



LITERATURE AS CRITIQUE OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION: UNVEILING THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND ETHNICITY IN *SĀQ AL-BĀMBŪ* BY SA'ŪD AL-SAN'ŪSĪ

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HISTORY ABSTRACT

Received 11/3/2025 Although there have been many studies on the novel *Sāq Al-Bāmbū*, none have highlighted the issue of social stratification. Previous studies have focused on psychology, identity, cultural hybridity, social protest, and translation problems. To fill this gap in academic studies, this article aims to discuss the issue of how social stratification is represented in the novel, specifically how the intersections of race, class, gender, and ethnicity affect the lives of marginalised characters such as José. This study uses a qualitative approach, and data are collected through close reading and textual analysis, focusing on narrative elements. The data are then analysed using the sociology of literature, specifically social stratification. The analysis reveals four main aspects of social stratification illustrated in the novel: First, citizenship-based stratification shows that José's legal Kuwaiti citizenship does not guarantee social acceptance due to his Filipino heritage, highlighting the dominance of ethnicity and race over legal status in determining inclusion. Second, economic class-based stratification reveals the rigid class divisions in Kuwaiti society, where wealth and family background influence social status. Third, gender-based stratification emphasises the economic exploitation and limited autonomy of women, especially migrant workers like José's mother, reflecting how patriarchal norms limit women's roles. Finally, ethnic-based stratification illustrates the marginalisation of mixed-race individuals, like José, who face discrimination in Kuwait and the Philippines, with ethnic hierarchies shaping their social standing. The findings of this study contribute to and have implications for sociological studies in Arabic literature while offering critical insights into how literature can influence awareness and reflection on social practices in real-world contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

Sāq Al-Bāmbū, written by Sa'ūd Al-San'ūsī, is a unique literary work that contains social criticism of Kuwaiti society (Elayyan, 2016; Niyazi & Aaraji, 2018; Ba Zurays & Bilkhasar, 2016). The novel tells the story of José, a young man of mixed Kuwaiti-Filipino heritage, whose dual identity exposes him to conflicting social realities (Al-Mutairi et al., 2019; Al-Hawtali et al., 2023). Despite his legal Kuwaiti citizenship, José faces discrimination due to his Filipino ancestry. The novel explores themes of race, class, gender, and ethnicity as José navigates the rigid social structures in Kuwait and his connection to the Philippines (Al-San'usi, 2013). As he faces exclusion and societal barriers, *Sāq Al-Bāmbū* offers a poignant commentary on the intersection of personal identity and systemic inequalities. In literary studies, the phenomenon of social stratification contained in *Sāq Al-Bāmbū* becomes an object that can be observed to clarify criticism of social inequality (Manugeran et al., 2020; Sudewa, 2016; Wasik & Liliani, 2019). In this concept, literature becomes a tool for social criticism that not only aims to criticize, but also to make changes in the social order of a particular society (Iliescu, 2016; Satriati & Hapsarani, 2020; Sueb et al., 2025).

Although several studies have been conducted on *Sāq Al-Bāmbū*, none have highlighted social stratification and intersectionality. Based on the systematic literature review, the existing studies can be categorised into the perspectives of psychology, identity, cultural hybridity, social protest, and translation problems. Studies from the perspective of literary psychology reveal the many mental pressures experienced by the main character, José, in his search for the meaning of life and identity (Ballawy et al., 2024; Al-Ghamdi, 2023). José is depicted as experiencing psychological maturity that makes his character grow and change frequently. José, who experiences uncertainty about his national affiliation (Philippines-Kuwait) and religion (Islam-Christianity), experiences a crisis of belonging, psychological alienation, and dismembered dreams, where he is not part of the community or authority (Arslan, 2019; Ghanim, 2024; Hezam, 2017). Despite frequent insults and rejections, he managed to undergo a maturation process and reconcile the cultural confrontations he faced (Al-Mutairi, 2016; Ballawy et al., 2024). Al-Sanousi's storytelling technique that successfully portrays José as a protagonist shows the success of *Sāq Al-Bāmbū* as one of the Arabic Bildungsroman (Abu-Enein, 2020; Al-Mutairi, 2016).

