

**UNMASKING HISTORICAL SUBSTRATA: NEXUS BETWEEN  
INSEPARABILITY OF HISTORY AND MAKING OF *THE GREAT  
GATSBY***

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**Abstract**

Acknowledging a seasoned axiom of relationality that essentially normativizes that the text, especially literary one, is eventual product of the time in history, a historical and critical re-reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) significantly manifests the nexus between the production of the novel and the American society and its history. Historical events that occurred in his time have markedly constituted and shaped the larger and dominant narrative of this extraordinary fiction work of the first-quarter of the twentieth century of America. By disinterring those watershed events, it is to illustrate that how historical vicissitudes and subsequent outcomes of the particular time in American history led to nucleation of the provenance of the novel and its themes.

**Key words-** *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald, America, First World War, Afro-American, Jazz, and Intertextuality

This paper intends to identify, foreground and analyse the historical aspects of Francis Scott Fitzgerald's magnum opus *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Woven intricately against the backdrop of several historical events of the first quarter of the twentieth century, the novel characteristically embodies the result, impact and importance of a series of events that either directly or obliquely contributed in shaping, making and enactment of this immortal American masterpiece of fiction. It is argued that history has copiously contributed to the writing of *Gatsby* since several references and allusions in the text are adroitly embedded in historical developments of that time.

The novel embodies a plethora of themes- the chasm between social classes, the rise of economy, the engagement with the World War I, the assertion of the Black power (Afro-American community), the development of various industries and spread of technologies, and the status of women, etc. With the modernism ushered in, America and its society underwent a multitude of vicissitudes that are well reflected in *Gatsby*. Consequently, the course of American history also took a substantially different route that generously provided vast materials the contemporary writers to produce works like *The Great Gatsby*. The paper tries to examine how those materials and events from the immediate past which spread the first two and half decades of the last century are worked out to shape various aspects of the novel. In other words, it attempts to contextualize and situate *Gatsby* in the tradition of history so as to underline the fact that the literary text shares an organic, symbiotic and unalienable bond with history.

### **The Great War**

George Orwell said, “If the war didn’t happen to kill you, it was bound you to start thinking<sup>1</sup>”. Often distant and unprepared for the war, America managed to maintain its neutrality to it by the then President Woodrow Wilson for nearly two and half years. But the United States declared war on Germany on 6 April 1917, “...That the state of war between the United States and the Imperial German Government, which has thus been thrust upon the United States, is hereby formally declared<sup>2</sup>...” Resultantly, it led to mass recruitment of American young males as soldiers in the first World War to fight against the enemy forces. Those young men fought against European forces at different centres across the Atlantic. Thus, twenty one year old Fitzgerald-who belonged to the middle class background showed his keen interest in joining the war in October 1917. His decision obtrusively brought a great deal to his works.

With the entry of the United States into the war, Fitzgerald made his way to join the Army after six months of the declaration. His participation and experience in the war cardinally contributed to draw the contour of *Gatsby*. The young protagonist Jay Gatsby, like Fitzgerald himself, “...was in the American army during the war” (*The Great Gatsby*, 35) that sets and decides rest of his action and aim in his life. It can be argued that the novel contains some autobiographical elements and thus, a wonderful romantic love story- both Fitzgerald and Zelda<sup>3</sup> on the one hand and Gatsby and Daisy on the other- is skilfully re-created against the backdrop of the war. Perhaps, there is thin possibility that the name of Camp Taylor- where Gatsby comes in contact with Daisy Fay (later Buchannan) and he falls in love with her, may indirectly refer to Camp Sheridan which was the rendezvous for Fitzgerald and Zelda.

