

**Conceptualizing the Muslim Body and the Black Body in Diana Abu Jabar's *Arabian Jazz* and Ta-Nehisi's Coates' *Between the World and Me***

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## Abstract

In this paper, I will compare some scenes from Ta-Nehisi's Coates' *Between the World and Me* (2015) and Diana Abu Jabar's *Arabian Jazz* (1993) to illustrate racial prejudices held by whites against minorities such as African Americans and Arab Americans. I will examine the African Americans' and Arab Americans' narratives in terms of writing and representing their experiences in literary works as protest literature regardless to their fighting toward their human rights, identity, and comfortable and secured life. Additionally, in this paper, I will use the critical race theory (the whiteness theory) to investigate the marginalization of the minority races in the American society during 20th and 21st centuries which lead them to have negative feelings and attitudes toward the white Americans such as: fears, lack of comfort, and feeling of worthlessness. I will use secondary sources such as Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folks* (1994) and Veronica Watson's *The Whiteness of the White Souls* (2013) that would help me to improve my paper and to understand the personalities of minorities, their struggles, and their difficulties to feel that they would not be fit and included in the American society as well as they would discover the illusion of the American Dream and the false of comfort.

**Key Words:** critical race theory, minority literature, racism, whiteness studies

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To what extent do we feel that the minority individuals are the victims of the racial prejudices in white American society? How can we define “minority” in literature? What kind of messages do minority group authors aim to send to the readers? How do minority group authors depict their experiences, and struggles in The United States and what are the outcomes of their painful and hard experiences of being a minority in white American society? Between the late 20th century and contemporary times, both memoirs and novels highlight racial prejudices against the minorities in American society. Memoirs and novels are used as a tool that reflect and bring out a lot of issues that deal with minority groups in white American society such as: Arab Americans, African Americans, Asians...etc. Authors like Arab American writer Diana Abu-Jabar and the African American writer Ta-Nehisi Coates use literature as a tool of protesting against the racial prejudices that marginalize minorities in American society from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to contemporary time. In this paper, I will compare some scenes from Ta-Nehisi's Coates' *Between the World and Me* (2015) and Diana Abu Jabar's *Arabian Jazz* (1993) by using critical race theory including the whiteness theory to illustrate racial prejudices as means of marginalizing African Americans and Arab Americans, leading these groups to have negative feelings toward white Americans: fear, and double consciousness. Additionally, I will examine the African Americans and Arab Americans narratives as protest literature in terms of writing and representing their experiences in literary works demonstrating that despite the differences between the two groups, they share the same goal of expressing themselves as fighters in finding their identity and obtaining a comfortable and secured life.

### **Historical Background:**

In terms of comparing these two narratives, it is a significant to highlight the year publication to clarify the time span between these two narratives, and the historical background behind each of them. Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* (2015) discusses both civil rights activists like Malcolm X, as well as Black Lives Matter. The book has received so many reviews but not scholarly articles. Conversely, since the publication of Diana Abu-Jabar's *Arabian Jazz* in 1993, the novel has attracted many critics to write about it such as: Pauline Kaldas, Ibis Gomez-Vega, Hind El-Hajj, and SireneHarb. They highlight the issues of feminism, Arab stereotypes, marriage, fairytales, immigration, and hybridity. Most importantly, Abu-Jabar is one of the authors who compare the Arab Americans to African Americans based on their social positions in American society. Mazen Naous (2009), in his article "Arabian Jazz and the Need for Improvising Arab Identity in the US," believes that "in American minorities' narratives of struggle, the interconnections between blacks, Asians, and Middle Easterners become increasingly clear. These stories and soundings of profound connections are dispersed by the " 'dominant chord,' by the dominant culture" (73). Thus, while this paper suggests that these two minority writers are both controlled by the dominant power known as white supremacy, it is also important to address that their individual experiences of domination are unique. Thus, we must account for the time of publication between these two primary sources to address the historical context of their works. Diana Abu-Jabar depicts the situations of Arab Americans in America before 9/11. On the other hand, Coates brings issues of racism, race, and the value of black body from past to contemporary. Despite these very different historical contexts, both of the authors are minorities who are addressing the same issues in their narratives whether they are different in time, genre, gender, minority group, violence, and type of protesting. Mostly, the