From an identity perspective, several studies have concluded that José's identity crisis, internal conflict, and external conflict led to a fragmented identity (Jarrar, 2015; Al-Mutairi et al., 2019; Taş & Eminoğlu, 2023). He faces unique identity challenges and a long identity struggle as a social norm in the structure of Gulf society, shaped by pre- and post-colonial powers (Faraji & Sa'adi, 2025; Al-Hawtali et al., 2023; Elayyan, 2016). The search for identity becomes difficult due to strict regulations and laws and thick cultural, religious, and linguistic barriers (Al-Hawtali et al., 2023; Hezam, 2017; Abdu-Alhakam et al., 2020). However, despite this, José eventually formed his own identity and beliefs as a product of his reconciliation with cultural hybridity, known as hybrid identity (Hezam, 2017; Bouazza, 2022; Ba Zurays & Bilkhasar, 2016). With the complexity of the theme of identity raised, *Sāq Al-Bāmbū* has become one of the strong representations of Gulf society literature that makes individual identity and its relationship in society a main issue (Bilokopytova & El Guessab, 2022; Elayyan, 2016).

In addition to creating a hybrid identity, the dynamics of José's life also represent cultural hybridity. Several studies have mentioned *Sāq Al-Bāmbū* as a representation of the bicultural experience of diaspora and migrant workers in the Gulf countries

(Ghanim, 2024; Hezam, 2017). The main character is depicted as experiencing socio-cultural alienation, leading him to a natural process of identity grafting (Al-Mutairi, 2019; Jarrar, 2015; Al-Hawtali et al., 2023). The hybridisation of José's identity as a result of the reconciliation of cultural hybridity produces negative effects in the form of social and cultural rejection by the majority of society in both cultures (Al-Mutairi et al., 2019; Abdu-Alhakam, 2020). Cultural hybridity as the root of hybrid identity becomes a tragedy that creates various social prejudices in the majority and dominant society, thus complicating the process of individual assimilation (Ba Zurays & Bilkhasar, 2016; Arslan, 2019). Wrapped in a fascinating plot and intrigue, *Sāq Al-Bāmbū* is considered successful in raising the discourse of cultural hybridity as a unity of ideas and values originating from qualitatively different cultural heterogeneity (Zughair & Ghazi, 2023; Al-Mutairi, 2016).

Several other reviewers also refer to the novel *Sāq Al-Bāmbū* as a form of social protest by citizens against the state. McManus's (2016) and Waisal's (2019) studies concluded that al-San'usi's work is a social, economic, political, religious critique, and is a form of popular rebellion that the authoritarian regime has long silenced. Sociologically, al-San'ūsī attempts to criticise Qatari society and describe the reality of their interactions with the outside world, which are so exclusive and the treatment of female domestic workers, which is quite problematic (Elayyan, 2016; Fajar, 2023). *Sāq Al-Bāmbū* directs protests at the customs and traditions of Arab society in general, and Kuwait in particular, about things that are considered taboo and forbidden in the socio-cultural order (Ba Zurays & Bilkhasar, 2016; Niyazi & Aaraji, 2018). Meanwhile, studies on translating novels into English show divergence due to social, political, religious, and cultural constraints. To overcome these constraints, translators use strategies of omission, cultural substitution, translation using loanwords, and loanwords accompanied by explanations (Rababah & Al-Abbas, 2022).

Based on the systematic literature review above, previous studies have succeeded in laying a strong foundation for understanding the complexities of psychology, identity, cultural hybridity, protest values, and translation problems in *Sāq Al-Bāmbū*. Still, none fully address the nuanced intersectionality of race, class, gender, and ethnicity as a form of social stratification. The study of sociology in Arabic literature, particularly through the lens of social stratification, has become a significant area of study in recent years to understand how literary works reflect and shape societal structures (Censi, 2022; Sellman, 2018; Maffi, 2025). Several studies of social stratification in Arabic literary works have succeeded in revealing reflections of socio-economic, cultural, and educational divides within Arab society (Noviana, 2024; Azizah & Ardiyanti, 2024; Harianto, 2016). On the other hand, researchers also revealed how social capital influenced the legitimacy of writers in the Arab literary world and reflected the social stratifications of their time (Asih & Anum, 2023; Harianto, 2016). This insight reveals that literature is not merely an aesthetic product but a tool for understanding societal values, hierarchies, and tensions.

