

The Image of Women as Victims in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

Nouh Al-Guzo^{1*}.

¹Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 03 Nov 2020

Accepted 23 Feb 2021

Published 01 Apr 2022

*Corresponding author:

Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Email: drnouhlguzo@yahoo.com.

Abstract

This paper sheds light on the image of women as victims in the male-dominant society of America in the 1920s through a critical analysis of Francis Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby*. The three main female characters in the narrative—Daisy Buchanan, Myrtle Wilson, and Jordan Baker—are products of oppressive forces and are treated by powerful men as objects rather than as thoughtful beings. The belief held by these characters that marriage to wealthy men is one of the few options available for women to achieve success and happiness makes them victims of the advances of morally corrupt men who seek to oppress and control them. The realistic depiction of women in America during that time can be interpreted by feminists as a catalyst for change and a call to resist the patriarchal system and traditional gender roles.

Keywords: The Great Gatsby, Feminists, American, Patriarchal, Women, Men.

Francis Scott Fitzgerald's tragic novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925) records the economic prosperity of America's post-WWI as well as the exuberance and grandiose parties that were hallmarks of the American Society at that time. Susan Parr refers to the fact that Americans have been pursuing an unattainable dream and viewing America as the promised land of riches and success by arguing that "the vision of America as a New Eden was always and only an illusion" (1981, p. 673). Joyce Rowe also finds the narrative as "the most historically self-conscious consideration of American idealism and the social cost of its attempt to subdue the facts of history to the faith of myth" (1988, p. 100). Ross Posnock studies Fitzgerald's novel from a Marxist perspective as a work that criticizes the materialism of the age and argues that the narrator expresses "the novel's account of man's relation to society ... profoundly agrees with Marx's great discovery that it is social rather than individual consciousness that determines man's existence" (1984, p. 202). Critics like Jerome Mandel suggest that Fitzgerald used the elements of medieval romance in composing his novel, "we may never know the extent to which Fitzgerald conceived *The Great Gatsby* – either consciously or unconsciously – as the myth of America retold as medieval romance" (1988, p. 555). Peter Slater states that Fitzgerald explores the ethnic differences of the American culture through his use of racist attitudes, "a heightened awareness of ethnic differences does constitute a significant element in the book" (1973, p. 53). Feminists criticize the ill treatment of women to maintain patriarchal power and emphasize that women should receive equal opportunities to their male counterparts. This paper reads Fitzgerald's novel

from a feminist perspective and examines the image of women as victims who are treated as objects in a morally bankrupt and corrupt society.

Many feminists view male writers as misogynists who attempt to perpetuate the victimization and oppression of women through their writings. These feminists find women as susceptible to victimization in a patriarchal society that denies women their rights and treats them as inferior to men. Raymond Pfeiffer states, "I accept the charge widely made by feminist writers that there is a pervasive and significant sense in which women are oppressed in most societies throughout the world" (1985, p. 217). The oppression of women triggered the resistance of feminists who suggested that women should act collectively to challenge the norms of patriarchy and constant abuses of women. The portrayal of women as victims suggests "a view of the self as a primarily passive object or product of constraining forces, conditions, and motivations" (Chang, 1989, p. 536). Norma Profitt refers to the passivity and powerlessness of women in patriarchal society that presents "women not only as passive objects of abuse but as downtrodden and devoid of any ability to act on their own behalf" (1996, p. 26). This implies that women can be viewed as product of hostile environment and unjust forces that victimize and oppress them. Fitzgerald does not attempt to look down on women throughout his narrative, but rather to present a realistic depiction of the treatment of women in the capitalist American society of the 1920s that valued money and material goods over spirituality. Rena Sanderson speaks of Fitzgerald's view on women, "In Fitzgerald's mind, this young woman represented a new philosophy of romantic individualism, rebellion, and liberation, and his earliest writings enthusiastically present her as an embodiment of these new values" (2001, p. 143). Fitzgerald depicts the new values that the American society acquired in the 1920s and the impact of these values on the life of women.