characters in these two books have a conflict inside them regarding to identifying their identities with any culture or heritage. Through the characters' experiences, the conflicts are shown as a result of how white people authority looks at and treats them. For this reason, I choose Diana Abu-Jabar's *Arabian Jazz* (1993) and Ta-Nehisi's Coates' *Between the World and Me* (2015) for comparison in order to illustrate the racial prejudices against the minorities in white American society which lead them to have negative feelings: fear, and double consciousness.

### **Critical Context:**

In the context of analyzing how minority experiences in American society foster negative feelings of fear and double consciousness, it is important first to discuss the critical definitions of what it means to be a 'minority'. Diana Abu Jabar and Ta-Nehisi's Coates are considered members of minority groups in terms of their differences from the majority. However, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Robert Brinkley (1983) in their article "What is a Minor Literature?" define the term of "minor literature" as "not the literature of a minor language but the literature a minority makes in a major language" (11). Based on Deleuze and Guattari's argument, the minor literature has three characteristics which are "the deterritorialization of the language, the connection of the individual and the political, the collective arrangement of utterance" (18). In this study, these characteristics of minor literature would be applicable on the primary sources of this study. On the other hand, other social, cultural, political, and literary critics define minority based on their field of study, either if they connect it to the number of population, or to the different races, religions, ethnicity, and nationality in a large society such as the American society. The author Timothy N Laurie (2007), in his article "The Concept of Minority for the Study of Culture," highlights on the relationship between minority and majority groups

regardless of the cultural and political purposes that might distinguish the minority from the majority. He writes:

Since the early 20th century, the contrast between majorities and minorities has provided a powerful model for social scientists interested in social diversity. The origins of 'minority' as a social label come not from musicology but from the politico-judicial concept of the dissenting minority and from early twentieth-century studies of predominantly European migrants in North America. Language around 'majorities' and 'minorities' has come to pervade a range of political and institutional forums across many cultural contexts, but with a consistent emphasis on the power of numbers - too small, too large - to diagnose a range of social ills. (2)

Timothy N Laurie's view toward defining the relationship between the majority and minority can be similar to what Deleuze and Guattari believe in their article that every individual experience in a minority literature reflects the "politics" of majority in a way of another. This is clear in Coates's *Between the World and Me* where he represents the murder of his friend as a reflection of the politics in American society toward treating African Americans. In some way, the police, in most of countries, represent the majority and their beliefs. Sociologist Louis Wirth (1945)'s definition of minority is kind of relating to the abuses that are targeted the African Americans, he writes:

We may define a minority as a group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination. The existence of a minority in a society implies the existence of a corresponding dominant group enjoying higher social status and greater privileges.

Minority status carries with it the exclusion from full participation in the life of the society ... The members of minority groups are held in lower esteem and may even be objects of contempt, hatred, ridicule, and violence. (348)

It is important and significant to search for the definition of minority group in order to understand the standpoint of the author, and how the white American society constructs the authors and locates them within society. Determining their location in the society would help readers understand their experiences that are based on racial differences.