By examining these works, this research situates *Sāq Al-Bāmbū* within the broader discourse on how Arabic literature critiques and reflects the social stratification in contemporary Arab societies. These studies emphasise the importance of approaching literary works within their specific sociocultural contexts, a perspective that is also essential in analysing *Sāq Al-Bāmbū*. Based on this review, this study will answer the main problem: "What are the types of social stratification found in the novel *Sāq Al-Bāmbū* by Sa'ūd Al-San'ūsī?" By adopting a sociological literary approach, this article will investigate the influence of social structures on character development, mobility, and

conflict (Abdu-Alhakam et al., 2020). Through closely examining the dynamics between characters and the tensions that arise from their unequal social standings, this analysis will deepen our understanding of how social stratification impacts individual and collective experiences.

Furthermore, the study connects these literary themes with real-world concerns about inequality and social mobility, which remain at the forefront of contemporary global conversations (Lestaluhu & Latupapua, 2021). This research offers a new perspective by incorporating the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and ethnicity, which has not been fully addressed in previous studies on *Sāq Al-Bāmbū*. It contributes to the expanding field of sociological literary studies, particularly in Arabic literature, by shedding light on how literature reflects and critiques social structures in modern societies. This research is important because it contributes to the growing field of sociological literary studies, especially in the context of contemporary Arab literature. By linking social stratification with themes of inequality and mobility, this study enriches the realm of literary criticism and encourages a deeper examination of social divides within literary texts. Through the lens of *Sāq Al-Bāmbū*, the story of marginalised individuals seeking recognition offers powerful insights into how privilege, power, and social structures operate within a divided society (Monroy-Gómez-Franco, 2023).

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive method to analyze social stratification in *Sāq Al-Bāmbū*. The focus is on understanding the social tensions depicted through the character, who navigates between two distinct classes. Qualitative research, as defined by Neale (2016), Ningi (2022), and Sundler et al. (2019), explores social aspects through a detailed examination of narrative elements, offering insights into the social realities presented in the text and linking them to existing social theories. The descriptive method helps depict phenomena in detail to understand the object of study. The research thoroughly analyses narrative components such as character development, dialogue, and social interactions to implement these qualitative characteristics. These elements are examined to understand the dynamics of social stratification within the novel's plot and character arcs.

Research data was taken from the novel *Sāq Al-Bāmbū*, a contemporary novel written by Sa'ūd Al-San'ūsī (Al-San'ūsī, 2013). The novel was first published in 2012 by Dar al-Adab in Beirut, Lebanon. The novel as a data source can be accessed online and downloaded from the page <https://www.kutubm.com/download/?id=13921>. Data in the form of narrative excerpts and dialogue is collected through an in-depth reading of the novel, focusing on key elements that reflect social stratification, such as character expressions and phrases. The data collection process includes three stages: *First*, a comprehensive novel reading is conducted to identify passages and character interactions that depict social inequality. *Second*, relevant sections are noted and annotated to capture how the author depicts the complexities of race, class, and gender. *Third*, bibliographic research supports and expands on the themes and theories identified within the text, ensuring that the analysis is grounded in both primary and secondary sources. The stages of data analysis involve: *First*, identifying the key elements in the text related to social stratification. *Second*, interpreting how these elements reflect the interplay of social, racial, and gendered forces. *Finally*, these findings will be synthesized with existing sociological literature to assess how the novel critiques contemporary social structures.

Text analysis is guided by literary sociology theory, particularly social stratification. Literary sociology examines how social structures in texts shape character interactions and plot development. The concept of social stratification used in this analysis is derived from Max Weber's theory of social hierarchy, which divides social hierarchies into three primary categories: class, status, and power (Weber, 1922). Weber's theory is crucial to understanding how social stratification shapes José's experiences within the narrative. The four types of social stratification identified in this study, citizenship-based, economic class-based, gender-based, and ethnicity-based, reflect how these categories intersect and perpetuate inequalities in Kuwaiti society. References from Weber's works and secondary literature on sociological theories of stratification provide the foundation for analysing these dynamics (Weber, 1922).

RESULT

Based on repeated readings and a sociological literary analysis of *Sāq Al-Bāmbū* by Sa'ūd Al-San'ūsī, this study identifies four primary forms of social stratification depicted in the novel: citizenship, social class, gender, and ethnicity. These forms of stratification serve as structural mechanisms that shape the interactions, conflicts, and mobility of characters within Kuwaiti society. The following sections provide a detailed analysis of each form of stratification and its implications within the context of the novel.

