www.TLHjournal.com Literary Herald ISSN: 2454-3365
An International Refereed English e-Journal
Impact Factor: 2.24 (IIJIF)

The Lopsided American Dream: A Comparison of Jay Gatsby and Tom Buchanan in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

Iram Qureshi
Research Scholar (Integrated Ph.D.)
Department of English
University of Kashmir

Abstract:

The ethos of American dream can be conveniently traced back to the American Declaration of Independence, 1776. It patently stands for equality, liberty and a right to pursue happiness. However, the larger question remains how far are these goals actualized. Numerous writers have contested the spirit of American dream, among whom F. Scott Fitzgerald perhaps best depicts its decadence. The novel, *The Great Gatsby*, apart from depicting how affluence has corroded the essence of the dream also lays bare how class consciousness has made inroads into a society which was envisioned to be essentially classless. Tom and Gatsby can be read as representative specimens of their class. Tom has an opulent lineage, and doesn't seem to possess a high work ethic, while Gatsby, in order to realize his dream resorts to illegal means to accumulate wealth and reunite with Daisy. However, he cannot quite bridge the gap between him and Daisy and utterly fails in the pursuit of his dream.

Key Words: American dream, wealth, disillusionment, moral failure, class consciousness.

www.TLHjournal.com Literary Herald ISSN: 2454-3365
An International Refereed English e-Journal
Impact Factor: 2.24 (IIJIF)

The Lopsided American Dream: A Comparison of Jay Gatsby and Tom Buchanan in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

Iram Qureshi
Research Scholar (Integrated Ph.D.)
Department of English
University of Kashmir

America has been reckoned to be a land of unparalleled opportunities and a "dream nation" for thousands of people living across the globe. What drives this yearning is the assurance of living an ideal life if one works industriously for it. American dream thus represents an egalitarian society wherein the chances of upward mobility cannot be thwarted by manmade barriers. James Truslow Adams, who is said to have coined the term "American Dream" in his book *The Epic of America* points out that American dream gave "hope of a better and richer life for all the masses of humble and ordinary folk who made the American nation" (363).

Jim Cullen elucidates:

> "The term seems like . . . the most immediate component of an American identity, a birthright far more meaningful and compelling than terms like "democracy," "Constitution," or even "the United States." (5)

In literature, American Dream has remained an engaging theme. Many American writers including F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mark Twain, Theodore Dreiser, Edward Albee, John Steinbeck, Toni Morrison, Arthur Miller, Sinclair Lewis, Hunter S. Thompson etc., have examined it thoroughly vis-à-vis the social, political, cultural and economic milieu of America.

F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) is one of the most prominent writer of [as Fitzgerald termed it] "the Jazz age". He finished four novels: *This Side of Paradise* (1920), *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and *Tender Is the Night* (1934). *The Great Gatsby* can easily be called his *magnum opus* and a master piece. The novel mirrors the decade of 1920s, which witnessed both the First World War (1914) as well as the Great Depression (1929). However, at the same time, it has endured as a great piece of literature, so much so that many critics point out that it echoes the contemporary socio-economic landscape of America. It is hence not surprising that although the novel received mixed reviews at the time of its publication and not all the copies published were sold, yet it survived the near obscurity to be later consensually reviewed as a novel with a lasting impact. Beuka states:

> The novel's aura of glamour, its modern romanticism, and its questioning of core American values have made it, in the eyes of many, the quintessential American novel. (1)

Not only does the work offer a close scrutiny of the American dream throughout the story, even the characters can be read as representative specimens of their class. The narrator Nick, who visits West Egg delineates how the residents of East Egg differ from the residents of West Egg. While the residents of West Egg are less fashionable and more significantly are the *nouveau riche*, the people of East egg have been well-off since generations. Tom Buchanan who is the husband of Daisy (Nick's cousin) resides in East Egg. Tom, even at a premature stage of life possesses almost everything that the American dream promises.

