

Modernity, Patriarchy, and Female Consciousness in Fitzgerald and Mahfouz

Mohamed Abdulhasan Jasm

Open Educational College, Iraqi Ministry of Education

alsuhaily@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the complex relationship between modernity, material desire, and female identity in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Naguib Mahfouz's *Zuqāq al-Midaq* (1947) translated into *Midaq Alley* (1966). It is intended to show how female characters actively pursue social mobility and personal autonomy within rapidly transforming societies of the early twentieth century, rather than viewing women merely as passive victims of patriarchal oppression.

Through a comparative approach grounded in feminist and materialist criticism, the paper investigates how characters such as Daisy Buchanan, Myrtle Wilson, and Hamida navigate the promises of modern life while confronting gender ideology and the persistent constraints of class hierarchy. The observation to emerge from this paper is that modernity offers these women the illusion of freedom and upward mobility, yet ultimately reproduces the very structures of power that limit their agency.

Keywords: comparative literature, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Naguib Mahfouz, feminism, patriarchy, women's oppression

Introduction:

The position of women within patriarchal societies has remained a subject of enduring debate and reform throughout modern history. Intellectual developments during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries played a significant role in challenging the rigid gender hierarchies that had long structured social life in many regions of the world. During this period, both women activists and women writers began to question traditional conceptions related to gender roles, family structures, and women's participation in public life. As these discussions heightened, literature emerged as an influential cultural medium through which social attitudes toward women were expressed, negotiated, and occasionally questioned.

Literary portrayals of women often mirror the broader cultural and social dynamics of the societies in which they are produced. Across both Western and Arab literary traditions, fictional female figures consistently disclose prevailing expectations surrounding gender relations and social responsibilities. Consequently, literary representations of women may function as indicators of evolving social realities, particularly during periods of rapid transformation. One of the most significant developments during the early twentieth century was the emergence of the concept of the "modern woman."

Although this idea originated in urban and middle-class settings, its influence gradually expanded to women from lower-income backgrounds, who began to envision new possibilities for social mobility and personal autonomy. In many cases, these aspirations were grounded in the belief that financial independence would offer protection and social security amid evolving social structures.

The period following the First World War represented a particularly transformative moment in Western societies. In the United States, the decade commonly known as the Roaring Twenties or the Jazz Age experienced sweeping social and economic transformations.

Rapid industrial growth, urban expansion, and technological innovation reshaped everyday life and contributed to the expansion of consumer culture. American households became increasingly attracted to modern forms of entertainment and material goods — such as automobiles, cameras, sewing machines, and radios — which facilitated new patterns of communication and leisure. Within this environment of modernization, women began to challenge conventional norms by participating more actively in the workforce and public life, as they adopted new styles of dress and behavior epitomized by the “flapper” dresses (Curnutt, 2002, pp. 29–30).

Despite these developments, the transformation of gender roles during this period remained complex and at times contradictory. Although many women gained greater social visibility and a degree of independence, traditional values and patriarchal norms continued to impose significant constraints. The growing attraction of consumer culture and material prosperity often generated tensions between emerging modern lifestyles and established moral frameworks.

Comparable social transformations were also occurring in the Arab world during the early decades of the twentieth century. The expansion of urban centers such as Cairo along with the growth of industrial and commercial activity brought about new social dynamics that influenced family life and gender relations in general. Scholars in various domains have described the modernization of Cairo as the emergence of what has been termed “New Cairo,” which reflected the city’s rapid urban and cultural transformation (Lane-Poole, 1902/1906, pp. 1–31). At the same time, the colonial political framework and cultural interaction with European powers complicated the process of modernization. During the period surrounding the Second World War, in particular, Egyptian society was profoundly affected by British political control and increasing cultural exchange with the West, which deepened debates over national identity, tradition and modernity (al-Said, 1978, pp. 13–15).

Within this shifting sociopolitical landscape, Egyptian women gradually asserted their presence in public spheres, particularly in discourses concerning education, employment, and social reform. Inspired partly by global movements advocating women’s rights, many women sought to challenge the traditional roles historically mandated by patriarchal structures.

Technological progress and industrial development fostered the growth of large urban centers and new economic opportunities, which, in turn, enabled women to participate more actively in household economies and public life. However, these transformations often unfolded unevenly, particularly within lower-class communities where economic hardship restricted opportunities for advancement. In such an environment, the attraction of modern lifestyles was closely associated with aspirations for financial stability and upward social mobility. Influenced by Western models of modern life, it encouraged women in general and younger generations in particular to challenge traditional roles by seeking greater participation in both household economies and public life.

Research Focus:

This study explores how early twentieth-century literary narratives depict the aspirations and dilemmas of women from backgrounds marked by economic hardship who encounter the promises of modernity. It particularly focuses on how the pursuit for financial independence and social advancement shapes female characters who attempt to challenge the traditional roles which were long imposed by patriarchal institutions.

The analysis focuses on two influential novels: *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald and *Midaq Alley* by Naguib Mahfouz. The purpose behind choosing these two narratives is that they originate from distinct cultural and historical contexts, yet they both depict female characters who seek to redefine their lives within rapidly changing social environments. These novels spotlight women who pursue modern lifestyles that appear to promise autonomy, wealth, and social prestige; and reject inherited expectations associated with domesticity, motherhood, and economic dependence.