Citizenship-Based Stratification

Stratification based on citizenship in the novel shows how citizenship status affects rights, access, and social recognition. This stratification division can be seen from how citizenship is constructed in the Kuwaiti social hierarchy, how conditions are in the Philippines, as his mother's country of origin, and how mixed-blood individuals like José experience uncertainty of identity and social treatment. Several key textual quotes highlight this form of stratification. Kuwait is a wealthy nation with a strong welfare system that offers its citizens significant benefits, including financial security, education, and healthcare. However, these privileges are exclusive to those officially recognised as Kuwaiti nationals. Non-citizens, including migrant workers, face systemic discrimination and limited rights.

Excerpt 1 أدركت أمي ان مستقبلا آمنا، قلما يتوفر لرجل، ينتظرني هناك، في الكويت التي تقدم لمواطنيها، وأنا أحدهم، ما لا تقدمه أكثر الدول تقدما.
"My mother saw a secure future ahead of me, one that was rare for men in her country, waiting for me in Kuwait, where the state provides for its citizens more than developed countries do. And I am Kuwaiti." (Al-San'ūsī, 2013, p.77)

Excerpt 2 "ولكنني كويتي.. لا أحتاج إلى تأشيرة."
"I am Kuwaiti. I don't need a visa." (Al-San'ūsī, 2013, p.316)

Excerpt 1 illustrates how José, as a Kuwaiti citizen, benefits from social advantages, such as financial security and access to education, which are far superior to those found in other countries, even those considered more developed. This shows that citizenship in Kuwait provides privileges and a higher standard of living that are rarely available elsewhere, creating a clear divide between nationals, who enjoy these rights, and non-

nationals, who often do not have the same access. However, despite José's Kuwaiti citizenship, Excerpt 2 reveals that citizenship alone does not always guarantee full social acceptance. The statement "*I am Kuwaiti. I don't need a visa*" emphasises the privilege of citizenship in terms of mobility and legal security. Yet, José still faces social discrimination due to his Filipino heritage. Although legally a citizen, his racial identity and ethnic stereotypes create a social barrier, demonstrating that citizenship does not always equate to full recognition in society, especially when factors like ethnicity influence social perception.

One of the novel's central themes is the struggle faced by mixed-race individuals like José, who exist in a liminal space between two cultures. Though legally a Kuwaiti citizen, he is never fully accepted due to his Filipino heritage. He experiences discrimination not just from society at large but also from his own family.

Excerpt 3 لو ولدت لأب وأم كويتيين، مسلماً... أستيقظ صباح كل يوم لأذهب إلى عملي الذي اخترته بنفسه، أشكل جزءاً من الكل...
"*If only I were born to a Kuwaiti mother and father muslim... I would wake up every morning, go to a job of my choosing, and live my life with ease.*" (Al-San'ūsī, 2013, p.63)

Excerpt 4 وقفت في حيرة أمام هذه الطوابير هل أتوجه للطوابير التي يقف فيها الفلبينيون الذين كانوا معي في الرحلة؟ أم تلك الطوابير التي يقف فيها أناس لا يشبهونني؟
"*I stood there confused, unsure which line to take. Should I stand with the Filipinos who were on my flight? Or with those whose faces looked nothing like mine?*" (Al-San'ūsī, 2013, p.185)

Excerpt 5 رَفَضَ وجهي قبل أن يرى جواز سفري!".
"*The officer had already rejected my face before even looking at my passport!*" (Al-San'ūsī, 2013, p.186)

José's experience as a mixed-race individual highlights the tension between his legal Kuwaiti citizenship and the social exclusion he faces due to his Filipino heritage. Despite being legally recognised as a Kuwaiti citizen, José is trapped in a liminal space between two cultures. His desire for a life free from discrimination is evident in Excerpt 3 as his wish, "*If only I were born to a Kuwaiti mother and father Muslim... I would wake up every morning, go to a job of my choosing, and live my life with ease*". This quote reveals his belief that if he were fully Kuwaiti, his life would be simpler and more accepted, free from the barriers created by his mixed heritage. The reality of his situation, however, is marked by discrimination not only from society but also from his own family, showing how ethnicity and family background intersect to limit his social mobility and acceptance.