The World War I was the first ever major international crisis America had ever encountered before. In fact, it drastically brought out several social (ethnic black population), economic (share market, weapons and automobile industries) and political (women endowed adult franchise) changes. These transformations in turn, transported the nation to essentially rich and wealthy era that may be referred to as “New Era” or “Roaring Twenties”. Neil Wynn while describing the war as a watershed event in American history, remarks, “...the prewar era of

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<sup>1</sup> George Orwell. *Coming Up for Air* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950). 144. Google Book Search. Over Here: The First World War and American Society.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nationalcenter.org/DeclarationofWWI.html>

<sup>3</sup> In June, 1918, Fitzgerald was transferred to Camp Sheridan near Montgomery, Alabama, where he met and fell in love with Zelda Sayre, a southern beauty. (Magill’s Survey of American Literature, 777)

political engagement, idealism and reform known as “progressivism” separated by World War I from the materialism, conservatism, and disengagement of the “prosperous” 1920s. To many postwar observers and later historians, the entry of the United States into the European conflict in 1917 marked not just a dramatic departure in foreign relations, but also the end of an era of reform.” (xxvii, Wynn) Hence, *Gatsby* represents the essence of the period through its kaleidoscopic portrayal of different classes in American society, materialistic attitude of its people and an absence of moral and idealistic force. For instances, the grand showy parties hosted by Gatsby, Daisy’s materialistic obsession with wealth, because “Her voice is full of money” (96), Tom’s adulterous adventure with Myrtle Wilson, Gatsby’s passionate “amoral” love for Daisy, etc. extensively illustrate the enormous impact of and dynamic relationship with the war on the production of the novel.

### **The Rise of the Coloured**

It was evident that the war had created a grave dearth of youth power at home, because most of them were abroad on different fronts. The developments of various industries-automobile, communication and weapons necessitated the recruitment of women and Afro-American workers. Thus, the commonplace presence of the new ethnic community that is negroes gave impetus to the rise of their power, though they faced racial discriminations and became the prey to the capitalist economy. Nicholas Tredell in his *Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby* (2008) highlights the point, “The anxiety about ethnic others which issued in such legislation as well as in more overt racist attitudes in evident in *Gatsby* in two of its white Anglo-Saxon male protagonists: Tom and Nick.” (10) The conversation between these two characters in the beginning chapter overtly expose the fact of racial remarks against the black people. Tom feels threatened of their privileges as the white race and considers the superiority of his race should be maintained. Referring to Goddard’s *The Rise of the Coloured Empires* he says, “The idea is if we don’t look out the white race will be-will be utterly submerged. It’s all scientific stuff; it’s been proved....It’s up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have controlled of things. (*Gatsby*, 10-11). The white race-centric idea of controlling, making and protecting civilization became the object of critique and the motif of the discourse in Fitzgerald’s view on racial prejudices.

After the war ended and those soldiers returned to America-Gatsby and Nick for examples, they were rendered unemployed. Consequently, there were racial riots<sup>4</sup> one after another between the white and the black, but in most of the cases the black deaths were more in numbers. The immediate reasons for those tragic incidents can firmly be associated with the patriarchal ideology of purity of race (prohibiting intermarriage of races and Nordic race superiority) and capitalist mindset of maximum privileges (the rise of the underclass). Elizabeth Preston in her article “Implying Authors in *The Great Gatsby*” argues, “Tom’s concerns about maintaining white privilege and prohibiting racial intermarriage reflect the traditional ideology of a patriarchal, capitalist society which depends for its privileges on an underclass of “others”-women, nonwhites.” (150) The novel also exhibits the sense of anti-Semitism when Meyer

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<sup>4</sup> Some examples in chronological orders- 2 July 1917 in East St. Louis, Illinois. Death-29 Afro-Americans and 8 whites; July, 1919 in Longview, Texas, 2African Americans died; 27 July 1919 in Chicago, 23 African Americans and 15 whites were dead; 1-5 January, 1923- A white mob murdered 8 African Americans in Rosewood, Florida. (Neil A Wynn’s A to Z)

Wolfshiem is introduced to Nick Carraway as “[A] small, flat-nosed Jew raised his large head and regarded me with two fine growths of hair which luxuriated in either nostrils. After a moment I discovered his tiny eyes in the half darkness.” (*Gatsby*, 55).