Fitzgerald presents Daisy, a wealthy and aristocratic woman, as a victim of the moral decay and aggression of the upper-class society. Daisy prefers money and wealth to spiritual principles, and therefore marries the narrow-minded and cruel, Tom Buchanan, who is her equal of social standing. The Buchanans live in a palace in the luxurious and fashionable East Egg, a part of the town with denizens of inherited wealth. The narrator, Nick Carraway, describes the house of the Buchanans as a "Georgian Colonial mansion, overlooking the bay" (Fitzgerald, 2002, p. 4). The belief of Daisy that success and happiness can be attained through her marriage to a financially stable man makes her decide to marry the wealthy Tom. Nick explicitly refers to the emptiness of the life of Daisy and her dependence on marriage to give shape for her life,

Something within her was crying for a decision. She wanted her life shaped now, immediately – and the decision must be made by some force of love, of money, of unquestionable practicality – that was close at hand. That force took shape in the middle of spring with the arrival of Tom Buchanan. There was a wholesome bulkiness about his person and his position and Daisy was flattered. Doubtless there was a certain struggle and a certain relief. (p. 94)

It would be probably true to view Daisy as a shallow woman for choosing to marry Tom for money and social standing. This reminds us with the fact that marriage was one of the few options available for women to guarantee stability, as they were dependent on spouses for financial support. Susan Parr points out, "Daisy subscribes to the version of the dream that applies to women, that marriage to a successful man is not the symbol of success but success itself" (1981, p. 667). This could be the reason that makes Daisy decide to marry a wealthy man because she does not want to lose her social standing. Despite the fact the Daisy gains economic security and maintains her social status as an upper-class woman, she becomes a victim of the ruthlessness and infidelities of Tom, as he has extramarital affairs. Daisy describes the brutality of Tom through

showing her bruised pinkie finger to her cousin Nick, “That’s what I get for marrying a brute of a man, a great big hulking physical specimen of a –” (p. 8). Although Tom does not hurt Daisy physically through the rest of the novel, but this shows his violent character and the fact that he does not seem to be afraid of using physical strength to have control over others. Furthermore, this action reflects the stubborn nature of Tom as he never apologizes for Daisy after hurting her knuckle or shows any signs of regret.

Fitzgerald highlights throughout the narrative the moral decay of the American patriarchal society in 1920s that denies women their humanity and treats them as commodities. The fact that Daisy places high value on her corporeal presence in enchanting suitors, who give her a sense of security, could be a result of the oppression of women and treating them as thoughtless objects. Daisy attempts to dominate her suitors through her physical beauty and her habit to speak in a seductive way “was only to make people lean toward her” (p. 6). She seems to accept her passive role in society through drawing the attention of men to her “low, thrilling voice” (p. 6), rather than her words and thoughts. Patriarchal society seems to celebrate and present women as sexual beings through overlooking their intellectuality and not giving them the same opportunities as their male counterparts. Martha Easton points out, “female identity has been seen as inherently bodily and biological (and this view has been criticized as ‘essentialist’), as ideologically constructed, or as socially performed” (2012, p. 101). We could infer that the emphasis on the charming qualities of Daisy’s voice is a result of the awareness that her body and beauty cannot be separable from her female identity.

Daisy realizes that her marriage to Tom was faulty and that she submitted herself to the unwanted advances and violence of a careless man. Through her marriage to the wealthy Tom, Daisy learns that she can enjoy a beautiful and luxurious existence but not a happy and loving marriage. Daisy criticizes her society that seems to be ruled by patriarchy and declares after giving birth to her newborn girl that “I hope she’ll be a fool – that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool” (p. 11). Daisy seems to be aware of the limited options that are available for women in her patriarchal society and assumes that in order for her daughter to succeed, she has to play the role of “a beautiful little fool”, a role that she has already played with Tom. The fact that Daisy wants her daughter to be a fool implies that she is not happy and reveals cracks in her marriage, especially with the multiple affairs of Tom and his unfaithfulness that she can do nothing about it. The moment that Daisy learns that her newborn baby is a girl, she starts to cry because she understands that her patriarchal society does not take women seriously nor recognize their intellectuality. Therefore, Daisy wants her daughter to depend on her physical beauty rather than intellectuality to reach success. In fact, Daisy does not treat her daughter as a human being, but rather as a lovely object, bringing her out to her party guests to show off. When Daisy’s daughter says to her mother, “I got dressed before luncheon” (p. 72), Daisy answers in an excited manner, “That’s because your mother wanted to show you off” (p. 72). Fitzgerald condemns the patriarchal ideology that objectifies women and treats them as possessions of wealthy men. Judith Fetterley states that women are “symbolic of the power of moneyed men” (1978, p. 83) and this could be viewed in the novel as women value wealth and material goods over honesty and intellectuality. Lois Tyson also argues that women are treated as “commodities in a male-dominated market” (1994, p. 50) as well as passive victims of patriarchy.