José's racial identity becomes a significant factor in how he is perceived, even though he possesses the legal status of a Kuwaiti citizen. In one decisive moment, José reflects in Excerpt 4, "*I stood there confused, unsure which line to take. Should I stand with the Filipinos who were on my flight? Or with those whose faces looked nothing like mine?*" His racial appearance creates a psychological and social barrier, making it difficult for others to view him as truly Kuwaiti, despite his legal standing. This sentiment is reinforced in another incident, where an officer rejects him based solely on his appearance as reflected in Excerpt 6: "*The officer had already rejected my face before*

even looking at my passport!". These experiences demonstrate that citizenship alone does not guarantee inclusion in Kuwaiti society, as social perceptions and racial identity play a critical role in determining who is considered a "real" Kuwaiti, emphasising the deep-rooted stratification that exists despite legal recognition.

Economic Class-Based Stratification

Social stratification in *Sāq Al-Bāmbū* is deeply tied to economic status, occupational roles, and inherited privilege. The novel presents a rigid class hierarchy, particularly in Kuwaiti society, where wealth and family background dictate social status. This section compiles key excerpts highlighting how social class influences character interactions, opportunities, and discrimination. The stratification can be categorised into three main aspects: the elite class in Kuwait, the working and lower class, and the struggles of mixed-background individuals within these structures. Kuwait is depicted as a country where wealth is highly concentrated among a few elite families, and class divisions are sharply defined. The ruling and upper-class citizens can access financial security, prestigious social status, and employment opportunities. At the same time, manual labour and lower-paying jobs are primarily filled by non-Kuwaiti workers.

Excerpt 6 أن ينجح رجل ما في عمله ويكون ثروة فهو رجل عصامي، أما أن ينجح فيصل العادل، زوج عمتي نورية، فهو "حرامي!". ألو.. ألو عيسى.. هل تسمعني؟
"If someone is skilled at their job and becomes wealthy, they are seen as successful and independent. But if Faisal Al-Adil, Aunt Nuriyah's husband, becomes successful, he is suspected of being a thief." (Al-San'ūsī, 2013, p.349)

Excerpt 7 ...أصغرها يُعد قصرا في تلك المناطق التي جئت منها.
"The smallest houses here resemble a mansion from where I come from." (Al-San'ūsī, 2013, p.198)

Excerpt 8 لا يمكنني السير في شوارع الكويت من دون أن ألاحظ السيارات. أرخصها وأبسطها يُعد حلما لا يتحقق للمواطن العادي في الفلبين.
"It is impossible to walk down the streets of Kuwait without noticing cars passing by. What is considered cheap and simple here is an unattainable dream for the average Filipino." (Al-San'ūsī, 2013, p.198)

In *Sāq Al-Bāmbū*, Kuwait is depicted as a society with a clear class divide, where wealth is concentrated within a small elite group, and manual labour or lower-paying jobs are filled by non-Kuwaiti workers. This stratification is deeply entrenched in the country's social and economic structure, where the elite have access to financial security, prestigious status, and abundant employment opportunities. At the same time, the working class, particularly foreign labourers, remain marginalised. The quote in Excerpt 6, *"If someone is skilled at their job and becomes wealthy, they are seen as successful and independent. But suppose Faisal Al-Adil, Aunt Nuriyah's husband, becomes successful. In that case, he is suspected of being a thief"*, illustrating the scepticism and suspicion faced by individuals from outside the elite class who manage to rise economically. This highlights how social mobility is often not celebrated in Kuwait

labourers. These instances underscore the deep-seated economic exploitation and social marginalisation of migrant workers in Kuwait, where social class and ethnicity dictate one's status and opportunities.

Gender-Based Stratification

In *Sāq Al-Bāmbū*, gender plays a crucial role in shaping social hierarchies, particularly through patriarchal inheritance, economic exploitation of women, and restrictions on women's autonomy in marriage. The novel highlights how societal structures in Kuwait and the Philippines reinforce these inequalities, affecting both male and female characters differently. Women in both Kuwait and the Philippines face structural oppression, where they are often forced into exploitative labour conditions, including domestic work and even prostitution. This is evident in the experiences of José's mother and Aida.