At the same time, the narratives reveal the complex consequences of such aspirations, as the pursuit of material success and personal freedom often exposes these women to new forms of vulnerability, particularly in societies where patriarchal authority and class inequality continue to have significant influence. By examining the motivations and experiences of these characters, the study seeks to highlight the tensions between modern ideals of independence and the structural constraints that persist in shaping women's lives.

Theoretical Framework:

The comparative analysis of these two novels is grounded in the assumption that literary works are deeply embedded in the social and cultural conditions in which they originate. Both F. Scott Fitzgerald and Naguib Mahfouz portray societies that experienced profound transformations in the aftermath of global conflict and economic transformation. The fictional worlds they present in their selected novels explore anxieties about social instability, moral uncertainty, and the evolving relationship between tradition and modernity. Both authors portray characters from marginalized social groups who attempt to navigate these transformations while they grapple with the pressures of class hierarchy and gender norms.

In order to explore these issues, the current paper employs the perspective of comparative literature and particularly relies on the principles articulated within the American school of comparative literary studies. Scholars such as René Wellek argue that literary analysis should transcend national boundaries so that it can engage with the broader intellectual and cultural forces shaping literary production (as cited in Shamsuddin & Abd Rahman, 2012, p. 4). Thus, by adopting comparative frameworks, researchers are able to examine both the convergences and the divergences that arise when texts from diverse cultural traditions confront similar social concerns.

From this perspective, literature can be understood as part of a wider network of cultural expression that reflects historical experiences and ideological developments across different societies (Abood, 1999, p. 10). Arab theorists of comparative literature, including Muhammad Ghunaymi Hilal (1953) and Abde Abood (1999), similarly emphasize the significance of studying literary works within an international framework that considers the circulation of ideas, narrative forms, and thematic concerns across cultural boundaries (Abood, 1999, p.39). Comparative literary analysis therefore enables scholars to identify points of intersection and difference in representing social issues, including gender relations, class inequality, and cultural transformation.

In addition to theories of comparative literature, this paper incorporates insights from feminist theory in an attempt to examine how patriarchal structures shape the lives of female characters. The theories of Simone de Beauvoir, specifically in her *The Second Sex* (1908-1986), provides a compelling framework for understanding the historical construction of women as the "Other" within male-dominated societies. Simone de Beauvoir (1949/1953) states that social institutions frequently assign women subordinate roles that restrict their autonomy and define their identities in relation to men (p. 79).

Materialist feminist perspectives further illuminate the economic dimensions of gender inequality. Scholars such as Christine Delphy, who was the first to use the phrase "materialist feminism" in 1975, have asserted that the family operates as an economic unit in which women's labor is often exploited and rendered invisible (as cited in Tyson, 2006, 2nd ed., p. 97). They maintain that domestic work performed by women is frequently treated as a natural obligation rather than recognized as productive labor, and this, in turn, reinforces their economic dependence within patriarchal structures (ibid., p. 97-98).

Within Arab reformist thought, discussions of women's rights were also articulated by reformist thinkers such as Qasim Amin (1899), who argued that social customs rather than religious teachings were largely responsible for women's marginalization (p. 31). Amin emphasized the importance of education and social participation for women as essential elements of a modern and progressive society. Later feminist thinkers, including Nawal El Saadawi, expanded these debates by critically examining the intersections between gender, social power, and cultural tradition in Arab societies. By integrating these comparative and feminist perspectives, this paper seeks to examine how literary narratives from distinct cultural contexts portray women's attempts to negotiate the promises and limitations of modern life.

Research Design:

The present study employs a comparative literary approach in order to examine the depiction of female characters in novels rooted in different cultural traditions: *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald and *Midaq Alley* by Naguib Mahfouz, as comparative literature provides an effective framework for investigating literary texts that originate from different cultural, historical and linguistic contexts. According to René Wellek, comparative literary studies promote broader intellectual awareness by placing national literatures within a wider network of cultural and aesthetic exchanges. Instead of restricting analysis to direct influences or translations, comparative criticism investigates the relationships between literary practices, cultural traditions, and social values across national boundaries (Wellek, 1948, pp. 40- 43). Thus, this approach allows scholars to analyze literary works in relation to their cultural contexts while they highlight thematic and stylistic intersections between them. Accordingly, this study aims to address the research questions under consideration within this comparative framework.

Likewise, the Arab comparatist Abood (1999) emphasizes the distinction between literature as a creative form and literary studies as a systematic discipline that seeks to interpret the cultural and aesthetic features of texts (p.30-31). Within such a view, the study of any national literature becomes incomplete if it is isolated from other literary traditions. Thus, comparative analysis becomes essential in revealing how different societies articulate shared human concerns through distinct cultural frameworks.