Fitzgerald portrays the moral bankruptcy of patriarchy bound by no ethics and the new values that American society acquired after WWI. Women seem to be denied their full humanity in a society that attempts to maintain the traditional gender roles, and therefore treats women as

any nonhuman objects. Daisy in Fitzgerald's novel realizes that the only option available to her as a woman is to play the role of a wife through choosing among wealthy suitors. She becomes the object of love for both Tom and Jay Gatsby, the son of poor farmers and a self-made millionaire, who earned his money through his involvement with criminals. Tom and Gatsby struggle to possess and impress Daisy through their obscene wealth, ignoring the emotions of Daisy as a human being. The false pretense of Gatsby that he comes from a rich background and the fact that Daisy looks for a secure and comfortable life with a man of "old money" makes her choose Tom over Gatsby. The extravagant wedding of Daisy is described as follows,

In June she [Daisy] married Tom Buchanan of Chicago with more pomp and circumstance than Louisville ever knew before. He came down with a hundred people in four private cars and hired a whole floor of the Seelbach Hotel, and the day before the wedding he gave her a string of pearls valued at three hundred and fifty thousand dollars. (p. 47)

Daisy seems to be surrounded by men who attempt to sustain the patriarchal power structure and the traditional gender roles. Veronica Makowsky refers to America of the 1920s as a society controlled by the rules of patriarchy as she states, "autonomy was not really a viable choice for an upper-class young woman of the 1920s" (2011, p. 29). This could be the reason that makes Daisy play the part of a thoughtless woman and feel that security depends on her marriage to a wealthy man.

Daisy has been victimized and degraded as an object because of her disregard of the ethics and moral principles that should rule any relationship. Jerome Mandel describes the love of Gatsby to Daisy as "ideal and spiritual" (1988, p. 548); however, Gatsby does not prove to be better than the morally corrupt Tom through his constant attempts to objectify Daisy. Gatsby tries to impress Daisy through buying a mansion across a bay from her house and throwing expensive parties with the hope that she will "wander into one of his parties, some night" (p. 49). Gatsby feels triumphant when he invites Daisy to tour his mansion and she starts crying and sobbing after seeing his closet full of expensive shirts, "suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily. 'They're such beautiful shirts,' she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. 'It makes me sad because I've never seen such – such beautiful shirts before'" (p. 57). The sentimental reaction of Daisy makes Gatsby feel confident and victorious that he can possess and win Daisy back through his obscene wealth. Gatsby demands Daisy to renounce her love to Tom and when he insists, Daisy cries out to him, "Oh, you want too much" (p. 82). This implies that Gatsby views Daisy as an unreachable dream and an embodiment of beauty and wealth.

Many feminists like Pfeiffer and Donaldson believe that some men objectify women and treat them as inferior to enhance their social standing. Pfeiffer points out, "there have no doubt been some men who have consciously and actively sought to oppress women, and some who have done so in order to promote their own social positions" (1985, p. 217). Donaldson also suggests, "If he [man] could win the heart of the girl – especially the golden girl over whom hung an aura of money, beauty, and social position – surely that meant that he had arrived, that he belonged" (2012, p. 43). It would be true to say that Gatsby in Fitzgerald's novel struggles to possess Daisy because she provides him with the only access to the dominant class. Gatsby seems to be aware that Daisy cares about money and since he has succeeded in becoming a very wealthy person, he thinks that his dream would be complete with winning Daisy. The fact that Gatsby comes from a humble background and earns his wealth through participating in organized crime prevents members of the upper class from treating him as their equal and stops him from climbing the social ladder. Tom degrades and criticizes Gatsby on the basis of social class when he calls him, "Mr.

Nobody from Nowhere” (p. 81), and therefore destroys the dream of his rival because Daisy realizes that Gatsby will never be an equal to her.

The relationship of Tom with Myrtle Wilson, a lower-class woman who looks to improve her life through having an affair with Tom, represents an example of the ruthlessness of the upper-class society and their exploitation of the poor. Tom does not show any signs of respect to Myrtle or recognize her identity as a human being, but rather as an object to satisfy his desires. The constant attempts of Tom to dominate and oppress Myrtle can be viewed clearly after he breaks her nose when Myrtle insists on speaking his wife’s name at the wild party at their New York apartment. The aggression of Tom against Myrtle is described as follows, “Making a short deft movement Tom Buchanan broke her nose with his open hand. Then there were bloody towels upon the bathroom floor, and women’s voices scolding, and high over the confusion a long-broken wail of pain” (p. 23). The fact that Tom strikes his mistress across the face, breaking her nose, only for speaking the name of his wife reflects his scorn for the working class. Tom seems to be ashamed of having an affair with a lower-class woman and gets angry at Myrtle for reminding him with Daisy’s name, and therefore uses violence to stop her. Adam Meehan describes Tom as “a willful and domineering man who gets what he wants with money and muscles” (2014, p. 56). As a poor and helpless woman, Myrtle does not seem to have the power to object or stop the exploitation of Tom to her. This reminds us with the episode earlier in the novel when the upper-class woman Daisy resists Tom through repeating the word “hulking” (p. 8), a word that Tom does not like, and this shows her confidence and self-esteem. This reflects Tom’s awareness of the class differences and the substantial gulf that separates the upper class from the lower class.

