INTERNATIONALIZING GATSBY AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

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Keywords: Gatsby, The American Dream,

Put simply, the American Dream is the ideal of opportunity for all, of advancement in a career of society without regard to one’s origin. The ideal was embodied in Thomas Jefferson’s “Declaration of Independence” as “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Jefferson was specifically reacting against the ‘closed’ European societies, where power and wealth were seen to be in the hands of an aristocratic governing elite. Thus the dream idealizes those who are ‘self-made’ as opposed to those who gain wealth and status through inheritance. One of the commonest critical approaches to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* has been to see it as a new myth of America, a myth partaking of the flavour of the 1920s. We are well aware that the term ‘Gatsby’ has become a generic term used in the American context to allude to a lot of things – the jazz age, the fabulous parties, the idea and pursuit of the American Dream, the democratic idealism when the mythic Gatsby is said to be “a son of God” having “risen from a Platonic conception of himself” and waiting eternally for the ‘green light’ to emanate from the end of Daisy’s dock. Gatsby is also implicitly linked to some of the other mythic figures of American literature who have similar status, in particular to James Fennimore Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, and to Mark Twain’s Huck Finn. These characters are supposedly mythical in that they manifest abstract ideals attractive to Americans – personal freedom, a self-reliant individuality, a belief in personal integrity rather than conformity. Also Fitzgerald’s myth seems to be about the decadence of American values. Gatsby’s dream, although it finally destroys him tragically, raises him above the other characters, giving him a dignity that other characters had never possessed.

The objective of my paper is to explore how the 1925 canonical American text, *The Great Gatsby*, a novel that T.S. Eliot announced to be “a remarkable book…the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James,” is read and interpreted many decades later.
through different multi-ethnic texts. Since intertextuality refers to far more than the ‘influences’ of writers on each other, it is also interesting because it shows how the iconic figure of Jay Gatsby, the protagonist has long ago transcended American shores to rest in various forms in the psyche of men and women from diverse cultures across the world. Apart from analyzing this beautifully written rags-to-riches narrative, my presentation deals with the use of the novel, the myth behind the American Dream of success, as well as the representation of the protagonist Gatsby in different avatars, in cross-cultural settings showing how the text’s canonical status can never be overestimated.

As mentioned earlier, the influence of Fitzgerald’s immortal text has led to occasional references in different contexts around the literary world. The noted British writer of Pakistani descent, Hanif Kureishi in his memoir My Ear At His Heart: Reading My Father (2004) tells us a lot about the books and the writers that influenced him in his creative process and states:

As a young man, if I discovered a writer, I’d look out for anything written about him. He or she, as well as the work then became the subject, the source of the words. If he liked hats, I would think about getting a hat; reading about Scott Fitzgerald always inspired me to go to the pub. The fact is, the place writers and artists hold in the public imagination exists beyond their work.

Though Kureshi does not specifically mention the particular novel, The Great Gatsby makes its appearance in a unique post-modern story by the British writer Ali Smith. Titled “The Universal Story” it concerns a man buying used copies of The Great Gatsby for his sister, who has an arts grant to make boats. Inspired by the line “so we beat on, boats against the current,” she makes a “seven-foot boat made of copies of The Great Gatsby stuck together with waterproof sealant [which] was launched in the spring, in Ipswich Harbor…[It] stayed afloat for three hundred yards before it finally took in water and sank.”

One can go on mentioning many other instances where there are cursory references of the text, or where the rags-to-riches story becomes significant. In a recent novel How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild and Got a Life by Kaavya Viswanathan (the young Indian American girl who brought shame to our country for charges of plagiarism) the young protagonist Opal “felt [her] breath coming more and more quickly” when she saw her
heartthrob Sean carrying a copy of *The Great Gatsby* under his arms. This text, which was a “required senior-lit reading” was probably prescribed in this Ivy-League institution as a canonical guide to the American Dream of success. The Gatsby myth of success was once again referred to in a memoir published in 2005 where the narrator states:

> From the beginning, there was a touch of unreality about my life in the fast lane. …The balcony of my home in Bel Air, California, faced the Pacific and from it I could see Catalania Island, miles off shore. Its golden hills were haloed by the setting sun, its mythically named port of Avalon teased me – a self-made millionaire – just as the green light on Daisy Buchanan’s pier had taunted Jay Gatsby, reminding him that in spite of his accomplishments, he would never truly belong to her world (13).