Building upon these theoretical insights, this research follows the principles of the American school of comparative literature, which prioritizes thematic analysis and cultural context rather than limiting comparison to direct historical influence. The two novels under examination were penned in different cultural contexts and historical moments, with approximately twenty-four years between their publication. However, despite these differences, both texts portray female characters whose lives are effectively shaped by social conventions, economic conditions, and patriarchal norms. Thus, by comparing these two narratives, the study aims to identify both convergences and divergences in the portrayal of women within American and Egyptian societies.

Through this comparative framework, the current study investigates how male authors from dramatically different cultural environments construct female identities within their fictional worlds.

In addition to examining the narrative strategies and stylistic techniques employed by the authors, the analysis considers the ideological, social and economic dynamics that shape women's experiences in both novels. Such an approach enables the study to place the portrayal of women within broader cultural and historical contexts, thereby linking domestic life in both American and Egyptian societies to wider global discussions about gender roles and social change.

To deepen this analysis, this paper also incorporates feminist theoretical perspectives drawn from both Western and Arab schools of thought. Notably, the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir are employed as a foundational framework for understanding Western feminist thought, while the contributions of Qasim Amin represent an early articulation of feminist reform within the Arab world. These theoretical perspectives allow the research to investigate how economic and social structures contribute to women's subordination and marginalization.

From a feminist perspective, economic conditions stand out as a defining force in women's social position. Friedrich Engels argues that true emancipation would only become possible when women actively take part in the broader system of production rather than remaining confined to domestic labor (as cited in De Beauvoir, 1956, p. 81). However, Simone de Beauvoir criticizes Engels' claim that attributes women's historical oppression to the rise of private property. She proposes that patriarchal control intensified when men sought to accumulate wealth and expand their economic power. Furthermore, Simone de Beauvoir challenges this interpretation by arguing that economic arguments alone cannot fully account for women's subordination. She contends that gender inequality is also rooted in a deeper psychological and philosophical structure wherein women are constructed as "the Other," which is a category through which male identity asserts its authority and dominance.

According to Beauvoir (1956), patriarchal societies define women primarily through their roles as sexual partners, reproducers, and objects of desire. In this view, women's identities reflect male expectations rather than by their own autonomous aspirations (p. 83, 85). Building on this perspective, Christine Delphy (1984) highlights the role of the family as a fundamental economic unit wherein women's labor is systematically exploited. For Delphy, marriage serves as a social contract that confines women to unpaid domestic work, although the same labor would be financially compensated when it is performed outside the household (p.64-66).

These theoretical insights highlight the experiences of several female characters in the examined novels. For instance, Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby* seems to accept patriarchal constraints although she recognizes the limitations imposed upon her by wealth and social status. Similarly, female figures, in *Midaq Alley*, remain confined by patriarchal norms that restrict them to domestic roles and limit their personal autonomy. Thus, in both novels, women must contend with a complex intersection of economic dependency, social constraints, and gendered power dynamics.

Sheikh Al-Huseini's wife, in *Midaq Alley*, also reflects a form of silent subjugation, as she is aware of the inconsistencies that mark her husband's behavior. However, her awareness of these contradictions does not result in revolutionary resistance but rather in a posture of silent endurance. Similarly, Sanya Afify submits to the authority of a man nearly twenty years younger than her. A comparable situation appears in the case of Daisy Buchanan who demonstrates a similar pattern of submission. Although she is aware of the nature of her social environment, she deliberately accepts a passive role and tolerates domination by a wealthy husband who embodies the power of inherited wealth and social prestige. According to De Beauvoir (1956), women's social conditions are destined to remain unchanged as long as social regulations and cultural norms continue to define motherhood

as the ultimate purpose of a woman's existence. Consequently, she insists that women must actively assert their rights and independence (pp. 80–86).

In another part of the world, Arab society also played a significant role in shaping early feminist discourse. In his writings, Qasim Amin (1899) advocated the emancipation of Arab women. He emphasized the necessity of granting them equal opportunities in education, employment, and economic participation. His call marked a pivotal moment in the emergence of modern feminist thought within the Arab context. Amin (1899) argues that men imposed rigid customs and restrictive regulations that confined women to domestic responsibilities and limited their role to serving their husbands, which, in turn, deprived them of access to education. This reality is vividly portrayed in *Midaq Alley*, where women remain largely restricted to household duties and domestic life. Within the settings of Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*, female characters are depicted as uneducated and socially subordinate to male authority. This is why Hamida is viewed with suspicion and eventually marginalized for refusing to accept the conventional norms imposed upon women, particularly the expectation that she remain confined to the household and dedicate herself entirely to marital and domestic duties.

Amin (1899) further contends that genuine social progress in Arab societies is unattainable unless women are granted the dignity and rights originally recognized for them within Islamic teachings. The contemporary feminist theorist Nawal El Saadawi (1931) similarly maintains that Amin's advocacy for women's emancipation and the emergence of the "new woman" does not contradict Islamic principles; rather, it can be seen as a pivotal milestone in the struggle to restore women's rights.

Critical Discussion:

The literary worlds delineated by Mahfouz and Fitzgerald reflect the reality of two distinct societies that have experienced profound cultural and social transformations. Although the novelists wrote within different cultural and historical contexts, their novels provide insightful depictions of the tensions between individual desire and social constraint, aspiration and disillusionment and, more significantly, between tradition and modernity, whose influence on both societies has been profound.