### **Physical and Verbal Violence:**

#### 1. Abu-Jabar's Summary

Diana Abu-Jabar's *Arabian Jazz* (1993) is a novel that depicts a Middle Eastern widower father, Matussem Ramoud, who moves to America in later years of his twenties, and loves his American dead wife, Nora Ramoud. Matussem lives in America with his two American born daughters: Jemorah and Melvina. Jemorah is working in a hospital at the department of bills and patients' insurance. She does not feel satisfied with her job and she wishes to complete her higher education. On the other hand, Melvina, who is the youngest daughter, is working as a nurse who loves her job very much. She is a strong character who plays the role of being a mother to her older sister and sometimes her father. They live in a middle class house in a working class neighborhood. Matussem's youngest sister, a wife of Zaeed, Fatimah is the one who takes care of the two daughters after the death of their mother. Their mother is an Irish Catholic American and dies of typhus during a family trip to Jordan. Nora's parents claim that Matussem kills Nora figuratively. They welcomed him in the airport with the phrase of "you killed her. You. You killed her" (Abu-Jabar, 1993, p. 85). Diana Abu-Jabar, through her novel,

discusses some of the issues that show what Arab Americans as minority group are struggling in white American society such as: racism, identity's struggles, and double consciousness.

## 2. Abu-Jabar on Verbal Violence and Double-consciousness:

Diana Abu-Jabar, through *Arabian Jazz* (1993), presents the verbal violence as a result of the racial discrimination between white Americans and Arab Americans in neighborhood, schools, public places, and in the workplaces. Matussem's daughters are working in the hospital where Portia, a white American woman also works. Portia was a friend of their mother, Noura. Sadly, Portia practices the racial discrimination on the two daughters because of their Arab American father. Portia believes that Noura, her best friend, made a mistake by marrying an Arab American man, Matussem who isn't "better any other negroes" (Abu-Jabar, 1993, p. 294). She makes Arab Americans equal to African Americans where she tends to put them in the margins. Portia expresses her negative attitude of accepting Arab Americans in white American society by humiliating one of Matussem's daughters, Jemorah. She always devalues their mother for marrying their father who has different skin color, kills her, and wastes her life opportunities from being a woman like her. She says "your mother could have made such beautiful children-they could have been so lovely, like she was, like a white rose" (Abu-Jabar, 1993, p. 294). Portia is a symbol of some white Americans who think that they have the privilege to marginalize and dehumanize the minorities; she "uses the term "American" as a marker of superiority and exclusivity" (Naous, 2009, p. 71). When Portia realizes her hateful and hurtful words toward Jemorah because of her Arab American father, she declares that she loves her but she doesn't want her to belong to the Eastern and Arabic culture, and "she is sympathetic to Jemorah for her bad luck at having such a father" (Hartman, 2006, p.155). Portia's aim of humiliating Matussem and his daughter is because she wants "to save whatever of [their] mother's clean blood is left"



(Abu-Jabar, 1993, p. 295). In this way, Portia, as a white, practices her racial prejudice against the minority, Jemorah, for being an Arab American through marginalizing her father for not being deserved to marry her best friend, Noura only because of his race.

The conversation with Portia leads Jemorah to have fear inside her as a negative feeling of being marginalized and dehumanized, Abu-Jabar (1993) writes:

It struck her after she reached the car and locked herself in that the thin breath in her lungs and the tightening sensation in her stomach were fear. Not merely the fear of being caught, but of everything around her\_of the way the strange faces turned and rushed forward, of gestures and glances, of the world of these people, who didn't know her or want to know her. (298)

Not only fear that might hunt Arab Americans in the white American society but the suffering from double consciousness. They do not feel themselves belonging to any culture either Eastern or Western. They all are hunted by their mother's memories. Melvina works hard to convince her father that he has to travel to Jordan because Matussem couldn't visit Jordan after his American wife died there. Melvina says that "this is your homeland, your people, this is a journey to your past, to all of our pasts" (Abu-Jabra, 1993, p. 259). Once they feel connected to their eastern culture, they feel the rejection from their people back there as well as they want to be escaped from being controlled by the cultural expectations of their eastern culture such as: early marriage, and marriage's importance. Additionally, the daughters' physical appearance makes them feel different from the majority of white Americans as well as the white Americans stress on making them feel of their differentiation. Naous (2009) comments on this issue saying, "differing shades of color make for painful identity negotiations in *Arabian Jazz*" (76). For example, when Portia says to Jemorah "we'll try putting some pink lipstick on you, maybe

