experiences highlight how whiteness is stratified, and gaining privilege in society is channelised through education, social respectability and economic status.

The experiences of the Ramoud family can be understood through Kimberle Crenshaw's theorisation of intersectionality in "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color". Crenshaw opines that channels of power do not function independently. Instead, they interact in order to produce overlapping kinds of exclusion and discrimination [5]. Individuals are placed within diverse social structures that include gender, ethnicity, class and race. Intersectionality is a specific relevance in the Arab-American context, as the experiences of diasporic communities cannot be understood through ethnicity or race alone. In the text, the Ramoud family is forced to negotiate their Arab heritage, immigrant identity, economic uncertainty, gender expectations and cultural difference. Their overlapping identities lead to a complex creation of exclusion that extends beyond a singular axis of oppression. Crenshaw's theorisation



facilitates a deeper understanding of the Ramoud family's experiences. It attempts to expose how race, gender, migration and ethnicity serve as a collective force in shaping the family's social status in American society.

Diaspora theory serves as the building block for understanding the ongoing negotiations of identity that the Ramoud family indulges in. Stuart Hall, in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," reiterates that cultural identity must not be perceived solely as a fixed essence drawn from the past. Instead, it must be perceived as an evolving process constituted through memory history, and cultural transformation. Thus, identity is constantly reconstructed through negotiations with evolving sociopolitical contexts [6]. Avtar Brah builds on Hall's theorisation in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. She conceptualises diaspora as 'diasporic space' where indigenous people and communities attempt to negotiate a sense of belonging within shared sociocultural and political environments [7]. Therefore, diaspora is not just a condition experienced outside the homeland, but also a fluid social space that facilitates the constant production of identity through social interactions, displacement, and cultural memory.

Louise Cainkar in *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experiences after 9/11* suggests that the Arab-American identity has been conditioned by surveillance, political suspicion and racialisation, especially during times of geopolitical tensions - "Legal classifications alone have not protected Arab Americans from social exclusion or racial prejudice; instead, public perceptions have frequently positioned them as

outsiders despite their formal inclusion within the category of whiteness" [8]. Nadine Nabar's perceptions are across the same lines. The text *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism*, highlights the process through which Arab-American identity is produced in convergence with religion, race, political discourse and nationality. Thus, Arab-Americans experience a form of conditional belonging in which citizenship does not guarantee cultural acceptance [9]. Sara Ahmed, in *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, discusses the politics of 'strangerhood', thereby enriching the understanding of individuals perceived as outsiders despite their shared nationality. She elucidates, "A stranger is not an individual who arrives from outside. Rather, it is a person who does not completely belong" [10].

The experiences of the Otts family question the assumption that whiteness inherently confers privilege. Abu-Jaber's narrative exposes how social stigma and poverty lead to the creation of various levels of division within whiteness; thereby producing a new category that Wray calls 'classed whiteness'. The author's first description of the Otts family lays emphasis on their established presence within a geographically and economically marginalised community, "Route 31, the Otts family (which) had grown like a dynasty, spreading and mingling with Brooms, Ellises, and many sundry others, all immigrants from more ancient upstate hamlets, like Cicero and Phoenix along the old highways" [11]. Instead of presenting poverty as a failure, Abu-Jaber's description highlights how economic hardships are rooted in generations of families living on the social peripheries. The Otts being referred to



as a dynasty is extremely ironic. Unlike traditional descriptions of dynasties overloaded with influence and wealth, the Otts family inherits social prejudice, economic insecurity and limited opportunities. This validates that their position is not accidental, but structural.

Matt Wray's conceptualisation of 'white trash' reflects on the internal hierarchical differentiation of whiteness, suggesting that not all White Americans have the privilege of enjoying the social status of equality. Though the Otts family identifies as a superior racial group, they are marginalised from the class society, owing to their property. Neither does the family possess any economic capital, nor do they have the social prestige that is needed to achieve mainstream recognition in American society. Their whiteness does not remain limited to social advantage since class continues to shape their position within the broader hierarchy. This social stigma being internalised becomes evident through Peachy Otts' declaration, "We're white trash... You're moving into a white-trash town. Crazy nuts, goof-heads" [11]. The expression 'white trash' is used by an individual belonging to the community itself. Peachy's statement is an articulation without any element of resistance or surprise, reflecting on the years of marginalisation and social exclusion. It highlights the internalisation of an identity that has already been imposed by society. Classed whiteness is of specific relevance in this context as it indicates class inferiority and not just a racial category.

The novel further builds on this idea through the close association between Jemorah and Peachy. Abu-Jaber writes, "Peachy was Jemorah's only friend on the bus. The other children taunted Jemorah because

of her strange name, her darker skin" [11]. Despite their diverse cultural and racial backgrounds, they shared similar experiences when it came to the social exclusion they encountered at school. Their friendship rests on their shared ideas that are way outside the acceptable social order. Their friendship further prefigures the novel's broader engagement with comparative politics by demonstrating how different channels of modularisation can lead to unexpected forms of solidarity. The connection they share becomes significant when Jemorah says, "She knew those children had been right. She didn't fit in even with them, those children that nobody wanted" [11]. Jemorah realises that exclusion functions at several levels. She remains an outsider even in front of children, who come from economically marginalised backgrounds, owing to her identity as an Arab of darker complexion. Thus, the novel portrays exclusion as relational and layered, aligning with Crenshaw's perspective that diverse power systems converge rather than operate independently.