Naguib Mahfouz, who was born in Cairo in 1911, spent his early years in the old district of al-Jamaliyya, where the environment of this neighborhood played a formative role in shaping his literary imagination. The narrow alleys, traditional social dynamics, and everyday life of such community eventually became essential components of many of his fictional works. In many of his works, Mahfouz placed significant emphasis on what he referred to as the "hara world," which is a term he used to describe the small quarters typically inhabited by the lower social classes. For Mahfouz, the "hara" represented more than a physical location; instead it functioned as a symbolic microcosm of Egyptian society.

Mahfouz himself acknowledged the emotional and creative connection between the writer and this particular place and its memories. He states that a writer is often in need of a tangible source of reference from which emotional and artistic expression can emerge (as cited in El-Enany, 1993, p. 2). Therefore, the hara became a recurring setting in most of his fictional works, as it functions both as a narrative backdrop and as a medium through which broader reflections on society and human nature can be articulated. Even when Mahfouz shifted toward more intellectual or symbolic themes, the presence of this familiar social context remained an integral part of his writings.

In his later reflections, Mahfouz further explains the increasing importance of this context in his literary works, particularly during the later stages of his career. He maintains that with the progression of age writers are often encouraged to return to their origins, where they find in childhood

memories a sense of stability and emotional anchor. Within a rapidly changing world, writers seek refuge in the recollections of earlier experiences and familiar spaces. Thus, Mahfouz's persistent use of the *hara* as a central element in his fictional worlds and as an important inspiration for many of his works, such as *The Epic of the Harafish*, illustrates this nostalgia for the traditional neighborhood (Al-Ghitani, p. 107).

Therefore, Mahfouz's fictional works function not only as artistic expression but also as a social document. His narratives frequently investigate the complex realities of Egyptian life by portraying the social hierarchies, economic struggles, and political transformations that shaped the daily lives of ordinary people. Through his novels, he addresses issues that affect different social strata of individuals including the lower, middle, and upper classes. Historical developments, particularly the Egyptian Revolution of 1919, also influenced his literary outlook. This event profoundly shaped his worldview, and its repercussions can be traced throughout much of his literary works.

Meanwhile, the American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald, who was born in 1896, became one of the most influential literary voices of twentieth-century American literature. Fitzgerald's literary works often shed light on the social atmosphere of the 1920s, a period he famously labeled as the Jazz Age. His works captured both the exuberance and instability that characterized American society following World War I. During this period, the rapid economic growth and cultural change generated both optimism and moral uncertainty, conditions that Fitzgerald vividly explored in his fiction.

Fitzgerald's narratives focus primarily on the contradictions and complexities of American life at that time. The characters he delineated often reveal the anxieties, aspirations, and disillusionments of a society fascinated by wealth and social mobility. His examined novel *The Great Gatsby*, which was published in 1925, is widely regarded as the quintessential novel of the Jazz Age. It depicts the extravagant parties, social ambition, and emotional dissatisfaction. It also offers a critical reflection on the pursuit of the American Dream.

The authenticity of Fitzgerald's literary portrayals can partially be attributed to his personal experiences. Immersed in the glamorous social life of the period, Fitzgerald was familiar with the extravagance and excess that characterized elite American society. His firsthand experience of such communities allowed him to depict the cultural environment of the 1920s with remarkable precision and vivid detail. As a consequence, both critics and readers have frequently praised Fitzgerald's ability to capture the spirit of his era, as he simultaneously exposes the moral and emotional emptiness hidden beneath its surface.

Despite the influential social contexts that framed both novels, some critics assert that fiction ultimately engages with universal dimensions of human existence. According to Raleigh (1957), at its most abstract level, the novel transcends local traditions and national myths in order to address enduring truths of human existence (p. 57). Within this perspective, many characters in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* appear to exist within a superficial social milieu that is devoid of deeper meaning. Characters such as Jordan Baker, Daisy Fay, and Tom Buchanan seem trapped in a monotonous existence marked by moral indifference and emotional emptiness. Raleigh observes that such characters appear reduced to a mundane form of existence that lacks genuine human significance (1957, p. 57).

In contrast, the novel's protagonist Jay Gatsby and its narrator Nick Carraway preserve a more profound sense of human dignity within the novel's moral landscape. Nick, in particular, perceives Gatsby's tragic aspirations and emotional sincerity despite the illusions that shape his life. Although

Gatsby's existence is brief and ultimately futile, it reflects a powerful longing for fulfillment that distinguishes him from the morally indifferent community surrounding him (Raleigh, 1957, p. 57).

By frequently looking back to stability and tradition, Nick tends to view the world through a reflective lens that is firmly grounded in history and tradition. By contrast, Gatsby directs his attention toward the future, which is symbolized by the famous green light at the end of Daisy Buchanan's dock. For Gatsby, this light represents his persistent, yet illusory, desire to reclaim the past by recreating his earlier relationship with Daisy (Choudhury, 2000, p. 29). However, Gatsby's dream ultimately remains unattainable.