lightening your hair, make you American” (Abu-Jabar, 1993, p. 295). Additionally, when Melvina hears an American man indicates Matussem, as “the dirty sand nigger” (Abu-Jabar, 1993, p. 99). That thing makes them live in double consciousness about their physical appearance, their origins, and their citizenships. Because of American physical appearance stereotypes, white Americans such as Portia couldn't identify the Ramoud family as whites. More interestingly, Abu Jabar sets the setting of the novel in white neighborhood for showing that the characters themselves are not paying attention to what they look like but the whites make them feel the difference by appointing to their skin, and their hair and eyes' color.

The main struggle for minorities is their attempt to include themselves in the society without feeling that they are different from them for any reason. Du Bois's definition of double consciousness can be applied on the characters of *Arabian Jazz*: Matussem Ramoud and his two daughters where they are “straddling of two cultures, two families, two identities, and especially two languages cause a need to improvise and intertwine their individual and collective identities as Arab Americans” (Naous, 2009, p. 61). In the other words, people are considered minority in white society because of their difference and distance from the normativity. Such these people are African Americans and Arab Americans who are experiencing the “double consciousness” of being bonding and connecting to two cultures African or Arab culture as it's their main race and white American culture because of their living in it. Du Bois (2013) who introduces the term of “double consciousness”, he defines it as:

This sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings;

two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (38).

The racial discrimination that they faced in white American society prevents them or makes it difficult to feel that they are real American citizens like the whites. As the minorities are living with fear, they are also living with double consciousness as a result of whiteness effects on them.

Veronica Watson in her book *The Souls of White Folks* (2013) comments on the concept of double consciousness by saying that “double consciousness is one result, perhaps the most pernicious effect, of the color line. It is the two-ness that is born when one’s self-understanding collides with social constructions of race that limit one’s ability to actualize one’s vision of the self” (16). Minority individuals in white American society are not only seeking whiteness through crossing the color line but also attempting to be loyal to both cultures. For example, *In Arabian Jazz*, Matussem’s use of jazz music is a tool “to seek to other improvisation as the binary opposite to the disciplined achievements of western music, which reflect the intellectual and technological advancements of the West” (Naous, 2009, p. 67). Matussem, through his admiration of using Arabian jazz, connects between the eastern and western culture because he is influenced by both of them, and this is what double consciousness is as a result of whites’ denying and marginalizing them from being a white American although they have an American citizenship.

### 3. Coates’s Summary:

Ta-Nehisi Coates writes *Between the World and Me* (2015) as a letter to his fifteen years old son, Samori. Coates is inspired by James Baldwin's 1963 *The Fire Next Time* and he presents the racial injustices and Black Live Matters that happens before one century and half until the current days. In his letter to his son, he explains what it means to be a black in America, what is

the value of the black body, and what is racism. In addition, he talks about some events in his life that show the racial discrimination toward people of color in America such as the murder of Prince Jones.

#### 4. Coates on Physical Violence and Fear

Coates defines Black Life Matter Movement as African Americans protesting against the racial injustices of police killing of black people. Coates talks about this issue where people of color are walking in the streets with “fears” that anyone might kill them. The African American man cannot own his black body because it might be shot by the white police officer without any evidence or approve to shot him. When he hears that there is a murder of a black man in Virginia, he thinks of himself, his son, and any black man because he knows that “these officers had [his] body. Could do with that body whatever they pleased” (Coates, 2015, p. 76). Sadly, they do not need to give any explanation of what they have done to the black people. He remembers all black men who had been shot by the police officer: Elmer Clay Newman, Gary Hopkins, and Freddie McCollum. Through *the Washington Post*, he sees Prince Jones’ picture under one line of the incident’s description “He had been shot by a PG County officer, not in PG County, not even in D.C. but somewhere in Northern Virginia” (Coates, 2015, p. 77). Prince Jones was killed while he is driving to his fiancé’s home, and the police claims that Jones tries to run over an officer with his car. That news doesn’t make him sad as it does make him fearful toward his future and his son’s future for the possibility of destroying his son’s body as the previous killed black men. He goes to Prince Jones’ home, he found people asking to forgive the policeman toward what he did to Prince Jones but Coates doesn’t think of that because he knows that “[Prince Jones] was murdered by his country and all the fears that have marked it from birth” (Coates, 2015, p. 78). It is not an individual act but rather a country’s act. This point

