

GENDER IN DOCTRINATION THROUGH LITERATURE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE *GREAT GATSBY*

Munejah Khan

Assistant Professor, Department of English Language & Literature, Islamic University of Science & Technology, Awantipora, Jammu and Kashmir, India

Received: 01 Mar 2019

Accepted: 04 Mar 2019

Published: 13 Mar 2019

ABSTRACT

F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby (1925) is often referred to as one of the best exemplification of the Jazz Age or the Roaring Twenties. The wealthy Gatsby is the American dream incarnate and his parties exhibit the enthusiasm of the 1920's. The Roaring Twenties also propagated the feminine ideal of the "new woman" who could defy the norms of patriarchy. However, even with the emergence of the "new woman" the inequities did not cease to exist. This paper analyses how The Great Gatsby is essentially written from a man's perspective and how it presents women as objects of ornamental importance to men and as inferior beings. Fitzgerald blatant sexism is voiced through the narrator Nick Carraway when he says "Dishonesty in a woman is something you never blame deeply. . . ." In the novel patriarchal order categorizes women either as "Madonna" or as "whore" based on their submission to or rebellion against, the rules of patriarchy. This paper focuses on how the representation of women in literature aims at providing "the role models which indicate what constitutes acceptable versions of the feminine and legitimate female goals and aspirations" (Barry 117). The paper through Fitzgerald's novel illustrates how women like Daisy internalize the norms and values of patriarchy that emphasize the superiority of men. Daisy on the birth of her daughter says as if to reaffirm the inferior status of women "All right, I'm glad it's a girl. And I hope she'll be a fool—that the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool". The paper analyses how women have been constructed in The Great Gatsby and reaffirms Simone DeBeaviour's statement "one is not born but becomes a woman".

KEYWORDS: *Patriarchy, Gender, Women, New Woman, Feminism*

INTRODUCTION

The Great Gatsby (1925) exemplifies the power of the American Dream with its promise of upward mobility and happiness, regardless of where one was placed on the social ladder. The story is set in "the Roaring Twenties, or the Jazz Age, a term coined by Fitzgerald" (Tyson 121), almost a decade after World War I. A central concern of the novel is how the American Dream motivated people to succeed through Machiavellian means. Another turning point in American history was the grant of suffrage to American women in 1920 and this led to several changes. Women began to move freely in public and the dress code also underwent a change:

Before the war, standard dress for women included long skirts, tightly laced corsets, high-buttoned shoes, and long hair demurely swept up onto the head. A few years after the war, skirts became shorter, laced corsets began to disappear,

modern footwear frequently replaced high-buttoned shoes, and “bobbed” hair became the fashion for young women.”(Tyson 121).

These changes were understood as consequential to the grant of suffrage to women and manifested in the concept of the “New Woman”. Gatsby’s parties mirror the Roaring twenties and the “new woman” is also part of the image. However, the inequities did not cease to exist and this “new woman” was not welcome in the old patriarchal set up. The portrayal of women in literature is a form of “socialization since it provides the role models which indicate to women and men, what constitutes acceptable versions of the feminine and legitimate female goals and aspirations” (Barry 117).

In *The Great Gatsby* Fitzgerald unfolds a plot dominated by patriarchy. The male characters are staunch patriarchs and the female characters are defined, represented and act out roles determined by patriarchal discourse. The events in the novel unravel patriarchal suppression of women and categorize them either as “Madonna” or “whore based on their submission to or rebellion against patriarchal norms. Feminist criticism investigates how literary works augment psychological and socio-cultural oppression of women. Men are always defined as strong, rational and decisive; while terms like emotional, lack and submissive are used for women. Feminists believe:

These gender roles have been used very successfully to justify inequities . . . Patriarchy is thus, by definition, sexist, which means it promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men. This belief in the inborn inferiority of women is a form of what is called biological essentialism because it is based on biological differences between the sexes that are considered part of our unchanging essence as men and women. (Tyson 85)

Patriarchy fails to recognize the fact that women are not born feminine and that they are indoctrinated into accepting and acting out submissive and passive roles. Patriarchal forces view the submissive attitude of women as a virtue and propagate the idea that patient and passive women will be suitably rewarded. In popular fairy tales the reward usually involves the “they lived happily ever after ending” to a woman’s story. However, happiness is guaranteed only to women who submit to patriarchal norms. Good women adhere to the rules of patriarchy and bad women violate the rules:

These two roles—also referred to as “madonna” and “whore” or “angel” and “bitch”—view women only in terms of how they relate to the patriarchal order. . . “Bad girls” . . . they’re sexually forward in appearance or behaviour. . . they. . . are used and then discarded because they don’t deserve better. . . They’re not good enough to bear a man’s name or his legitimate children. That role is appropriate only for a properly sub- missive “good girl.” The “good girl” is rewarded for her behavior by being placed on a pedestal by patriarchal culture. However, patriarchy objectifies both “bad girls” and “good girls.” That is, patriarchy treats women, whatever their role, like objects: like objects, women exist, according to patriarchy, to be used without consideration of their own perspectives, feelings, or opinions (Tyson 89-90).