Myrtle finds in her affair with the wealthy Tom an escape from the boredom and poverty that she lives with her husband George Wilson, a garage owner lives in the Valley of Ashes. Tom thinks it will be easy to manipulate and have control over a low-class woman like Myrtle through buying her inexpensive gifts. The naivety of Myrtle can be viewed through her belief that Tom will eventually divorce Daisy and rescue her from the miserable life with Wilson. She further accepts the invented story of Tom about the impossibility to divorce Daisy because “she’s a Catholic” (p. 21). Tom seems to be aware that Myrtle, as a powerless and poor woman, will not pose any threat to him and to his social status. So, he does not feel ashamed to have other lower-class mistresses and feels that they do not deserve his respect because they are socially inferior to him. Norma Profitt states that “women’s status as victims appears as fundamentally immutable” (1996, p. 26) because of the continued exploitation and objectification of women. Tom attempts to perpetuate patriarchy through victimizing and manipulating lower-class women whom he thinks will be powerless to resist his advances.

Fitzgerald presents Myrtle as a victim who seems to be caught between two aggressive societies – the upper class represented by Tom and the lower class represented by Wilson – that attempt to enslave and oppress her. While Tom dominates Myrtle with his money and rents her an apartment in New York, Wilson controls her and limits her freedom using physical force. Wilson locks his wife in her room after suspecting that she has an affair with another man, not realizing the impossibility of resolving the issue this way. No doubt that Wilson loves and idealizes Myrtle, and this could be the reason that makes him get devastated and attempts to stop the disloyalty of his wife by any means possible; however, he does not realize that Myrtle wants to escape the dreary life with him. Wilson tells his neighbor Michaelis after hearing the noise of Myrtle in the bedroom, “‘I’ve got my wife locked in up there,’ explained Wilson calmly. ‘She’s going to stay there till the day after tomorrow, and then we’re going to move away’” (p. 85). This implies that Wilson views

his wife as a property and that he has every right to control her while at the same time refuses to acknowledge her humanity. Feminists charge men as responsible for the victimization and oppression of women because they want to maintain their powerful role in society. Lenora Ucko attests that abused women “feel powerless against their mates’ aggression and physical power and experience psychological defeat” (1991, p. 414). Myrtle in Fitzgerald’s narrative experiences defeat through her tragic death by Gatsby’s car, driven by Daisy. Myrtle attempts to escape the physical violence and brutality of Wilson through running out in the road mistaking Gatsby’s yellow car for Tom’s and if the car will stop for her. The narrator describes the violent and degrading death of Myrtle as follows, “Myrtle Wilson, her life violently extinguished, knelt in the road and mingled her thick dark blood with the dust” (p. 86). Fitzgerald presents Myrtle as a victim of the strict patriarchal system that degrades women and seems to draw the sympathy of the readers to the tragic fate of a lower-class woman like Myrtle who loses her life seeking a better life. Feminists like Linda Pelzer criticize the ill treatment of women to sustain patriarchal power, “In Fitzgerald’s novel, women remain prisoners of patriarchy . . . commodities to be possessed and discarded by brutish louts” (2003, p. 127). The oppression of women has always acted as a catalyst for reform to achieve equality between women and men and resist gender inequity.

Jordan Baker, a friend of Daisy, represents another female victim in Fitzgerald’s narrative and an epitome of the Jazz Age, a time in which women were searching for success through a life of exuberance. Fitzgerald depicts Jordan as a professional golfer and an object of Nick’s love, who attempts to lure men through her corporeal presence. The portrayal of Jordan as dishonest and amoral character emphasizes the patriarchal ideology that did not take women seriously in 1920s America. Nick calls Jordan an “incurably dishonest” and that she “instinctively avoided clever shrewd men” (p. 36) after hearing a rumor about her cheating in a golf tournament at Westchester. He dismisses the rumor about Jordan’s lack of integrity with the sexist statement, “dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply” (p. 36). The tolerance of Jordan’s deception reflects Nick’s prejudice as he perceives women as immature, and therefore they should not be held accountable for their actions.