### **The Dry Years**

On 19 January, 1919, the Eighteenth Amendment of the constitution of the United States of America was ratified that prohibited the making and selling of the alcoholic drinks. It states in section I, “After one year from the ratification of this article the manufacture, sale or transportation of intoxicating liquors within, the importation thereof into, or the exportation thereof from the United States and all territory subject to the jurisdiction thereof for beverage purposes is hereby prohibited.” Thus, the rise of the organized crime of illegal manufacturing and selling liquors paved way for the bootlegging and in turn, there was a surge of illegal pool of unlimited wealth which is represented by the persona of Gatsby because “He’s a bootlegger”. (*Gatsby*, 48) Gatsby “...owned some drug-stores, a lot of drug-stores. (*Gatsby*, 87) and “[Y]ou can buy anything at a drug-store nowadays.” (*Gatsby* 96)

Though after fourteen years the Twenty-first Amendment<sup>5</sup> was brought to repeal the Eighteenth one, the initial years of ban fairly accelerated the proliferation of gangsters, crime and illegal amassing of wealth. Tredell accounts for the impact of the Prohibition in apt words. He writes, “... Prohibition, an outgrowth of old American Puritanism which was designed to create a sober and temperate society, 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.” ( 10) The dry years, therefore, caused the upward mobility to the ambitious people like Gatsby and Wolfshiem, because the upper crust of the society was recognized with the wealth and their extravagant life-style.

### **The Empowered Women**

Since the outbreak of the Great War and the following years, the role of American women drastically changed. They contributed in the making of the nation during the war period in lieu of the young males (who were overseas) of the society. Hence, their demand of equal was quickened in the aftermath of the War. The attitude towards women change after the war, because so many women excelled and outdid men by helping the war cause. Women’s war work strengthened the demand for political recognition. The then President Woodrow Wilson advocated women’s political right, “We have made partners of the women in this war; shall we admit them only to a partnership of suffering and sacrifice and toil and not to a partnerships of privilege and right?<sup>6</sup>” Finally, on the historic day of 26 August 1920, women of the United States got the right to vote when the Nineteenth Amendment<sup>7</sup> to the constitution of the nation was made.

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<sup>5</sup> Section 1. The Eighteenth article of amendment to the Constitution of the United States is hereby repealed.

<sup>6</sup> The quote is cited from the following web portal: <http://jarredjoly0.tripod.com/id3.html>

<sup>7</sup> The right to citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.

It would not be exaggeration to say that the entire plot of *Gatsby* revolves around the female protagonist Daisy. She enjoys an exalted position between two men- Tom and Gatsby, because she represents the frivolous and independent spirit attributed to women of the period. As a model of the capitalist upper class, the materialistic and indifferent attitude of Daisy towards Gatsby and her final choice of Tom reveal the fact of her callous exercise of free selection. Another woman of the novel, Jordan Baker invariably shows the frank and independence spirit of the era. She maybe supposedly identified with those kind of women who were called “new woman” in the 1920s. The presence of woman guests at Gatsby’s parties and their uncontrolled enjoyment and free-mixing with the opposite gender suggest an upgraded social status to women.

### **The Economic Boom**

The decade of 1920s is often considered the prosper period in the world history in general and in American history in particular. This postwar era was marked by a sudden swell in various industries and means of communication. The promotion of media, entertainment industry and consumerism led to the propriety of the nation. Economically, during this decade there was a great diffusion and use of automobile, telephone, motion pictures, electricity, unprecedented consumer demands and aspirations. Wynn quotes Fitzgerald’s view on the period, “The decade, known variously as the “Jazz Age,” “Roaring Twenties,” “Prosperity Decade,” and “New Era,” was depicted by one of its greatest chroniclers, the author F. Scott Fitzgerald, as “an age of miracles, an age of excess,” when “ a whole race was going hedonistic, deciding on pleasure.” The sudden growth of consumerism associated with the automobile industry, new electrical appliances, movies, radio and sport supported Fitzgerald’s view.” (Wynn, xxvii-viii) It can, therefore, be well asserted that Fitzgerald’s writing of *Gatsby* heavily hinges on the repository of that particular decade.