These lines, taken from Mani Bhowmik’s *Code Name God: The Spiritual Odyssey of A Man of Science* (2005) the memoir of an Indian scientist whose hard work and brilliance led him to be the co-inventor of the excimer laser in corrective eye surgery, speak a lot about the myth of Gatsby and the American Dream that Fitzgerald had created more than eighty years ago. Coming from a man whose success won him a spot on *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, this comparison is more interesting when the author states:

> My journey from mud to marble was complete, and like Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, I sought to wipe clean all traces of the poor non-immigrant boy I had been. Within just a few years, I owned six hilltop houses with million-dollar postcard views, Beverly Hills, Bel Air, Palos Verdes, Malibu – each one was a bulwark against the fate of my ancestors. I drove a Rolls-Royce (96-97).

The two other memoirs that I want to discuss here are Wu Ningkun’s *A Single Tear: A Family’s Persecution, Love, and Endurance in Communist China* (1993), and Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003). Trying to teach the Fitzgerald text in environments hostile to Western ideas and according to ‘prior codes’ bring forth unprecedented problems both in communist China and in the Khomeini regime in Tehran during the height of religious fundamentalism, and therefore becomes a new means of assessing the canonical text intertextually and interculturally.

Wu Ningkun’s *A Single Tear* is a gripping narrative that tells the story of a young, conscientious and sensitive Chinese professor of English, who was educated in America, whose decision to return to China from America after the 1949 Mao Zedong revolution has lasting and potentially tragic implications for both him and his family. Like many Chinese
who emigrated to other parts of the world after the World War II, Wu answered to the call of his homeland as he believed that China will be able to enter a better, prosperous and independent phase with the new Mao regime. Leaving his doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago incomplete, he was pressed to join the department of Western languages and literature at Yenching University in Peking. Though not particularly political, and ignorant of Marxism, he agreed, abandoning his prospects in literary America. Although quickly disillusioned, Wu and his family remain subject to persecution, imprisonment, deprivation, poverty, betrayal and humiliation. By the time of Mao’s death in the 1970s, the Wu family has been moved – separately and together – from city to country and back again, persecuted for their religious beliefs as Christians, and distrustful of neighbors and friends with the constant denunciations that have become standard. After enduring this pogrom for forty years, the family ultimately survived and when Wu wrote this memoir he believed that the truthful account of his experiences over three tragic decades, though intensely personal, would “contribute to a compassionate understanding of history and men.”(viii)

One may ask, how does Gatsby come in here? Well, in the very first chapter of the memoir, aptly entitled “The Return of a Native, 1951-52” Wu Ningkun narrates how he left America without “any doubt in [his] mind that he would eventually go home and put [his] expertise to some good use for a new China.” Full of optimism, he thought that he “would be welcomed as a patriotic intellectual who had given up an attractive profession in the most affluent capitalist society to come home and serve the socialist motherland.”(4) Soon after joining the university, all the professors were ordered to examine their past for pro-American bourgeois ideology and subjected to criticism by students at public meetings. It was in this “self-criticism” session that Ningkun was first denounced politically for exposing his students to capitalistic propaganda like *The Great Gatsby.*

When it was my turn, I spoke of my tardy recognition of the great things the party had done for China, I admitted I had perhaps wasted too many years steeping myself in the study of bourgeois Western literature when the Chinese people were fighting for a new China under the leadership of the Communist party, and I expressed readiness to remold my ideology, which had been formed in Nationalist China and the United States. I thought I had gone pretty far in getting to the bottom of things. No sooner had I finished, however, than a bespectacled second-year English major jumped to his feet and called my self-criticism “superficial” and “evasive.” He brandished a paperback American novel one of the seniors in my class had borrowed from me. My righteous accuser pointed to the cover, which pictured a hand with
painted fingernails holding a glass of wine, and demanded with indignant eloquence, “Is this the kind of crap you’ve brought back from the U.S. imperialists to corrupt the young minds of New China with?” The novel was *The Great Gatsby*. I was much more “backward” than I had realized, but I was not prepared to dump Fitzgerald’s classic. Nonetheless, I had to make a more humble self-criticism a few days later before I was “passed.” (20)