Excerpt 12 كانت والدتي في ذلك الوقت قد بلغت عامها العشرين وبلا شك في نظر جدي، كانت الاستثمار الأمثل للعائلة، وضمان استمرارها في الوقت الذي أصبحت فيه أيدا عاطلة عن العمل، منصرفة إلى تربية ابنتها. وفي ظل انصراف الابن الوحيد بيدرو عن شؤون أبيه وأختيه وانشغاله الدائم في البحث عن عمل، كان الوقت قد حان لاستثمار جوزافين.

"At that time, my mother was twenty years old. In my grandfather's eyes, my mother was the perfect alternative source of income that would ensure the family's survival after Aida stopped working and spent her time taking care of her daughter. Since the only son in the family, Pedro, was already overwhelmed with his own family and always struggled to find work, the time had come to exploit Joséphine." (Al-San'ūsī, 2013, p.22)

Excerpt 13 أصبحت أيدا شيئا، مثل أي شيء يباع ويشترى بثمن.. ثمن بخس في الغالب وباهظ في ما ندر، يتفاوت ثمنها نظرا لنوع الخدمة التي تقدمها. عملت صامتا حزينة كارهة للمال والرجال. ليس المؤلم أن يكون للإنسان ثمن بخس، بل الألم كل الألم، أن يكون للإنسان ثمن. صارت أيدا مصدر دخل للعائلة.

"Aida became a commodity that could be bought and sold. Often, her rates were cheap. Rarely was she paid much. Aida worked in silence and sadness, harbouring hatred for men and their money. What hurt her was not that her rates were cheap, but the fact that she was charged a fee. Aida became a source of income for the family." (Al-San'ūsī, 2013, p.20-21)

Excerpt 14 وبكت والدتي لأن والدي لم يواجه جدتي بزواجه منها، وبكت أكثر لأنها تعلم أن والدي لم يتمرد على جدتي حفاظا عليها ورغبة في الاستمرار معها.

"My mother cried because my father never told my grandmother about their marriage... She sobbed even more because she knew my father never stood up to my grandmother to defend her." (Al-San'ūsī, 2013, p.44)

The three excerpts above illustrate the economic desperation that pushes women into low-wage domestic labour and, in extreme cases, situations of exploitation. Women from poorer backgrounds, particularly migrant workers like Joséphine and Aida, are treated as disposable labour, reinforcing a hierarchy where women are valued primarily for their ability to serve men and wealthier families. Furthermore, the novel emphasises how women lack autonomy in choosing their own partners, as male family members often control marriage decisions. Women face immense pressure to conform to their family's expectations regarding marriage. The third quote reveals the gendered power imbalance in marriages, where men, despite their love or commitments, often prioritise family honour over defending their wives. Joséphine's experience illustrates how women in traditional societies are frequently left without support, even by the men they trust the most. Additionally, the novel exposes the social stigma surrounding interracial marriages, especially between Kuwaiti men and foreign women.

Ethnicity-Based Stratification

Ethnicity plays a crucial role in shaping social hierarchy in *Sāq Al-Bāmbū*. The novel illustrates how individuals of mixed heritage, particularly those with Filipino ancestry, face discrimination and exclusion in Kuwaiti society. Ethnicity-based stratification manifests in several ways, including racial prejudice, social exclusion, and the rigid classification of ethnic groups within Kuwaiti society. José, as a mixed-race individual with a Kuwaiti father and a Filipino mother, experiences racial discrimination both in Kuwait and the Philippines. He is often treated as an outsider and struggles to find acceptance in either society.

Excerpt 15 *Made in Philippines* يستلقون على ظهورهم... نعم.. أنت على حق.. كويتي.. ولكن
"They laughed out loud. 'Yes, you're right. You're Kuwaiti, but made in the Philippines.'" (Al-San'ūsī, 2013, p.159)

Excerpt 16 وددت لو أقسم له بأن والدي كويتي.. وأني ولدت هناك ولدي أوراق تثبت ذلك. تركته يكمل ما أراد...
"I wanted to swear before him that my father was Kuwaiti and that I was born there and had official documents to prove it, but I let him continue talking." (Al-San'ūsī, 2013, p.162)

Excerpt 17 كان يسحب طرفي عينيه بسبابتيه ساخرا من ملامحي الآسيوية. انفجروا ضاحكين.
"Someone squinted his eyes at me with his index fingers, mocking my Filipino features." (Al-San'ūsī, 2013, p.310)

José's experience as a mixed-race individual, half Kuwaiti and half Filipino, reveals how racial discrimination shapes his identity and social interactions in both Kuwait and the Philippines. Despite his Kuwaiti citizenship, José is repeatedly treated as an outsider. The sentence in Excerpt 15, "Yes, you're right. You're Kuwaiti, but made in the Philippines", emphasises how his Filipino heritage is used to define him as less Kuwaiti, reflecting a racial hierarchy in Kuwait that sees mixed-race individuals as inferior or incomplete members of society. This label, "Made in the Philippines," directly undermines José's sense of belonging, highlighting the persistent prejudice that racial

identity holds more weight than legal nationality in determining one's status in Kuwaiti society.