becomes more clearer to Coates when he knows that the policeman was a black, Coates (2015) believes that

the truth is that the police reflect America in all of its will and fear, and whatever we might make of the country's criminal justice policy, it cannot be said that it was imposed by a repressive minority. The abuses that have followed from these policies--the sprawling carceral state, the random detention of black people, the torture of suspects--are the product of democratic will. And so to challenge the police is to challenge the American people who send them into the ghettos armed with the same self-generated fears that compelled the people who think they are white to flee the cities and into the Dream. (79)

This is what Black Lives Matter is to search for finding dignity and human rights for African Americans in America and to change them to be powerful rather than powerless.

Whenever Coates wants to forget his fears and the truth of his black body's value, another murder incident happens to confirm the sad truth that the black man couldn't own his body in this country. The black body in the American society is threatened by the country, and by the police. Coates (2015) believes that "our bodies are ourselves, that my soul is the voltage conducted through neurones and nerves, and that my spirit is my flesh," (79). What still astonishes him is that the police never get the value of the black body as the value of any white American in the society. The way the police officer "destroy his [Prince jones] body, scorched his shoulders and arms, ripped open his back, mangled lung, kidney, and liver" (Coates, 2015, p. 79) shows the hatred that comes because of the racial prejudices. Coates doesn't believe in forgiveness because he is sure that this incident will happen again and again with people of color. It is really sad to know that there was no witness of the murder except the policeman

himself. In investigation, the officer lies in describing the personal feature of Prince Jones, and then the officer didn't receive any kind of punishment. The murder of his friend in Howard University, Jones is shown the white police physical violence against the people of color where they should be treated as humans and killed only if they are criminals. From this sense, Coates appears his negative feelings and attitudes toward the white Americans and how that hardens his protection as a human father of his child, "You are all we have, and you come to us endangered. I think we would like to kill you ourselves before seeing you killed by the streets that America made" because he knows "the limits of [his] caring, the reach of its power" (Coates, 2015, p. 81). Coates as a black father in America understands that he can protect his son from everything but not from the country act that is represented by the police. His inability and limited power to protect his son is inherited by his father. Since his childhood, Coates lives in fear until his fatherhood. And if things won't change, that fear would be inherited to his son.

Coates, through his expressive words, and touching images calls only for protecting the body and owning one's body. One of the reviews in Dominicana website highlights on what the blacks are lack of in order to be treated equal to the whites, Br. Bonaventure Chapman comments on the value of the black body and takes this discussion more beyond that "Coates does not blame the horrors of slavery for destroying the black body physically, but he emphasizes on how the black spirit and soul can be protected, and in this point, black people can feel existed."

Dignity is the lost thing in Coates's lives and many African Americans in white Americans society. If the police believes that blacks have dignity and it should be respected, they would stop hurting them because they see them as real humans not only a physical body. Coates, by mentioning of the murderer of his friend shows the physical violence that has been practiced by the whites against the African Americans in American society during the current days. That leads

them to have negative feeling toward white American society. Coates (2015) writes “took me from fear to a rage that burned in me then, animates me now, and will likely leave me on fire for the rest of my days” (83). Coates and many other African Americans are living with fear of being hunted by the country, law, and the white supremacy. Fear is a negative feeling that is produced within the white supremacy and hierarchy and within the privilege to destroy the black bodies though America is his native country.