The tragedy of course did not end there but actually began. Summing up at the end of the session, the chairman pointed out that his “thinking had been polluted by [his] American education and by his reluctance to cast off “bourgeois individualism” and accept ideological remolding.”(30) As Marxists who believed in facing the facts and relieving the load on one’s own mind by telling the party all, Ningkun was looked upon as some sort of a suspect and the next stage was to make him take a pledge to step up his “thought reform.” Also, this was only his first taste of the arbitrary treatment of the individual by the all-powerful state, which would become the inflexible law of life in the decades to follow. That he was a bourgeois rightist seemed a foregone conclusion. In an interview given to the CNN in 1997, Wu states how this examination and confession was most frustrating. He felt he was so conscientious in coming home, so he got more and more frustrated and he got more and more angry, so he kept talking and talking and talking. He got himself into more and more trouble, because he didn’t know at the time, everything he said was actually monitored and whatever he said among his colleagues or to other people was actually recorded in detail. By 1956, once again he found himself “the number-one political villain”(57) and finally, at a general faculty-staff meeting the day before the festive National Day, he was “formally denounced as a ‘poisonous weed’ of the worst kind – an ‘ultrarightist, a backbone element of the reactionary right wing of the bourgeoisie.” (59) In Wu’s own words this was how things went:

My heinous crimes were characterized as anti-party, anti-people, and antischism, which made me a “Three-Anti” counterrevolutionary and an enemy of the people. The charges were numerous: I was born in a reactionary landlord family; I had served in the reactionary Nationalist Air Force; I had absorbed U.S. imperialist education; the motive of my return to China was unclarified; I was involved with the counterrevolutionary clique the ABC; I had taken part in their latest counterrevolutionary gathering; I maliciously attacked the Great Campaign to Uproot Hidden Counterrevolutionaries at a lynching; I openly clamored for freedom of speech for rightists to overthrow the socialist China; I shouted the counterrevolutionary U.S. imperialist slogan “Give me liberty or give me death!”; ….Placed in a chair by myself facing my tribunal, I burst into tears and pleaded guilty. My compulsory confession,
in which I thought I had gone far in besmirching myself, was denounced as insincere and treacherous. (59-60)

For those interested in knowing the end of this harrowing tale, Wu then found himself being torn from his young family and packed off for thought reform in a forced-labour camp in the Great Northern Wilderness, on the Soviet border facing Siberia, when the starving prisoners and their frightened visitors were beyond shedding a single tear. With nothing much but a copy of Hamlet in an old laundry bag, one is profoundly touched by Wu’s habit of quoting Shakespeare to himself at particularly bad moments. Nearly starved and nearly frozen, he survived some of the Maoist experiments and was released, only to be denounced again, as a ‘cow demon’ in the infamous Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. Wu was finally rehabilitated in 1979-80. Jay Gatsby, who is said to have risen “from a Platonic idea of himself” thus became the catalyst of this sincere professor’s downfall.

Fitzgerald’s text plays a greater role in the next memoir Azar Nafisi’s Reading Lolita in Tehran published in 2003. Like Wu Ningkun, literature professor Azar Nafisi returned to her native Islamic Republic of Iran in 1987 after a long education abroad. Winning a fellowship from Oxford, she taught English literature at the University of Tehran, the Free Islamic University and the University of Allameh Tabatabai, that had been “singled out as the most liberal university in Tehran.”(9). In the fall of 1995, she was expelled from the University of Tehran for refusing to wear the veil and left Iran for America in 1997. Every Thursday morning for those last two years, Nafisi indulged herself and decided to fulfill a dream. She secretly gathered seven of her most committed female students to read forbidden Western classics in the privacy of her own home. “The theme of the class was the relation between fiction and reality.” (6) As Islamic morality squads staged arbitrary raids in Tehran, fundamentalists seized hold of the universities, and a blind censor stifled artistic expression, the girls in Nafisi’s living room risked removing their veils and immersed themselves in the worlds of Jane Austen, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James and Vladimir Nabokov. She recollects how each student took off more than their scarves and robes in her room, gained outline and shape and gradually becoming her own inimitable self. “Living in a culture that denied any merit to literary works” Nafisi records in details the bleak reality of the times:

Our world under the mullah’s rule was shaped by the colorless lenses of the blind censor. Not just our reality but also our fiction had taken on this curious coloration in a world where the censor was the poet’s rival in rearranging and
reshaping reality, where we simultaneously invented ourselves and were figments of someone else’s imagination. (25)

In this extraordinary memoir, the students’ stories thus become intertwined with the ones they were reading. As Michiko Kakutani states in *The New York Times*, “the refuge from ideology that art can offer to those living under tyranny, and art’s affirmative and subversive faith in the voice of the individual” become the hallmark of this memoir.