Furthermore, José's need to justify his identity is evident in his internal struggle when he reflects in Excerpt 16, "*I wanted to swear before him that my father was Kuwaiti and that I was born there and had official documents to prove it, but I let him continue talking*". This excerpt shows that legal citizenship alone does not protect José from the racial perceptions that dominate social interactions. His Filipino features continue to mark him as an outsider, as seen in the incident when someone mocks his appearance in Excerpt 17, "*Someone squinted his eyes at me with his index fingers, mocking my Filipino features*". This explicit racial mockery underscores the critical role that physical appearance plays in social acceptance within Kuwait, where ethnic appearance can override legal status, reinforcing the rigid ethnic stratification that José faces. These experiences reveal how deeply racial discrimination impacts José's ability to integrate into both Kuwaiti and Filipino societies, trapping him in a liminal space between two cultures.

DISCUSSION

In *Sāq Al-Bāmbū*, citizenship-based stratification is highlighted through José's Kuwaiti nationality, which offers him legal rights but does not guarantee social acceptance because of his Filipino heritage. Despite Kuwait's wealth and robust welfare system that benefits its citizens, non-citizens, especially migrant workers, face exclusion. José's legal status as a Kuwaiti does not shield him from racial discrimination, revealing a gap between legal rights and social recognition. This disparity illustrates how ethnicity and racial identity often precede citizenship in determining social status (Mthembu, 2024). The novel contrasts the privileged lives of Kuwaiti citizens with the struggles of migrants like José's mother, who seek better opportunities abroad due to economic instability in the Philippines. This highlights the global divide between migrant-sending and receiving countries, reinforcing systemic inequalities (Zhai et al., 2021; Ducu et al., 2024). José's mixed-race identity further deepens his marginalization, as societal views based on race limit his acceptance, even within his own family. His experiences show that citizenship alone is not enough to guarantee inclusion, as race and cultural norms play a vital role in defining one's sense of belonging (Sarpong, 2017; Lewis et al., 2021).

The novel also explores global economic disparities, where migrants from lower-income countries like the Philippines are often exploited in wealthier nations, further deepening social class divisions. This aligns with the observation of Sarpong (2017) that gated communities and economic privilege help maintain separation between social classes. In Kuwait, family background and wealth largely determine social status. The elite enjoy financial security and prestigious roles, while foreign workers like José's mother are trapped in low-paying, exploitative jobs. Despite holding Kuwaiti citizenship, José faces exclusion due to his mixed racial heritage, which is seen as a source of shame. This highlights how racial identity and social class limit social mobility and acceptance, as Budiati & Rochmat (2020) and Valentino & Yadon (2022) discussed. Furthermore, Shi (2017) and AlTaher (2019) argue that social stratification is evident in restricted access to resources and opportunities, a reality reflected in the experiences of foreign workers and their descendants in Kuwait.

The novel also explores gender-based stratification, particularly through patriarchal inheritance, economic exploitation of women, and restrictions on women's autonomy in marriage. Societal structures in Kuwait and the Philippines reinforce these

inequalities, affecting men and women differently. A key issue is the patriarchal nature of inheritance, where family names and legacies are passed only through men, rendering women's roles secondary. Women from lower socio-economic backgrounds, such as José's mother and Aida, face economic exploitation and are pushed into harsh labour conditions. As explained by Busch (2020) and Grönlund & Öun (2024), occupational segregation and wage disparities disproportionately disadvantage women from marginalised groups. The novel also highlights how women lack autonomy in choosing marriage partners, with decisions often controlled by male family members. Interracial marriages involving foreign women are socially stigmatised, showing how gender, race, and class intersect in shaping norms. As Matyal et al. (2021) argue, patriarchal systems and cultural biases severely limit women's social mobility, creating layered disadvantages that deepen inequality.