Abu-Jaber attempts to critique the labour relations through the Otts family. Melvina makes a strong observation that "The business officers are the last non-unionized wing of the hospital, its women are the most underpaid of all staff, and they work the longest hours. Their right to employment isn't in question, but their working conditions are! [11]. Her observation shifts the understanding from personal deprivation to structural exploitation. Unemployment has never been the issue. Instead, it is the unequal working conditions that adversely affect the economically precarious workers. As a result, the capitalist group benefits from the



traumatic experiences of the socially invisible and underpaid labour force. Virge's statement reinstates this criticism. She mocks the language of gratitude that is expected from exploited labourers through a song. She sings, "All us slaves is so thankful! Now Lordy, oh, Lordy, won't you let me people go?" [11]. By referring to the idea of slavery, she attempts to expose the contradictions that prevail in a system which parallelly offers employment and denies labourers their rights.

This satirical comparison reflects on the unquestioned existence of unequal labour relations in America. By doing so, Abu-Jaber has extended the discussion of 'white trash' beyond stereotypical cultural representations to address broader questions related to institutional power and economic injustice. Through a detailed description of the Otts family, Abu-Jaber validates how whiteness is neither a universal privilege, nor uniform. However, the novel also avoids equating the experiences of the two families. The distinction between the two families serves as a critical basis for comparison. It ultimately reveals the advanced political channels through which America regulates ideas of belonging.

Abu-Jaber does not just present the Ramoud family as immigrants trying to negotiate between two cultures. Instead, she portrays them as individuals whose daily lives are affected by social exclusion and racist ideologies. Their joint experiences suggest that residence or legal citizenship does not guarantee acceptance. The idea of belonging is constantly constructed through visible markers of differences like name, cultural heritage, language, ancestry, ethnicity class and skin colour. The theoretical perspectives of Louise Calkins and Nadine Naber on

Arab-American racism, alongside Stuart Hall's conceptualisation of cultural identity serve as crucial frameworks for analysing the social positioning of the Ramoud family. Their painful experiences validate how diaspora is not merely to do with geographical displacement, but a constant negotiation with power structures that determine who is recognised as authentically American. The same is established through the childhood experiences of Jemurah, when she narrates:

The other children taunted Jem because of her strange name, her darker skin. They were relentless, running wild, children of the worst poverty, the school bus the only place they had an inkling of power. She remembered the sensation of their hands on her body as they teased her, a rippling hatred running over her arms, legs, through her hair. They asked her obscene questions, searched for her weakness, the chink that would let them into her strangeness [11].

This incident exposes how Jemurah's exclusion begins well before she critically reflects on her identity. Her complexion is an immediate indicator of difference, which leads the children to perceive her as an outsider. Crenshaw's theorisation of intersectionality and Ahmed's notion of the stranger both validate the perception of Jemurah as an individual who does not fully belong, despite her social embeddedness.

Naber's theorisation suggests that assimilation occurs through the suppression of ethnic identity



rather than merely its recognition. Through the depiction of the Ramoud family, Abu-Jaber ultimately suggests that diaspora cannot be understood only through migration. Additionally, diaspora must be understood as an ongoing negotiation with racist social structures that determine who is granted belonging and who remains positioned as foreign. The two families are presented as distinct expressions of a broader political system that continues to redefine the boundaries of American belonging. As a result, the Otts and the Ramoud family can be read in parallel, despite their historical differences in social subjugation.

CONCLUSION

The current study demonstrates that the novel serves as a political boutique of America, a fact that has remained unacknowledged in contemporary scholarship. The study also brings together the narratives of the two families by deliberately juxtaposing their lived experiences. It further reveals the structures through which exclusion is both produced and maintained. This comparative approach facilitates a deeper understanding of the association between diasporic identity, class, and race. This study highlights that whiteness is internally stratified along class lines. It questions the assumption that race alone can guarantee any privilege. It also exposes how social stigma and economic deprivation lead to the creation of hierarchies within whiteness. Upcoming studies may make a conscious attempt to extend the comparative method to other literary narratives revolving around Arab-American identity and examine how the convergence of race, migration, and class is evident across diasporic fiction.

The study reflects on the importance and relevance of Arab-American literature in contemporary debates on social stratification in American society. The novel also suggests that national belonging is not just determined by racial identity or citizenship. In fact, it is constantly negotiated through social acceptance, economic position, and cultural expectations. Abu-Jaber's attempt to challenge binaries of marginalisation and privilege contributes to current debates surrounding social justice, multiculturalism, and the politics of belonging. Thus, the novel suggests the need for an inclusive conception of American identity that seeks to address the differences without turning it into a mechanism of exclusion.

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