But first we have to understand how Fitzgerald travels back to the 1979 revolution. At the very beginning of the second part of her memoir entitled “Gatsby,” Nafisi narrates, how like Wu Ningkun, she had returned to her homeland with a lot of optimism and promise. From the airplane she saw suddenly a blanket of lights that signaled that she had arrived at Tehran and she felt that always on arrival there was a particular moment of epiphany. Like Jay Gatsby waiting for the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock, “For seventeen years,” she says, “I dreamed of those lights, so beckoning and seductive. I dreamed of being submerged in them and of never having to leave again.”(81) Along with her other personal items, the customs officer picked up *Ada, Jews Without Money, The Great Gatsby* “as if handling someone else’s dirty laundry. But he did not confiscate them – not then, That came sometime later.”(82)

On joining the English Department at the University of Tehran, she offered to teach a course where she would do a comparative study of the literature of the twenties and thirties, the proletarians and the non-proletarians. The best person for the twenties for her was of course Fitzgerald, though she was curious to know why in the thirties, people like him were pushed out by a new breed of writers. In trying to be “somewhat fair politically,”(89) side by side with *The Great Gatsby* and *A Farewell to Arms*, she planned to teach works by Maxim Gorky and Mike Gold. Before the new term began in September 1979, Nafisi had to spend most of her time hunting for the books on her syllabus. In one bookstore, as she was rummaging through a few copies of *The Great Gatsby* and *A Farewell to Arms*, the bookseller advised her to pick up and store whatever was available and soon enough the government blocked the distribution of foreign books in Iran.
The first day she went to the university armed with the trusty *Gatsby*. “It was showing signs of wear: the dearer a book was to my heart, the more battered and bruised it became.”(92) Anxious about how her class would receive her as she was anxious about the political upheavals in the country, she found the students unusually quiet. Her hands were full of all the books and Xeroxes she had brought for the class, “an eclectic mix of revolutionary writers whose works had been translated into Persian and “elitists” such as Fitzgerald, Faulkner and Woolf.” (93) She asked her students what they thought fiction would accomplish, why one should bother to read fiction at all. One thing the authors she would be teaching all had in common was their subversiveness and she told the students how the best fiction always forced one to question what one took for granted. One day, when her leftist students had cancelled classes protesting the fresh murder of three revolutionaries, Nafisi was caught up by a few students. They had already read *Gatsby* and wanted to know whether Fitzgerald’s other books were similar to it. Nafisi remembered this incident for a long time and wrote:

> We went on talking Fitzgerald as we walked down the wide staircase, past the various tables with their political goods for sale and the rather large crowd assembled in front of a wall plastered with newspapers. We walked onto the hot asphalt and sat on one of the benches by the stream running through the campus, and talked like children sharing coveted stolen cherries. I felt very young, and we laughed and we talked. Then we went our separate ways. We never became more intimate than that. (96)

We are then told about one of her colleagues, who always worried about losing his job. Having just divorced his wife, he had to maintain her, plus his home and swimming pool and somehow inappropriately kept comparing himself to Gatsby, calling himself Little Great Gatsby. But Nafisi’s first culture shock came when one day she had a stimulating discussion on the implications of the words *literature, radical, bourgeois* and *revolutionary* with one of the best students of her class, Mr. Bahri. At the end of the talk she was so excited that she reached out to him in a gesture of goodwill and friendship. He silently, deliberately, withdrew both his hands behind his back, as if to remove them from even the possibility of a handshake. Bewildered and “too much of a stranger to the newness of revolutionary ways,” (98) she was later informed by a colleague that the gesture meant that no Muslim man would or should touch a *namaharam* woman – a woman other than his wife, mother or sister. Still that aborted handshake did not prepare her fully to dislike Mr. Bahri, though she developed a habit of blaming him and holding him responsible for everything that went wrong.
Initially Nafisi felt the impending problems of teaching *Gatsby*. Amid shouts of “Death to America” and every now and then the burning of the American flag, the text seemed a strange choice for students burning with revolutionary zeal. Later, in retrospect, Nafisi felt that it was the right choice as the values shaping the novel were the exact opposite of those of the revolution. “Ironically, as time went by, it was the values inherent in *Gatsby* that would triumph, but at that time we had not yet realized just how far we had betrayed our dreams.”(108) Because of the constant interruptions, the *Gatsby* text was begun in November 1979 but could not be finished until January 1980. Nafisi’s choice of the text was not based on the political climate of the time but on the fact that it was a great novel. Though she read and reread *Gatsby* “with greedy wonder”, she was held back by a strange feeling that she did not want to share it with anyone. Her students were “slightly baffled” with the text. The story of an idealistic guy, so much in love with this beautiful rich girl who betrays him, could not be satisfying to those for whom sacrifice was defined by words such as *masses, revolution* and *Islam*. Passion and betrayal were for them political emotions, and love far removed from the stirrings of Jay Gatsby for Mrs. Tom Buchanan. Adultery in Tehran was one of so many other crimes, and the law dealt with it accordingly: public stoning.