The Great Gatsby is essentially written from a man’s perspective and it presents women as objects of ornamental importance to men and as inferior beings. The novel also categorizes women as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ based on how religiously they follow the precepts laid down by the patriarchy. Though *The Great Gatsby* interests the readers as a text documenting the American dream, on close introspection it is evident that the novel also serves to orient and indoctrinate women to submit to socially accepted gender roles. It also shows the pitfalls of going against patriarchy and essentially treats women as objects of male gaze. A cursory reading of the novel points out that there are three or four women characters. However, when one takes

a closer look the number of women in the novel is countless. Women who attend Gatsby's parties "whose dress and activities, identify them as incarnations of the New Woman, and they are portrayed as clones of a single, negative character type: shallow, exhibitionist, revolting, and deceitful" (Tyson 122). These women do not exist as individuals and function only as decorative items as is seen in reference to a character named McClenahan who is always accompanied by four girls to Gatsby's parties. These girls "were never quite the same ones in physical person, but they were so identical one with another that it inevitably seemed they had been there before"(68). The ornamental significance of women makes them a mere commodity and therefore it hardly matters who attends the party with McClenahan. As long as they are women, McClenahan's purpose is solved.

Apart from the countless women of Gatsby's parties there are three women characters who are drawn in detail by Fitzgerald. The fact that the novel was written around the time when the concept of the 'new woman' was emerging the three women appear to be the realizations of the "new woman". Yet the existence and visibility of Daisy Buchanan, Myrtle Wilson and Jordan Baker is determined by patriarchy which points out to the fact that despite the supposed empowerment the inequities did not cease to exist. The plot carefully documents how these three variants of the "new woman" try to rebel against the patriarchal authority and how each one of them is punished/relegated to the peripheral space by the forces of patriarchy.

Daisy Buchanan is the wife of Tom Buchanan, a wealthy, arrogant womanizer. The couple has a daughter and lives in the East Egg. Myrtle Wilson the wife of a garage owner is Tom's mistress and Jordan Baker is Daisy's old friend and a golfer by profession. The narrator of the story is Nick Carraway, who happens to be Daisy's cousin. Nick is also Gatsby's neighbour and is instrumental in bringing together the old lovers Gatsby and Daisy. Right from the first chapter gender roles in the novel are firmly emphasised. Nick Carraway on his first visit to his cousin Daisy remarks:

Across the courtesy bay the white palaces of fashionable East Egg glittered along the water, and the history of the summer really begins on the evening I drove over there to have dinner with the Tom Buchannan's. Daisy was my second cousin once removed, and I'd known Tom in college. And just after the war I spent two days with them in Chicago (8).

Though Daisy is Nick's cousin he does not say that he is going to visit Daisy as Tom Buchanan's presence has relegated her to the background. Tom Buchanan represents the patriarchal ideology in totality. Arrogant, dominating and capable of using force at the slightest provocation he dominates and oppresses both Daisy and Myrtle. Daisy has no existence of her own and she is defined in reference to her relation with Tom. The implication is this that once a woman gets married her own identity dissolves and she is known by the name of the man she is married to. Women are always defined in relation to the men they are associated with – father, brother, husband, son, etc.

When Nick finally arrives at "Tom Buchanan's", Daisy and Jordan fail to arrest his attention:

The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. They were both in white and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house. I must have stood for a few moments listening to the whip and snap of the curtains and the groan of a picture on the wall. Then there was a boom as Tom Buchanan shut the rear windows and the caught wind died out about the room, and the curtains and the rugs and the two young women ballooned slowly to the floor (10).

The material possessions of the room catch Nick's eye, though he notices the couch, the presence of women on it seemed to be "merely atmospheric, their bodies part of the decor"(Froehlich & Hazleton 87). Women in this passage come across only as decorative furniture. Amongst the three women in the novel, Daisy seems to have internalized the norms of patriarchy and she is a victim of her milieu heavily influenced by the importance given to socio-economic status in society. She has no power to control her life, all her "actions depicted in the story are seemingly being under the control of Tom. She is confined by Tom from developing her personhood. The story also reveals her inability to free herself from Tom's control . . . Daisy is fully aware of the oppression which she experiences. She realizes that she is oppressed by her surroundings"(Affronia & Hendrarti 7)