In contrast to the deception and dishonesty of Jordan, Nick professes that he represents the voice of integrity and moral conscience. Only few paragraphs after dismissing the amorality of Jordan, Nick deems himself as “one of the few honest people that I have ever known” (p. 37). The fact that Nick presents himself as judgmental in his view of women makes him not much different from the corrupt patriarchal world surrounding him. Veronica Makowsky points out, “it is tempting to defend Jordan by simply pointing out that Nick, fearing commitment, may be looking for a rationale for his abrupt jilting of Jordan at the end of the novel” (2011, p. 32). It would be true to say that the desire of Nick to present Jordan as dishonest could be a way not to acknowledge her affection and commit to a relationship with her. Nick ignores the constant pleas of Jordan for commitment and stability, and therefore breaks up with her because he believes that she does not act as trustworthy. Jordan blames Nick for breaking off the relationship with her and condemns him as irresponsible, “nevertheless you did throw me over ... you threw me over on the telephone. I don’t give a damn about you now, but it was a new experience for me and I felt a little dizzy for a while” (p. 111). Nick, like all male characters in the novel, stands for the injustice of the patriarchal system that victimizes and refuses to acknowledge the full humanity of women.

In conclusion, Fitzgerald presents throughout his narrative a realistic portrayal of the oppression and victimization of women in America 1920s. He also highlights the injustice and violence of the patriarchal system that views women as possessions and treats them as inferior to

men. Female characters in Fitzgerald's novel submit themselves to amoral and abusive men because of their belief that happiness and security can be achieved through their relationships with financially stable men. The awareness of female characters that society refuses to deal with them as intellectual beings and that their identities cannot be separable from their physical beauty makes them search for success through attracting wealthy men. Male characters treat women as objects of desire and attempt to control them through wealth and physical strength. Fitzgerald criticizes the moral corruption and decay of patriarchy that degrades women and overlooks their intellectuality to maintain the female gender roles. Feminists today have already succeeded in establishing equality between genders through empowering women and rejecting all forms of prejudice women encounter.

Conflicts of interest statements

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

References

- Chang, D. B. (1989). An abused spouse's self-saving process: A theory of identity transformation. *Sociological Perspectives*, 32(4), 535–550.
- Donaldson, S. (2012). *Fool for love: F. Scott Fitzgerald*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Easton, M. (2012). Feminism. *Studies in Iconography*, 33, 99–112.
- Fetterley, J. (1978). *The resisting reader*. Indiana University Press.
- Fitzgerald, F. S. (2002). *The great Gatsby*. York Press.
- Makowsky, V. (2011). Bad driving: Jordan's tantalizing story in *the great Gatsby*. *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, 9, 28–40.
- Mandel, J. (1988). The grotesque rose: Medieval romance and *the great Gatsby*. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 34(4), 541–558.
- Meehan, A. (2014). Repetition, race, and desire in *the great Gatsby*. *Journal of Modern Literature*, 37(2), 76–91.
- Parr, S. R. (1981). Individual responsibility in *the great Gatsby*. *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 57(4), 662–680.
- Pelzer, L. C. (2003). Beautiful fools and hulking brutes: F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The great Gatsby* (1925). *Women in Literature: Reading through the Lens of Gender*, 127–129.
- Pfeiffer, R. S. (1985). The responsibility of men for the oppression of women. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 2(2), 217–229.
- Posnock, R. (1984). A new world material without being real: Fitzgerald's critique of capitalism in *the great Gatsby*. In S. Donaldson (Ed.), *Critical essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's The great Gatsby* (pp. 201–213). G. K. Hall.
- Profitt, N. J. (1996). "Battered women" as "victims" and "survivors": Creating space for resistance. *Canadian Social Work Review/Revue Canadienne de Service Social*, 23–38.
- Rowe, J. A. (1988). Equivocal endings in classic American novels: *The scarlet letter; Adventures of Huckleberry Finn; The ambassadors; The great Gatsby*. Cambridge University Press.

-
- Sanderson, R. (2002). Women in Fitzgerald's fiction. In R. Prigozy (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald* (pp. 143–163). Cambridge University Press.
- Slater, P. G. (1973). Ethnicity in *the great Gatsby*. *Twentieth Century Literature*, 19(1), 53–62.
- Tyson, L. (1994). *Psychological politics of the American dream: The commodification of subjectivity in twentieth-century American literature*. Ohio State University Press.
- Ucko, L. G. (1991). Who's afraid of the big bad wolf? Confronting wife abuse through folk stories. *Social Work*, 36(5), 414–419.