As the teacher tried to explain to her students that *Gatsby* was an American classic, in many ways the quintessential American novel it was also different from the ideologies of her own country. “We in ancient countries have our past – we obsess over the past. They, the Americans, have a dream: they feel nostalgia about the promise of the future.”(109) She then tried to explain the concept of the American Dream. When they come to the point in the text when Gatsby is visiting Daisy and Tom Buchanan’s house for the first time and Tom has a sudden insight into their relationship, a student cut in to add that that is because Tom “is in love with the money and not with Daisy. She is only a symbol.” Another voice from the back of the room asks, “But what use is love in this world we live in?”(110) When the teacher asks what kind of a world would be suitable for love, Mr. Nyazi’s hand darts up. “We don’t have time for love right now,” he said. “We are committed to a higher, more sacred love.” When a female student Zarrin turned around and said sardonically, “Why else do you fight a revolution?” Mr. Nyazi turned very red, bowed his head and after a short pause took up his pen and started to write furiously. The teacher diffused the tension by
adding that a novel was not an allegory and to read a novel was to “inhale the experience” (111).

The next day Mr. Nyazi met Professor Nafisi in earnest and all goodwill, and his complaint was about Gatsby. He said he was telling her for her own good and he was serious. He was not against Mr. Gatsby himself but against the novel. The novel was immoral. It taught the youth the wrong stuff; it poisoned their minds – surely she could see? She reminded him that Gatsby was a work of fiction and not a how-to manual. But the gentleman was adamant/ “Maybe Mr. Gatsby was all right for the Americans, but not for our revolutionary youth.” There was, for Mr. Nyazi, no difference between the fiction of Fitzgerald and the facts of his own life: “The Great Gatsby was representative of things American, and America was poison for us; it certainly was. We should teach Iranian students to fight against American immorality,” he said.

In those days of public prosecutions, Nafisi suddenly had a mischievous notion and suggested that they put Gatsby on mock trial in class. Mr. Nyazi would be the prosecutor, and he should also write a paper offering his evidence. There would also be a lawyer for the defense and a defendant; the rest of the class would be the jury. They would also need a judge, a defendant and a defense attorney. Since no one volunteered to be the defense, the teacher had to defend it. Zarrin volunteered to be Nafisi’s lawyer and wanted to know if she the teacher was Fitzgerald or the book itself. They decided that the teacher would be the book: Fitzgerald may have had or lacked qualities that they could detect in the book. It was agreed that in this trial the rest of the class could at any point interrupt the defense or the prosecution with their own comments and questions. But no one wanted to speak for Gatsby.

The Great Gatsby thus became the set-piece in the courtroom drama in the classroom. “And so began the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran versus The Great Gatsby,” (124) writes Nafisi. After a long invocation “In the Name of God,” Mr. Nyazi, the Islamist prosecutor ranted against the novel for its ambiguity about the characters’ decadence:

Imam Khomeini has relegated a great task to our poets and writers…He has given them a sacred mission, much more exalted than that of the materialistic writers in the West….Our task as our Imam has stated, is to purge the country of the decadent Western culture…This is an Islamic court, not Perry Mason.
I can present my case the way I want to, and I am setting the context. I want to say that as a Muslim I cannot accept *Gatsby*. .... I have enough evidence – every page, *every* single page of this book is its own condemnation....And if you want to see cultural rape, you need go no further than this very book....This book preaches illicit relations between a man and a woman.