Daisy has internalized patriarchal dictates to such an extent that she has no will to question the male authority. She believes that it is destined that women have to suffer and the best course is accepting her destiny. She recounts about the birth of her daughter:

Listen, Nick; let me tell you what I said when she was born. Well, she was less than an hour old and Tom was God knows where. I woke up out of the ether with an utterly abandoned feeling and asked the nurse right away if it was a boy or a girl, and so I turned my head away and wept. 'All right.' I said, 'I'm glad it's a girl. And I hope she'll be a fool—that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool.' (20)

The implication of the quoted lines is that Daisy foresees her daughter's life as a replica of her experiences. Daisy is aware that her daughter's identity and position in society will also be constructed in the patriarchal imagination and the only option open to her is to be a "beautiful little fool" (20).

Daisy has been portrayed by Fitzgerald without providing her with any substance and reduced "to a charming wraith, a being who exists only as a fragile veneer, a shining radiance of Gatsby's construction, the centerpiece of Tom's wealth, rather than a woman with a personality of her own. Fitzgerald allows Daisy to exist only in the images men create of her"(Strba 45). Daisy does not exist as an individual and is always defined in relation to the men in her life be it Tom or Gatsby. It is said that in Fitzgerald's writings women were willfully "marginalized into purely personal areas of experience" (Strba 41). Fitzgerald said that *The Great Gatsby* "contains no important woman character" (qtd. in Turnbull 197). He gives them "secondary roles in the story, which keeps with the traditional view that women do not have a voice"(Wrenn 12). Patriarchy maintains that women are destined for passive roles as they are indecisive and cannot exhibit control. Myrtle's death at the hands of Daisy bears two implications; the first that when women gain empowerment (driver's seat) the only consequence can be a disaster and the other is that rebellion against patriarchy leads to punishment. Daisy and Myrtle indulge in adultery and both are punished; Myrtle through her death and Daisy's punishment is to remain caged in the loveless marriage with Tom.

Myrtle Wilson's illicit relationship with Tom Buchanan leads to her death. She violates the patriarchal gender code unabashedly by exhibiting her sexual choice. The readers are introduced to her through her telephone call which disturbs the serenity of the Buchanan household. The tension between the Buchanans becomes evident through Jordan Baker's pointed remark. "Tom's got some woman in New York", who hasn't "the decency not to disturb at dinner"(16). Though Myrtle has been open about her overt sexuality yet the patriarchal Tom controls her as well and also abuses her physically. Fitzgerald "in

the end makes Myrtle pay heavily for being openly sensualist”; whereas Tom goes Scottfree (Strba 44). Myrtle’s one adulterous relationship brings her death, whereas Tom’s numerous sexual relations are put to rest by moving to new locations. Women are not excused for their misconduct and Myrtle’s death with her breast hanging from her body serves as a warning to women not to defy patriarchal norms.

Another threat to patriarchy is the out and out ‘new woman’ Jordan Baker. Jordan is a typical male name; she plays golf and is also financially independent. Jordan “also has a different figure compared to other female characters in the story. Being described as having steady posture and small breast, she has a strong impression as being a man-like... is described for having resemble a cadet, a figure which is only compatible for men”(Affroni&Hendrarti 8). Patriarchy cannot accept women like her, Tom disapproves of her lifestyle, “They[her family] oughtn’t to let her run around the country this way...By God, I may be old-fashioned in my ideas, but women run around toomuch these days to suit me” (23). The irony is this that this sermonizing regarding how women should be controlled by their families comes from a notorious adulterer.

Nick Carraway also does not approve of Jordan Baker .Though he is romantically involved with her yet his attitude towards her is no different from Tom. He rejects Jordan Baker on the grounds of her lack of ethical considerations, “but his descriptions suggest a concealed source of antagonism: she is ‘unfeminine’, androgynous, more of a boy than a ‘lady’” (Strba 41). Nick refers to Jordan Baker when he says, “Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply” (48). But his statement pronounces all women as dishonest. Nevertheless, he does judge Jordan and casts her away in the end. Among the three women, Daisy is the lone survivor in the patriarchal set up- though at the cost of her free will.

Literature has been associated with transmitting values and culture of society. The orientation provided through literature, though subtle has wide ranging effects. Fitzgerald in the novel introduces the concept of “new woman” through the characters of Daisy, Myrtle and Jordan. However, he subtly hints that the “new woman” was not welcome in the patriarchal setup as the concept of “eternal feminine” still stimulated the patriarchal imagination. The ‘submissive’, ‘docile’, and ‘passive’ woman was ‘the woman’ acceptable to patriarchal societies. Women who threatened and questioned patriarchy would end up like the three women characters of *The Great Gatsby*.

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