The novel also addresses the experiences of other marginalised ethnic groups, showing how ethnicity-based stratification shapes social hierarchy in *Sāq Al-Bāmbū*. Individuals of mixed heritage, particularly those with Filipino ancestry like José, face systemic discrimination and exclusion in Kuwaiti society. Despite holding legal Kuwaiti citizenship, José is treated as an outsider, highlighting how ethnic background often overrides legal status. His Filipino lineage is seen as a stigma, even within his own family, reflecting the rigid ethnic classifications in Kuwaiti culture. As Mthembu (2024) and Li & Heath (2017) explain, ethnic stratification limits social inclusion and access to resources, particularly for those with multiple cultural identities. The novel also explores the plight of the Bedoon, who are born in Kuwait but denied citizenship, underscoring how ancestry, not birthplace, determines social standing. This aligns with Valentino & Yadon's (2022) and Dahl & Krog's (2018) argument that ethnicity intersects with class and economic status to deepen exclusion. Additionally, José's rejection in both Kuwait and the Philippines illustrates how ethnic stratification transcends borders, a point supported by Zhai et al. (2021) and Ravid (2025). Ethnic bias shapes social interactions and resource access, clearly reflected in José's lived experience.

The findings of this study complement and strengthen the results of the studies of Ballawy et al. (2024), Al-Ghamdi (2023), Arslan (2019), Ghanim (2024), and Hezam (2017). Intersectional and stratificational racial conflicts are one of the causes of mental stress experienced by José from childhood to adulthood. In the scope of identity studies, the intersection of ethnicity experienced by José and his mother strengthens the findings of several previous researchers on identity crises and identity hybridity (Jarrar, 2015; Al-Mutairi et al., 2019; Taş & Eminoğlu, 2023). The identity crisis in the form of rejection by society forced José to carry out cultural reconciliation, thus giving birth to a hybrid identity. Through this study, the researcher concluded that the identity crisis's main cause was the intersection of ethnicity. In terms of class and gender, the findings of this study enrich previous studies that have not touched on this issue. Through stratification based on economic class and gender, this study provides academic contributions to the body of studies on *Sāq Al-Bāmbū*.

CONCLUSION

This study explores the multifaceted nature of social stratification as portrayed in Kuwaiti society in *Sāq Al-Bāmbū*, focusing on citizenship, economic class, gender, and ethnicity. Through the experiences of José, a mixed-race individual, the novel illustrates how legal rights, such as citizenship, often fail to guarantee social acceptance, with ethnicity and racial identity playing a crucial role in shaping one's social position. The

stark divisions between Kuwait's elite and migrant workers highlight the deeply entrenched class and economic stratification, where wealth and family background determine one's opportunities and social mobility. The gender-based stratification explored in the novel further complicates these social hierarchies, as women, especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, face economic exploitation and limited autonomy. This intersection of gender, race, and class serves to reinforce systemic inequalities that hinder upward mobility and perpetuate social exclusion. Additionally, the novel exposes how ethnicity-based stratification transcends national boundaries, with José facing discrimination not only in Kuwait but also in the Philippines, reflecting the global nature of ethnic discrimination.

While this study contributes to understanding social stratification in contemporary Arab literature, it also reveals the need for further research into how these social divisions manifest in different cultural and geographical contexts. Future studies could explore how these themes of exclusion and marginalisation are reflected in other works of literature or how these patterns persist in other migrant-receiving societies. The findings of this study suggest a pressing need for continued discussions on the intersectionality of race, class, and gender in shaping the experiences of marginalised individuals in contemporary global societies. In addition to the perspectives of the study that can be implemented on these different objects, further researchers can also apply other analyses to the novel *Sāq Al-Bāmbū*. Analyses within the scope of Marxist theory, deconstructionism, postcolonialism, and postmodernism will reveal more social, cultural, political, and economic phenomena in the novel. With these studies, the dimensions of the novel's interpretation will become richer, so the dynamics of Arabic literary studies will also be more developed.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The first author contributed to designing and structuring the analysis, conducting the analysis, and writing the manuscript. The second author contributed to data collection, provided data and analytical tools, and was responsible for translating and proofreading the manuscript. The third author provided data and analytical tools, contributed to the analysis, and assisted in editing and finalising the manuscript.

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