The one thing good about this book is that it exposes the immorality and decadence of American society, but we have fought to rid ourselves of this trash and it is high time that such books be banned.... This book is supposed to be about the American dream, but what sort of a dream is this? Does the author mean to suggest that we should all be adulterers and bandits? Americans are decadent and in decline because this is their dream. They are going down! This is the last hiccup of a dead culture!(124-27)

When Zarrin was summoned to defend her case she accused the prosecutor of committing “the fallacy of getting too close to the amusement park. He can no longer distinguish fiction from reality.” (128) “*Gatsby* is being put on trial because it disturbs us,” she stated. “This is not the first time a novel – a non-political novel – has been put on trial by a state.” She cited the famous trials of *Madame Bovary, Ulysses, Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and *Lolita* and explained how in each case the novel won. The point that seemed to trouble the judge as well as the prosecutor was the lure of money and its role in the novel. It is about wealth but not about the vulgar materialism that had been hinted upon. While both the sides elaborated on their own points of view, Nafisi became rather excited. She wanted to tell them that the book “is not about adultery but about the loss of dreams.” (133) and kept going back to Fitzgerald’s own explanation of his novel: “That’s the whole burden of this novel,” he had said, “the loss of those illusions that give such color to the world so that you don’t care whether things are true or false as long as they partake of the magical glory.” So she advised her students in more concrete and practical terms:

> You don’t read *Gatsby* to learn whether adultery is good or bad but to learn about how complicated issues such as adultery and fidelity and marriage are. A great novel heightens your senses and sensitivity to the complexities of life and of individuals, and prevents you from the self-righteousness that sees morality in fixed formulas about good and evil....” (133)

Mr. Nyazi was of course unable to understand the logic. “But ma’am, there is nothing complicated about having an affair with another man’s wife. Why doesn’t Mr. Gatsby get his own wife?” he added sulkily. When it was time to hear from the jury, a few of the leftist activists defended the novel. Nafisi felt that they did so partly because the Muslim activists were so dead set against it. In essence, their defense was not so different from Nyazi’s...
condemnation. They said that they needed to read a fiction like *The Great Gatsby* because they needed to know about the immorality of American culture. They felt they should read more revolutionary material, but that they should read books like this as well to understand the enemy. It was much later that Nafisi discovered that “most students had supported Zarrin but very few were prepared to risk voicing their views, mainly because they lacked enough self-confidence to articulate their points as ‘eloquently’ as the defense and the prosecutor. Some claimed in private that they personally liked the book.”(135) Nafisi’s colleagues who were surprised that the debate in class was Fitzgerald versus Islam instead of Lenin versus the Imam, praised Mr. Bahri for quieting down the voices of outrage and somehow convinced the Islamic association that she had “put America on trial.” (137) Personally, the *Gatsby* “trial” had opened a window into Nafisi’s own feelings and desires. A totalitarian regime would have to dislike uncertainty or doubt, for its existence would rely heavily on absolutes: good, evil, God, etc. Nafisi shows us that the absence of doubt contributes to the disappearance of empathy, the very heart of any novel. The “blind censor” does not empathise; he only wants to wipe out imagination. The text thus becomes an allegory of the struggle between Iran’s Islamists and Leftists to control the legacy of the revolution. At the end of the trial, while trying to explain to Mr. Nyazi that dreams are perfect ideals, complete in themselves and cannot be imposed on a constantly changing imperfect, incomplete reality, Nafisi undergoes a kind of self-discovery:

> When I left the class that day, I did not tell them what I myself was just beginning to discover: how similar our own fate was becoming to Gatsby’s. He wanted to fulfill his dream by repeating the past, and in the end he discovered that the past was dead, the present a sham, and there was no future. Was this not similar to our revolution, which had come in the name of our collective past and had wrecked our lives in the name of a dream? (144)

Years later, as she read faxes and emails from some of her former students in Iran in her office in Washington D.C. Nafisi tried to decipher something beyond the hysteria of their words:

> I would like to know where Mr. Bahri is right now, at this moment, and to ask him: how did it all turn out, Mr. Bahri – was this your dream, your dream of the revolution? Who will pay for all the ghosts in my memory? Who will pay for the snapshots of the murdered and the executed that we hid in our shoes and closets as we moved on to other things? Tell me, Mr. Bahri – or, to use that odd expression of Gatsby’s, Tell me, old sport – what shall we do with all these corpses on our hands? (153)
Jay Gatsby’s journey back to New York occurs at the end of the twentieth century through an interesting debut novel by an American writer of Puerto Rican origin. Set in the Spanish Harlem section of New York City, Ernesto Quinonez’s *Bodega Dreams* (2000) is a direct take off on the Fitzgerald novel and speaks a lot of the multicultural context of American contemporary society, especially with the influx of innumerable number of illegal immigrants from Latin American countries. It talks about the survival of these people through drug peddling, fights, real estate brokerage and also the benefaction of a self-made leader of the group, a man called Willie Bodega who taught all Hispanics to shed their past and create themselves from nothing. Divided into three sections, the novel begins with a section called “Because Men Who Built This Country Were Men from the Streets.” The second section is called, “Because a Single Lawyer Can Steal More Money Than a Hundred Men with Guns”; and the last section is titled, “A New Language Being Born.” Any reader can clearly notice that there are several thematic and linguistic similarities with *The Great Gatsby*. Willie hankers for a Daisy-like deserter Vera, who is now someone else’s wife; he is nervous to meet her and by showing off his newly acquired wealth (like Gatsby’s bootlegging, here it is drug peddling), wants to bring back and recreate the past. In the end he is shot down and unlike the dreary setting of Gatsby’s funeral where no one was hardly present, the whole of Spanish Harlem joins in the funeral procession. On a positive note the narrator realizes that with a new language meaning a new race, Spanglish as the language of the future is being born out of the ashes of two cultures clashing with each other. The novel ends Gatsby-like with the hope of fresh life in the new world:

The way a picture that’s been hanging on a wall for years leaves a shadow of light behind, Bodega had kicked the door down and left a green light of hope for everyone. He had represented the limitless possibilities in us all by living his life, striving for those dreams that seemed to elude the neighborhood year after year. But in that transitory moment when at last the pearl was about to be handed to him, like Orpheus or Lot’s wife, he had to look back to find Vera.

No matter.

Tomorrow Spanish Harlem would run faster, fly higher, stretch out its arms farther, and one day those dreams would carry its people to new beginnings….The neighbourhood might have been down, but it was far from out. The people far from defeat. They had been bounced all over the place but they were still jamming.

It seemed like a good place to start. (213)
To conclude I reiterate the idea of intertextuality with which I began this article. According to some critics the term is not a mere cross-referencing or interdependence of texts, it also includes the attitude that one text exhibits towards another. Taking the term in its widest sense, these memoirs also exhibit the boundary-crossings between texts. With multiculturalism changing the face of the American literary scenario, the Barthesian idea -- that writing is always an iteration which is also a re-iteration, a re-writing which foregrounds the trace of the various texts it both knowingly and unknowingly places and displaces -- takes on an added meaning in this analysis. In *The Great Gatsby* F. Scott Fitzgerald had written a myth specifically about America and American society but it seems that the themes of the novel have transcended such particulars of time and place and attained a wider relevance. In the meantime, we just keep waiting for more of Jay Gatsby’s cross-cultural travels around the globe.

**Works Cited:**


INTERNATIONALIZING GATSBY AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

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Keywords: Gatsby, The American Dream,

Put simply, the American Dream is the ideal of opportunity for all, of advancement in a career of society without regard to one’s origin. The ideal was embodied in Thomas Jefferson’s “Declaration of Independence” as “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Jefferson was specifically reacting against the ‘closed’ European societies, where power and wealth were seen to be in the hands of an aristocratic governing elite. Thus the dream idealizes those who are ‘self-made’ as opposed to those who gain wealth and status through inheritance. One of the commonest critical approaches to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby has been to see it as a new myth of America, a myth partaking of the flavour of the 1920s. We are well aware that the term ‘Gatsby’ has become a generic term used in the American context to allude to a lot of things – the jazz age, the fabulous parties, the idea and pursuit of the American Dream, the democratic idealism when the mythic Gatsby is said to be “a son of God” having “risen from a Platonic conception of himself” and waiting eternally for the ‘green light’ to emanate from the end of Daisy’s dock. Gatsby is also implicitly linked to some of the other mythic figures of American literature who have similar status, in particular to James Fenimore Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, and to Mark Twain’s Huck Finn. These characters are supposedly mythical in that they manifest abstract ideals attractive to Americans – personal freedom, a self-reliant individuality, a belief in personal integrity rather than conformity. Also Fitzgerald’s myth seems to be about the decadence of American values. Gatsby’s dream, although it finally destroys him tragically, raises him above the other characters, giving him a dignity that other characters had never possessed.

The objective of my paper is to explore how the 1925 canonical American text, The Great Gatsby, a novel that T.S. Eliot announced to be “a remarkable book…the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James,” is read and interpreted many decades later.
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