##### 5. Effects of Fear and Double Consciousness:

In both texts, readers can see that the protagonists suffer from the effects of racism and prejudice in the form of double consciousness and fear. Abu-Jabar, through her novel, presents the issues of minorities of identifying their identity either as Arabs or as Americans and of avoiding being marginalized by white people through using some motifs. For example, the jazz music is known to be African American tradition, but Abu-Jabar lets her male protagonist, Matussem, to be a jazz music player “to invoke connections between these two groups” (Hartman, 2006, p.148). Abu-Jaba’s uses of “invocative of African American music” (Hartman, 2006, p.148) in her novel “are positive and celebratory, underlining a shared understanding through culture rather than establishing a bond between the two groups which is only based on shared oppression” (Hartman, 2006, p. 148). For more illustrations, Abu-Jabar hints that Arab Americans can be understood through jazz because of the similar struggles, feelings, attitudes toward themselves and the white American society. In fact, “In the novel, jazz functions as a metonymic symbol of African America; the racial tensions in Arabian Jazz must be interpreted through this lens” (Hartman, 2006, p. 150). Arabian jazz as a term is a connection of two different races for indicating to the same issue which is the racial prejudices from some whites.

The murderer of Prince Johns in Coates's *Between the World and Me* and Portia's psychological abuse through her racial comments against Matussem and his two daughters can be a cause to let them live with fears and double consciousness. Until now, blacks are still searching for the equality. It is not enough for them to hear from white men that "you are my brother, there is no difference between me and you" because in reality, police and some white American racists are experiencing and acting these differences loudly, abusively, and without punishment being blatantly racist toward minorities such as African Americans. On the other hand, Arab Americans are still struggling to identify themselves in white American society because of white supremacy. They usually identified with their skin color, race, and ethnicity, which lead them to have limited opportunities in the American dream. I think both Coates and Abu-Jabar portray themselves and the characters are feeling lost and having terrible in finding their right identity and location in white American society. For example, Abu Jabar portrays Jemorah to have struggles everywhere for being an Arab American either in her school bus when she was a child or her work. Also, she portrays her that she doesn't recognize the difference between the two cultures: Eastern and Western that is why she is influenced by any racial comments on her origins and her physical appearance. By the end of the novel, she understands her sister's statement when she says, "In the book of life every page has two sides" (Abu-Jabar, 1993, p. 6) at this point, Jemorah understands that she has to accept all people from different backgrounds regardless of their nationalities, ethnicities, and cultures in order to let herself enduring all the racial comments and prejudices against her without being fearful.

### **Definition of Whiteness:**

Whiteness is a social construct commonly created to uphold the social hierarchy. Specifically, whiteness is used by whites or other people who share the same beliefs



as the privileged group to marginalize non-whites in American society. My understanding of this point has lead me to select narratives that show the trauma and the violence of whiteness, either verbally or physically, in the American society. Most importantly, the selected literature helps us to understand the effects of whiteness on minorities regarding the trauma and violence that are mentioned in literary works. Literary works that are created by minority authors give the readers access to understanding the racial inequalities, racial discrimination, and violence against racial minorities. It is really important to understand the origins and the background of whiteness and racism in America. The history of whiteness and racism is associated with the history of America, as racial inequality and social injustices have existed since the creation of the United States. Whiteness is a lens through which we can examine the line that divides the whites and blacks in America.

Coates's *Between the World and Me* discusses racism that started from slavery until now, where the black bodies are treated as invaluable. Much of racism and suffering that the African Americans endured is due to whites who thought that their whiteness allowed them to have the power, authority and the privilege to dehumanize the blacks and marginalize them as well as control the American Dream. Coates (2015) writes about racism is that "Americans believe in the reality of 'race'. . . But race is the child of racism, not the father. And the process of naming 'the people' has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy. . . [whiteness] has no real meaning divorced from the machinery of criminal power" (7-8). The concept of racism is a real, not a myth, and it is socially constructed throughout the history of America where the social hierarchy was based on the skin color. According to Guess, "the concept "race" is based on socially constructed, but socially, and certainly scientifically, outmoded beliefs about the inherent superiority and inferiority of groups based on racial