> [Tom] had been . . . one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterwards savors of anti-climax. His family were enormously wealthy -- even in college his freedom with money was a matter of reproach. . . (11)

Tom exhibits supercilious conduct which is the consequence of his keen consciousness of the fact that he belongs to the "old money" class of people of America, to the distinguished class of society. Not only his demeanour but the surly tone of his voice bespeaks of his haughty disposition. Although Tom approves of Nick, his responses to Nick give him an impression that Tom claims admiration from him. Proud of being a resident of East Egg, Tom is also concerned about the possible subversion of the white race which he believes ought to be the elite and ruling class. This is in sharp contrast with the belief of inclusiveness and equal chances of advancement for everyone that forms the core of the American Dream. Thus, like many Americans, he abhors the notion that people from other races or classes can excel the already dominant group which leaves very little scope for people like Gatsby to prosper or to be deemed equally acceptable in society. He categorizes himself as Nordic, favours white supremacy and demeans the contribution of every other group. Tom in his conversation with Nick refers to a book and states:

> If we don't look out the white race will be –utterly submerged. . . . We're Nordics . . . And we've produced all the things that go to make a civilization – oh, science and art and all that. (18)

Jay Gatsby [Nick's neighbour in West Egg] belongs to the "new money" class of people. The character of Gatsby has a certain historical context in America.

> On January 15 1919, Congress ratified the Eighteenth Amendment, which prohibited the manufacture and sale of alcoholic drinks, and the Volstead Act put it into force. But Prohibition, an outgrowth of old American Puritanism . . . backfired dramatically. It fuelled the rapid growth of organized crime networks engaged in bootlegging—the making and selling of illegal alcoholic drinks—and fostered the emergence of wealthy

> and powerful gangsters who—like Gatsby—were also active in other criminal fields, such as gambling and bond fraud, and who aspired to social status. (Tredell 10)

Although born underprivileged, Gatsby is ambitious and as Bloom rightly states, "Unlike all the other characters Nick met, Gatsby had hope" (24). Hence, having very few prospects in life, he gets involved in illegal means to achieve his objectives. He purchases a house in West Egg and hosts grand parties to attract interest of Daisy, who he wanted to marry but eventually couldn't on account of his inferior financial status. As she lives across the dock, in East Egg, he is hopeful that the parties will kindle her curiosity and he can thus flaunt his newly acquired wealth to win her over. It is pertinent to mention that as his past is obscure, people at Gatsby's party make numerous speculations about him and many of them opine that he has some sort of criminal background. Thus, the source of money [on which he can't come clear] is crucial in determining the response and acceptability in society. He concocts stories about his lineage and upbringing. He conveys to Nick:

> I am the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West—all dead now. I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford. . . . My family all died and I came into a good deal of money. (64)

The words "some wealthy people", "all dead now" sound dubious to Nick as well as to the reader, nevertheless, it more importantly reveals how keen he is to establish his image as someone who has an affluent background and not be regarded as a person who has evolved from rags to riches. Although Gatsby has ample wealth to lead a splendid life, yet his wealth does not possess the grandiose that Tom's wealth possesses. Bloom states:

> He [Gatsby] is not in possession of the bearing and mores to handle wealth to which so many of Daisy's suitors were born. His house, his clothing, his car—all scream of his "new" wealth, making his wealth less alluring than that of "old money". (20)

Gatsby himself is quite conscious of the dissimilarity. The conversation he has about Daisy with Nick validates it. Nick narrates:

> 'She's got an indiscreet voice.' I remarked. 'It's full of—' I hesitated.
> 'Her voice is full of money,' he said suddenly.
> That was it. I'd never understood it before. It was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it. . . High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl. (115)

Gatsby's response bespeaks of the deep bias which he has towards his own money. He seems to revere the stature associated with Daisy's wealth, a stature which he does not associate with his own. Nick's analogy of linking Daisy to "king's daughter" reinforces the loftiness associated

with hereditary wealth. When Gatsby arranges for Daisy to visit his house in West Egg, Nick narrates:

> I think he [Gatsby] revalued everything in his house according to measure of response it drew from her [Daisy's] well-loved eyes. Sometimes too, he stared around at his possessions in a dazed way, as though in her actual and astounding presence none of it was any longer real. (88)

As if unsure of his success in life, Gatsby reassesses his possessions through Daisy's eyes. He is more than conscious of her reaction towards everything he owns to the extent that Gatsby later dismisses all of his servants as Daisy had disapproved them. He says to Nick that he "wanted somebody who wouldn't gossip" (109). He thus goes out of the way to ensure her appreciation.