This contrast between Nick and Gatsby further underscores the tension between past and future within the novel. According to Raleigh (1957), Gatsby is aware—if only subconsciously—that reality can never match the grandeur of his imagination (p. 56). The novel's conclusion suggests that not only does Gatsby's personal dream collapse, but the broader American Dream itself is corrupted. As Raleigh puts it, this corruption may even be inevitable, since the dream demands more than reality can provide (1957, p. 56).

Similarly, Bewley (1954) suggests that many critics have considered *The Great Gatsby* primarily as a reflection on the elusive concept of the American Dream. From this reading, Bewley challenges the assumption that Fitzgerald embraced this ideal. Rather, he contends that the novel offers one of the most insightful critiques of the American Dream in American literature (ibid.). Within this interpretation, the dream represents a romantic belief in limitless possibility, a vision in which the worlds of material ambition and spiritual aspiration become inseparably intertwined.

According to Bewley, the novel explores the fragile boundary between reality and illusion, as the illusions embraced by many characters throughout the novel often appear more convincing than reality itself (Bewley, 1954, p. 225). Gatsby, paradoxically, represents the novel's spiritual reality despite the unrealistic nature of his aspirations. His dream represents both a profound act of faith in life's possibilities and the pursuit of material wealth, yet Fitzgerald simultaneously exposes the limitations of Gatsby's romanticized vision of wealth and success (Bewley, 1954, p. 225-226).

Barzun, in his discussion of the symbolic dimensions of literary characters, suggests that fictional characters may acquire a mythic quality when they embody the collective attitudes and aspirations of society (as cited in Bewley, 1954, p. 226). Within this perspective, Gatsby can be interpreted as a mythic embodiment of the American romantic hero, for he personifies the conflict between illusion and reality at the heart of American cultural identity (Bewley, 1954, p. 226-227).

Nick Carraway describes Gatsby as being "gorgeous," which is a descriptor that resonates with the cultural atmosphere of the Roaring Twenties (the decade of cultural dynamism and economic prosperity in 1920s America), and this description underscores the symbolic dimension by casting Gatsby as an archetypal figure of American aspiration (ibid.).

While Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* explores the illusions surrounding wealth and social ambition in American society, Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley* examines similar tensions within the social fabric of Egyptian society. Critical readings of *Midaq Alley* frequently concentrate on the character of Hamida, whose transformation into a prostitute has generated considerable scholarly debate. Hamida is interpreted by some critics as a political symbol. Al-Qaisi (2004), for instance, claims that Hamida represents Egypt itself, as its dignity and autonomy were compromised during the British occupation of Egypt (p. 131-134). Within this interpretive framework, the external influence represented by the pimp Ibrahim Faraj serves as a parallel to the disruptive presence of colonial power within Egyptian society.

The symbolic reading of Hamida is adopted by other critics such as Al-Naqash, who associates her with the historical experience of Egypt under British colonization (as cited in al-Qaisi, 2004, p. 131-134). However, critics, like Bader, challenge this interpretation by arguing that reducing an entire nation with a fictional female character oversimplifies the complexities of both literature and history (as cited in al-Qaisi, 2004, p. 131-134).

Other critics approach Hamida from a different angle as they depict her as a self-interested individual who is driven by personal ambition and desire. Such readings highlight Hamida's pursuit of wealth and independence while they simultaneously overlook the difficult social and economic conditions that shape her decisions. As noted by al-Qaisi (2004), the harsh circumstances faced by impoverished communities often push individuals to defy patriarchally imposed traditions and moral expectations (p. 131-134).

The broader social conflict introduced in *Midaq Alley* has been extensively examined by literary scholars such as El-Enany (1993), who states that the novel depicts a central tension between traditional values and emerging modern influences (p. 47). On one side stands the stability associated with deeply rooted customs, while on the other appears the seductive appeal of Western modernity, which was introduced into Egyptian society during the British occupation.

This tension, according to El-Enany (1993), mirrors the profound cultural transformation that permeated Egyptian society during and after the Second World War. The presence of British military forces exposed local Egyptian communities to unfamiliar social influences and simultaneously introduced new economic opportunities. As a consequence, many Egyptians experienced the tension between preserving traditional cultural identities and embracing modernization (p. 54).

This conflict between traditional values and modern influences lies at the thematic center of the novel. The title itself evokes the enclosed and traditional environment of the alley, while the narrative examines the pressures of modern influences on its inhabitants. El-Enany (1993) maintains that the novel ultimately portrays the profound inner struggle within the human soul in the face of competing value systems. (p. 54). The war, in particular, served as a catalyst for modernity and offered Egyptians an escape from poverty and stagnation through employment in British army camps, while it simultaneously exposed them to novel moral and cultural challenges. (p. 55).

Socio-Cultural Context:

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, women in both Eastern and Western societies experienced extensive limitations which were imposed by patriarchal institutions. Social norms and patriarchal structures restricted them to subordinate and dependent roles within the household, where their identities and decisions were largely controlled by fathers, husbands, brothers, or even sons. Nonetheless, the early twentieth century witnessed an important transitional period during which the deeply rooted conventions and restrictive traditions began to weaken as women increasingly demanded active involvement in public life. This period, which was marked by the emergence of the "modern woman," was characterized by new aspirations for education, employment, and personal autonomy. This transformation, in turn, gradually altered prevailing social attitudes and promoted the perception of women as independent thinkers who are capable of contributing to social progress (Booker, 1996, p. 89-91).