The novel amply shows the use of automobile, telephone, railways, and advertisement. All rich characters- Gatsby, Tom, Daisy, and Nick ( bond salesman) are practically shown using those luxuries of the modern age. Fitzgerald includes a lot of images in the novel so as to prove and define the mood of the decade. For examples- the limousine and Rolls-Royce cars, the aquaplanes, the telephone, the advertisement (the symbolic eyes of Doctor T J Eckleburg), etc. are employed to serve the taste of the period. The rise of the automobile could be associated with the Ford Assembly Line technique that revolutionized the industry and made cars ubiquitous. In the novel, George Wilson who murders Gatsby is an owner of the garage, “*Repairs, GEORGE B. WILSON. Cars bought and sold.*” (*Gatsby* 19) Finally, the death of Myrtle Wilson is caused by the car accident on a dusty and rough road. The narrator Nick is a commuter who travels his office in the train.

### **The Jazz Age**

At this point, it can be said that the novel brilliantly documents the transformation from a wartime economy to peacetime economy. Though the Great Depression<sup>8</sup> followed the subsequent decade, the industry and economic boom enormously contributed to growth of the art, culture and life-style of the period. Jazz music- the form of popular music emerged from the African American community and became widely popular in 1920s-is one of the best examples

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<sup>8</sup> The Great Depression was a severe economic depression that engulfed entire world economy during the years before World War II.



that America has ever produced. In one of the parties hosted by Gatsby, the jazz music is highlighted by the announcement of the orchestra leader, “At the request of Mr Gatsby we are going to play for you Mr Valdmir Tostoff’s latest work, which attracted so much attention at Carnegie Hall last May. If you read the papers you know there was a big sensation...The piece is known...as “Valdimir Tostoff’s Jazz History of the World.” (*Gatsby* 39-40) Thus, Tough it was limited to mainly among the young or literary circles, for the first time the white American adopted the culture of the African American. Fitzgerald named the period as “The Jazzed Age<sup>9</sup>.”

### **Intertextuality**

Intertextuality, in simple terms, refers to the ways, process and method that highlight the mutual dependence of literary texts for their meaning. Thus, it would be better to examine *Gatsby* for clearer and deeper meaning by situating and contextualizing with the literary tradition. It is argued that Fitzgerald seemed to get inspiration for *The Great Gatsby* from the great modernist work *The Waste Land* (1922) by T S Eliot, though he had his materials ready from the constantly changing American society during the Jazz Age. Gatsby’s death in his own swimming pool obliquely suggests the title of the section “Death by Water”. The symbol of the eyes of Doctor T J Eckleburg find their parallel in Eliot’s character Tiresias who witnesses the fall of order in social life of London. The theme of Eliot’s poem, it can be argued, foreshadows the moral bankruptcy that in turn, become the haunting theme of Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby*.

The narrative technique of *The Great Gatsby* has similarity with that of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*- the novels are written in the first person narrative. The judicious and balanced narrator Nick Carraway, it seems, finds his equivalent in Charles Marlow. Like Marlow, Nick is the reliable narrator with refined moral fabric, since he often criticises the moral bankruptcy associated with capitalism. As the novel, like other literary works William Faulkner’s *Absalom Absalom!* and *Heart of Darkness*, deals with the issue of overt racism in covert manner of representation. For the better interpretation of this literary text, it is imperative to learn the literary tradition and the historical sense of the era. Hence, the inter-connections of *Gatsby* with as such texts provide better understanding.

### **Conclusion**

Though *Gatsby* is a tragic romantic novel, it leaves readers with a lot of questions-what is the criteria to judge a man (*Gatsby*): the wealth, the accomplishments or the social and racial superiority? Can the nation also be judge in the same manner as like the man? Many other themes in the novel such as failure of American Dream, the social classes, the problem of immigration, the popular entertainment, the growth of advertising and consumerism, the loosening of moral and sexual constrains are not discussed due to the vastness of the issues and delimitation of time and length of the paper. But the present interpretation of the novel-from the historical perspective- may help understand the text in better way. Since the interpretation of the historical texts and documents are not fixed and steady and the novel itself is a great work of literature, this analysis of *The Great Gatsby* may serve only as a mere and mild study in the direction of historical interpretation of the text.

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<sup>9</sup> Fitzgerald has a short story collection of eleven stories named as “Tales of the Jazz Age”.

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