Tom is full of contempt for Gatsby and all the "new money" people, which is evident from his conversation about Gatsby's background with Nick:

> "Who is this Gatsby anyhow?" demanded Tom suddenly. "Some big bootlegger?"
> "Where'd you hear that?" I inquired.
> "I didn't hear it. I imagined it. A lot of these newly rich people are just big bootleggers, you know". (104)

He calls Gatsby's car a "curious wagon" (115), thereby asserting Gatsby's inferiority through his choice of car. Quite contrary to Tom, who loves his wealth dearly, Gatsby is not avidly attached to it. He uses it as a passage to influence Daisy:

> Had he loved money for its own sake, and not as a means to win Daisy Buchanan, Gatsby would have been a success, like Daisy's husband Tom, a racist, moneyed brute. (Fear, and McNeil 216)

Tom has a mistress, Myrtle Wilson, who does not belong to the class that he does. Paradoxically, he is flabbergasted at Daisy's relation with Gatsby. He is contemptuous about the idea that a man born in low class can be associated with a high class woman, thus exposing the double standards he has with respect to himself and Gatsby. While Tom has surreptitious relations with women even after his marriage to Daisy, Gatsby on the other hand opts for a more restrained life: "He [Gatsby] knew women early, and since they spoiled him he became contemptuous of them. . . ." (95). However, it is ironic that despite a more ethical approach, Gatsby undergoes a catastrophe. When confronted with a choice between Gatsby and Tom, Daisy opts for a continuation of her married life with Tom resulting in a huge setback for Gatsby. On another level Gatsby can even be said to be more moral than Tom in terms of conduct. Being contemptuous of lower class, Tom is supercilious with them. He reacts haughtily to George Wilson [Myrtle's husband] when he stops at his garage to fill gasoline on the way to town.

> 'Let's have some gas!' cried Tom roughly. 'What do you think we stopped for—to admire the view?' (117)

Gatsby abstains from furious reaction when Tom provokes him over his "bootlegging" profession in the town. He is courteous towards the reporter who visits him:

> An ambitious young reporter from New York arrived one morning at Gatsby's door and asked him if he had anything to say.
> 'Anything to say about what?' inquired Gatsby politely. (94)

Despite having a more humane disposition Gatsby faces the brunt of being more or less an outcast.
When Daisy accidently kills Myrtle, Gatsby is willing to take the blame of the mishap. What comes to the fore after the incident is how strikingly similar Tom and Daisy are. Perhaps these lines from the novel best describe a privileged class that is immune to the sufferings of other classes:

> Daisy and Tom were sitting opposite each other at the kitchen table. . . . He was talking intently across the table. . . . Once in a while she looked up at him and nodded in agreement. . . . There was an unmistakable air of natural intimacy about the picture, and anybody would have said they were conspiring together. (138)

When Wilson leaves in pursuit of the murderer of his wife, Tom directs him to Gatsby's mansion, where he shoots Gatsby. The small funeral that Nick can stage for Gatsby depicts the loss of basic human values as even the closest associates of Gatsby do not turn up for the cremation.

Tom thus lives a fulfilling life without endeavoring for it, while as Gatsby has to strive quite hard. At one point of time it seems he has come close realizing his aspirations. While Daisy is still at Gatsby's home, Nick examines the visage of Gatsby, he describes the numerous feelings going through him:

> He had been full of the idea so long, dreamed it right through the end, waited with his teeth set, so to speak at an inconceivable set of intensity (89)

The "idea" here stands for his long cherished dream of meeting Daisy, yet on another level it symbolically represents the intense desire of fulfilment of the American dream. Although it seems to Nick that Gatsby does not retain the same intensity later, yet the fact remains that his dream remains unfulfilled which is quite synonymous with the failure of American dream predominantly for the unprivileged or underprivileged part of society.

Works Cited:

Adams, James Truslow. *The Epic of America*. 1931. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2012. Print.

Beuka, Robert. *American Icon*: *Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby in Critical and Cultural Context*. Rochester: Camden House, 2011. Print.

Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Guides*: *F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*. New York: Chelsea House, 2006. Print.

Cullen, Jim. *The American Dream*: *A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*. New York: Oxford UP, 2003. Print.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. 1925. England: Penguin, 1990. Print.

Tredell, Nicholas. *Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*: *A Reader's Guide*. London: Continuum Group, 2007. Print.