The image of the modern woman is most vividly represented in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, through the character of Daisy Buchanan in particular. Daisy belongs to the American upper class and shows keen awareness of the social realities that surround her. Instead of prioritizing romantic love, she ultimately places greater value on economic security and social prestige. This

perspective justifies her decision to marry Tom Buchanan, a wealthy East Egg resident who epitomizes the established aristocracy of American society. Daisy's acceptance of this marriage reflects her recognition that wealth and status often possess greater social significance than emotional fulfillment.

Within Tom's household, Daisy willingly conforms to the role imposed upon her in a patriarchal society. Although she is aware of Tom's infidelity, she chooses to remain in the marriage because independence seems both socially perilous and economically uncertain. Her awareness of women's restricted position is evident in her statement after the birth of her daughter. Daisy confides to Nick that she hopes the child will grow up to be "a beautiful little fool," since she views ignorance as the most secure position for a woman in such a society (*The Great Gatsby* p. 13). This remark underscores Daisy's cynical recognition of the limited opportunities afforded to women in a male-dominated social order.

Through Daisy's character, Fitzgerald reveals how women, shaped by social expectations, submit passively to patriarchal dictates and risk social exclusion if they resist. Aware of these constraints, Daisy conforms to the role prescribed for her and, even when Jay Gatsby seeks to rekindle their past relationship, she ultimately chooses to remain with Tom. This decision underscores both the powerful grip of social expectations and the precariousness of female independence, while her choice further reveals how social class and economic security shape personal decisions. By remaining within the aristocratic hierarchy, Daisy preserves her privileged position despite the emotional emptiness of her marriage.

A contrasting social environment emerges in Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*, where the protagonist Hamida comes from a lower-class background. Unlike Daisy, whose choices are shaped by the privileges of wealth, Hamida's ambitions spring from the frustrations of poverty and the constraints of social confinement. Hamida dreams of escaping the narrow confines of the alley and attaining the fashionable lifestyle associated with modern urban society. Yet her aspirations render her vulnerable to the manipulations of Ibrahim Faraj, a wealthy outsider who lures young women with promises of luxury and independence.

Faraj deliberately exploits Hamida's longing for social mobility. By showering her with jewelry, fashionable clothing, and the illusion of romantic affection, he persuades her that the modern life she desires is within reach. However, once young women become entangled with him, they are drawn into prostitution and ultimately exploited to serve the desires of British soldiers stationed in the area. Hamida's desire for wealth and social transformation thus becomes the very means through which Faraj achieves his own interests.

In sharp contrast, Hamida's tragic trajectory stands against the sincere affection offered by Abbas, who genuinely hopes to build a stable future with her. Abbas strives to protect Hamida from the destructive path she begins to follow; yet the harsh circumstances ultimately deny him the chance to rescue her. Abbas's eventual death at the hands of English soldiers parallels the tragic fate of Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*, who is killed by George Wilson as a consequence of the events associated with Myrtle's death. While Gatsby's dream collapses in tragedy, Daisy continues her privileged life without ever confronting the consequences of her actions. In contrast, Hamida survives but endures a different form of punishment. Her physical disfigurement erases the beauty upon which her new and modern identity depended, and her future remains veiled in uncertainty.

Modernity and Social Climbing:

Issues of social hierarchy constitute a central theme in *The Great Gatsby*, where Fitzgerald thoughtfully depicts women from diverse social backgrounds. One of the most striking examples is

Myrtle Wilson. She is married to George Wilson, a man from the working class who struggles to make ends meet, yet at the same time she is the mistress of Tom Buchanan, a wealthy figure of high social standing whose fortune and prestige epitomize the upper class. Myrtle aspires to the lifestyle associated with modern urban women, and she conveys this aspiration through both her appearance and her behavior. Her short hair, stylish attire, and enthusiasm for parties set her apart from the more traditional lifestyle embraced by earlier generations of women.

Myrtle finds little fulfillment in her marriage to George Wilson, and she attempts to escape this emptiness through her relationship with Tom Buchanan. Although Tom treats her with arrogance and disrespect, she remains attached to him because his wealth and prestige open the doors to the social world she longs to enter. From the very beginning of her relationship with Tom, Myrtle is preoccupied with her appearance and often spends beyond her means to cultivate a modern, stylish persona.

In this relationship, Myrtle values the material advantages associated with Tom more than any genuine emotional attachment. Her involvement with him appears motivated less by love than by the desire to escape the poverty of her life in the garage she shares with George. Like Myrtle, Daisy reveals her preference for security and status by choosing Tom's material wealth and social prestige over Gatsby's heartfelt devotion and genuine emotional commitment.

From a critical point of view, Tyson (2006, 2nd ed.) observes that Fitzgerald depicts Myrtle's sexuality as a form of aggressive self-assertion that surpasses the behavior of other female characters such as Daisy or Jordan Baker. Myrtle's socially powerless position as a working-class woman renders this portrayal particularly striking (p. 127). Although she strives to emulate the manners of the upper class, Myrtle ultimately remains confined to a subordinate role within the social hierarchy Tom represents.