distinctions” (Guess, 2006, p. 654). To Coates, whites use racism as a powerful tool to destroy black bodies. He writes “In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage.” (Coates, 2015, p. 103). Whenever whites hear about race or racism, they know that these issues do not affect them personally, and therefore they do not concern themselves with issues of racial inequality. Coates (2015) argue, “my experience in this world has been that the people who believe themselves to be white are obsessed with the politics of personal exoneration” (97). That gives them more credits to dehumanize people of color and put them under the spot of “others” for not being white because it is known that the hierarchy based on “one [whiteness] is privileged and the other is unprivileged” (Moosavinia1, S. R., et al, 2011, p. 105)

On the other hand, Arab Americans are immigrants who are leaving their home country for political, economic, and educational reasons in order to find their home in America. The book *Arab Americans An Integral Part of American Society* published by Arab American National Museum clarifies the history of Arab American immigrants to the United States. Arab immigration can be divided into three important waves. The first wave (1880s–1920s) consists Lebanese Christians who can be classified as Syrians or Turks. They were seeking for their rights to be treated and categorized as white citizens. The second wave (1950s-1960s) consists of a diverse number of Arab countries such as s Iraq, Egypt, Palestine and Jordan, and there were Muslims and Christians. Finally, the third wave (1970s–Present) consists of Arabs either Muslims or Christians who hold strong Arab traditions and culture. An important difference is mentioned in, *Arab Americans An Integral Part of American Society*, between the first wave, and the second and third is that Arab immigrants of first wave aim to be classified as “white” and their immigration was “motivated by the dream of providing better lives for themselves and their families” (7). While the second and third immigrants aim to establish “their Arab identity” (11)

through being “more involved in American politics on both the local and national levels” (11). Their involvement in the American society and politics leads them to be classified as a minority through linking them to other minority groups such as people of color. As a result of this immigration, many critics argue if Arab Americans can be considered as white or not white through using whiteness theory for paying a little attention to Arab Americans’ identities trying to categorize them in white American social hierarchy. Additionally, most of Arab American authors portray their characters in a way of showing their difficulty to be a white in a society where race is really appreciated.

### **White Estrangement:**

The author Veronica Watson, in her book *The Souls of White Folks* (2013), creates a new term that is called “literature of white estrangement” which is defined as “the literature of white estrangement (or the literature of white exposure; I use the terms interchangeably) is the larger collection of materials from practically every conceivable written genre-including short fiction, sermons, journalism, essays, drama, critical texts, and poetry-that critically engages Whiteness as a social construction”(5). A book like *Arabian Jazz* (1993) or *Between the world and Me* (2015) are good examples of “literature of white estrangement” for telling their struggles and experiences that happened as a result of white privilege.

Diana Abu-Jabar's *Arabian Jazz* and Coates' *Between the World and Me* are examples of minority literature where they portray their personal experiences and struggles in their stories to show how their lives as individuals and their families are affected by whiteness. A book like *Between the World and Me* presents the violence of whiteness, and how the whites treat African Americans as an “other” and marginalize them from the American society. It also shows “the interconnection between White (group) identity and violence” (Watson, 2013, p.108). The

idea and the concept of *Between the World and Me* that is written in letter form is “utilized by African American intellectuals as a deliberate strategy for reaching the white readers who perhaps would not otherwise have engaged either critiques of racism, social inequality, and injustice” (Watson, 2013, p. 6). Additionally, Coates (2015) assigns his blame for the mistreatment of minorities such as African Americans in the United States, and sadly it is still continuing until today, 21st centuries to:

White America’ is a syndicate arrayed to protect its exclusive power to dominate and control our bodies...without it, ‘white people’ would cease to exist for a want of reasons. There will surely always be people with straight hair and blue eyes, as there have been for all of history. But some of these straight-haired people with blue eyes have been ‘black,’ and this points to the great difference between their world and ours. We did not choose our fences. They were imposed on us... (42)