Tom's treatment of Myrtle reduces her to an object of pleasure. She is valued only insofar as she fulfills his desires, yet she is denied the respect accorded to women of his own social class. When Myrtle mistakenly assumes she has the right to mention Daisy's name in Tom's presence—shouting "Daisy! Daisy! Daisy!"—Tom violently reasserts her inferior position by striking her and breaking her nose (The Great Gatsby p. 25). Tom's reaction reflects the conviction that a lower-class woman lacks the authority to challenge established social boundaries.

Myrtle endures Tom's degrading treatment because she clings to the hope that the relationship might provide an escape from the oppressive reality of the valley of ashes. However, this hope is an illusory one that is sustained by Tom's vague promises to marry her in the future. (The Great Gatsby p. 23). Her endurance of Tom's harsh treatment underscores the powerful influence of economic aspiration on her decisions.

Tom Buchanan wields his wealth as an instrument of domination as he uses his financial privilege to maintain relationships with several working-class women such as Myrtle, a chambermaid, and another young woman he meets at Gatsby's party (Tyson, 2006, 2nd ed., p. 70). By means of his financial power, Tom manipulates social relationships and gratifies his desires, and shows no concern for the consequences faced by those involved.

In addition to its focus on individual struggles, Fitzgerald's narrative engages with broader themes of love and personal freedom within the social context of the early twentieth century. Yet, as Berman (2001) observes, this world remains sharply divided by rigid boundaries of wealth, education, and gender (p. 79). Such divisions influence the characters' behavior and prompt them to mimic fashionable lifestyles as a means of appearing modern or socially sophisticated.

Myrtle's behavior illustrates this phenomenon, as her actions reveal the tension between social aspiration and marital loyalty. Although she is married to a hardworking husband who strives to provide for her, she engages in an affair with Tom because she believes it will grant her access to a more glamorous existence. By choosing to become the mistress of a married man, Myrtle reveals the influence of changing social attitudes associated with modernity. Nevertheless, her relentless pursuit of wealth and prestige ends in tragedy, when she is killed before realizing the life she envisions.

Although the women's emancipation movement emerged later in many Arab societies, the early decades of the twentieth century witnessed notable changes in the status of Eastern women. Reformist intellectual movements contested traditional cultural norms and called for expanded educational and social opportunities for women. Their debates intensified during the era of European colonization in large parts of the Arab world and generated new cultural encounters and profound social tensions (Haddad, 1984, p. 137).

Such transformations are evident in *Midaq Alley*, as Mahfouz depicts women from various social backgrounds who struggle under the pressures of modernization. With the expansion of New Cairo, fresh economic opportunities and social influences are introduced into the alley. Factories employ young women, among them Jewish workers connected to the British army. Watching these women walk unrestrained through the streets fuels Hamida's envy and strengthens her pursuit of independence.

Hamida considers herself more attractive and capable than many of the working women, and thus envisions that she is entitled to similar opportunities. Her ambition drives her to reject the traditional expectations imposed upon women in her community. Consequently, she abandons her fiancé and distances herself from the customs and religious values that once shaped her life. However, the modern world Hamida pursues ultimately proves deceptive and draws her into exploitation and moral downfall. By the end of the narrative, her reputation in the alley collapses, and her quest for modernity results in the loss of both dignity and faith.

Other female characters in *Midaq Alley* also experience the psychological repercussions of social transformation. The wealthy widow Sanya Afify, for instance, suffers from profound loneliness despite her financial security. Weary of her solitary existence, Sanya confides her distress to Umm Hamida: "The truth is that I am tired out, Umm Hamida!" (*Midaq Alley*, p. 17). Umm Hamida acknowledges that loneliness is among the most painful conditions of life without companionship (*ibid.*). To escape this isolation, Sanya resolves to marry a man twenty years her junior.

This episode reveals how Mahfouz intertwines the emotional repercussions of social transformation with the enduring influence of patriarchal norms. Believing that remarriage will safeguard her social respectability and relieve her of the burdens of property management, Sanya expresses her discomfort at the idea of "standing in front of strange men asking for rent" (*ibid.*). This situation underscores the extent to which patriarchal norms dictate women's sense of dignity and security.

In both *The Great Gatsby* and *Midaq Alley*, the narratives expose societies caught between traditional values and emerging forms of modernity. Characters in these novels often suffer from alienation and spiritual emptiness as they struggle to reconcile inherited social frameworks with new cultural influences. Economic hardship, restricted access to education, and entrenched inequality frequently drive individuals toward morally questionable decisions.

Qasim Amin and Simone de Beauvoir both emphasize the importance of education and how knowledge serves as a powerful means through which women confront patriarchal structures and attain liberation. In the early twentieth century, lower-class communities across both Western and

Eastern societies were largely deprived of educational opportunities. This absence of intellectual development created a cultural environment in which superficial emblems of modernity were valued more than authentic intellectual or personal advancement.