The issue can be applied on Arab Americans, in *Arabian Jazz*, where they are asked to have blue eyes and blonde hair at least to be treated as whites in America. Diana Abu-Jabar talks about an Arab emigrated man who builds his life in a white neighborhood in New York to show the connection between whites and violence. She illustrates this through the verbal violence that is targeted towards them. For example, readers can see this violence in Portia's racial comments to Jomerah because of her parents’ marriage. Also, Jemorah faces the same thing every day on her school bus, but she "learned how to close her mind, how to disappear in her seat" (Abu-Jabar, 1993, p. 92) in order to escape from the student’s comments on her skin and look. Jemorah spends her life living in fear and worry because she is usually haunted by all the comments that she hears during the day.

### **White Estrangement as Protest Literature:**

Coates (2015), in *Between the World and Me*, indicates to the illusion of American Dream that is maintained and controlled by white supremacy, he writes “is perfect houses with nice lawns. ... The Dream smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake. And for so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies” (11). Salim Muwakkil (2015) writes a review in *These Times* website about how Coates relates the American Dream to the white supremacy, he writes:

Americans who believe themselves to be white are so firmly encased in “The Dream,” his term for the visions of suburban bliss and domestic tranquility used to obscure the racist brutalities that still sustain America, that they can only be rudely awakened. They must be made aware that America prospered on the ideas and benefits of a white supremacy that remains deeply embedded in its culture and institutions.

What prevents Coates from involving himself in the American Dream is that whites are shaping and reshaping the American Dream based on their needs, ambitions, and desires. One of the whites’ controlling of the American Dream is creating “the law [that] didn’t protect us” (Coates, 2015, p.17). Coates uses “us” as a referring to African Americans. The American dream for Coates is all different races should live in a secured life, and in real comfort. The real dream of an African American is that “he [African American man] simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (Du Bois, 1994, p.39). Coates and Abu-Jabar, through their narratives, send their wishes to all readers that all people should “believe in God, who made of one blood all nations that on earth do dwell. I believe that

all men, black and brown and white, are brothers, varying through time and opportunity, in form and gift and feature, but differing in no essential particular, and alike in soul and the possibility of infinite development.” (Du Bois, 1920, p. 3). In the following quotes, Coates shows the beauty of his letter, the beauty of his thoughts, and the beauty of his message that seems to me is addressed to the whites and blacks in terms of letting them understand the risk as well as understand to live as one nation no matter what is your skin’s color in order to make the American Dream real for everybody, every race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality. He writes:

My wish for you is that you feel no need to constrict yourself to make other people comfortable. None of that can change the math anyway. I never wanted you to be twice as good as them, so much as I have always wanted you to attack every day of your brief bright life in struggle. The people who must believe they are white can never be your measuring stick. I would not have you descend into your own dream. I would have you be a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world. (107-8)

### **Conclusion**

Finally, whenever the authors Coates and Abu-Jabar both face racial discrimination, violence, hateful words, they never fight back abusively. Because they are writers who aim to throw their stones through their narratives in the society for bringing more attention to their issues and their sufferings. Abu-Jabar brings identity politics and Arabs Americans’ negotiating through the racial discrimination in American society to the readers. One way to protest is to face the society, and to find hope and ambition for including the self within the society. In another way, Matussem’s playing of Arab music shows his protest in order to let the Americans accept him and his family in white American society because “music also creates social bonds that cross racial lines” (Naous, 2009, p.76). Their protest is to find their place in the white American

society as American citizens without being different or apart from it. While Coates is writing a letter to his son and the next generation for letting them know the value of the black body in white American society. Despite the differences between the two minority narratives, they both are sharing the same goal in expressing themselves as fighters toward finding their identity, and comfortable and secured life.

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