Poorly educated or illiterate women were particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Lacking both education and economic independence, they often depended on powerful men who wielded their authority for self-interest. Tom Buchanan and Ibrahim Faraj vividly exemplify this dynamic. Both belong to privileged social classes, yet they display a striking absence of moral responsibility. Tom reduces women to gratify his desires, while Faraj commodifies Hamida for profit.

In *Midaq Alley*, economic anxieties shape the ambitions and interactions of its inhabitants. Mahfouz underscores this reality by remarking, "Money might be a dead tongue in other places, but in *Midaq Alley* it was a very much alive language" (Takieddine-Amyuni, 1985, p. 137). Within impoverished environments, individuals often imitate the lifestyles of the wealthy in the hope of escaping their difficult circumstances.

These ambitions are vividly reflected in the characters of Hamida and Myrtle Wilson. Convinced that her beauty and confidence qualify her, Hamida dreams of escaping the alley by securing employment beyond the narrow confines of her neighborhood. Likewise, Myrtle Wilson compares herself to Daisy and other affluent women at Gatsby's extravagant gatherings, believing that she too deserves entry into such a glamorous lifestyle.

In the end, both Fitzgerald and Mahfouz depict a profound division between privileged and marginalized social groups. They expose the struggles of those who inhabit the "valley of ashes" and "Midaq Alley", where poverty and limited opportunities shape daily life. Within these worlds, the pursuit of wealth and social mobility often overshadows deeper human values, as many characters become consumed by material success and fashionable lifestyles, at the expense of traditional responsibilities and emotional fidelity.

Conclusion:

Across the history of literature, female characters have been portrayed in a wide range of roles that mirror the social and cultural realities of their times. As a reflection of social transformation, literature reveals the evolving perceptions of women across different traditions and communities. The opening decades of the twentieth century marked a profound era of transformation. With the acceleration of modernism, the concept of the "modern woman" began to emerge alongside new social values and lifestyles. As modernization advanced, women began to step outside the traditional roles that had long confined them to household duties and socially restricted roles.

However, the shift toward modernity carried significant consequences. For many women, especially those marginalized by poverty and limited access to education, the quest for independence frequently entailed serious risks. The desire for social mobility, financial security, and personal freedom sometimes led women into circumstances where exploitation was unavoidable. As reflected in *The Great Gatsby* and *Midaq Alley*, the aspiration to escape traditional limitations could lead women into new forms of fragility and exploitation rather than authentic empowerment.

Within the broader field of feminist criticism, Marxist Feminists interpret women's exploitation as a systemic consequence of entrenched economic inequality and the pervasive logic of capitalist domination. From this perspective, the capitalist system consolidates authority within ruling elites and perpetuates the marginalization of those with scarce economic resources. Within this system, men frequently operate as agents of power, while women, particularly those without financial independence, remain its most exposed and vulnerable participants. In such contexts, narratives of

women's liberation often generate illusions of freedom yet neglect the economic realities required for authentic independence.

The female characters delineated by F. Scott Fitzgerald and Naguib Mahfouz dramatize such complexities. For instance, Hamida dreams of escaping the restrictive environment of the alley by the means of wealth and independence. Similarly, Myrtle Wilson yearns to transcend the poverty of her marriage by clinging to a man whose affluence promises the lifestyle she desires. Meanwhile, Daisy Buchanan and Sanya Afify exemplify how patriarchal structures can offer women a fragile sense of protection providing that they accept significant limitations on their independence.

In both novels, many characters belong to economically disadvantaged or poorly educated social classes. Their limited access to education and professional prospects consequently undermines their independence and renders them vulnerable to manipulation by socially powerful actors. Had these women enjoyed wider access to education and participation in professional and intellectual spheres, their circumstances might have taken a different course. The social transformations of the early twentieth century gradually opened avenues for women to assert both intellectual competence and social agency. Through broader access to education and the cultivation of rational awareness, women were equipped with more effective means to contest patriarchal dominance and resist repressive cultural traditions.

Both Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley* underscore the profound impact of social structures on individual conduct. Their characters' aspirations for modern ways of life frequently result in alienation, moral conflict, or tragedy. The experiences of these women demonstrate that true emancipation cannot be achieved through superficial modernity or material affluence. Instead, authentic empowerment requires structural transformation that provides women with opportunities for full participation in social, educational, and economic spheres.

Future Research:

Future research could broaden the current comparative study by incorporating additional theoretical perspectives. Postcolonial Studies, for example, could offer valuable critical insights on how colonial legacies and power dynamics structure the social contexts depicted in these novels. Both texts reflect societies shaped by broader historical forces, such as war and foreign political dominance, that leave their mark on the colonizers and the colonized alike. Interpreting these dynamics through postcolonial theory may uncover deeper layers of cultural tension and identity formation.

Another promising extension of this comparative study involves psychoanalytic approaches. As both narratives depict characters whose choices are driven by complex psychological motivations, personal desires, and internal conflicts. A psychoanalytic reading may therefore analyze the hidden drives behind the characters' choices and reveal how their inner conflicts intersect with societal constraints and cultural norms.

In conclusion, this comparative study of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley* highlights the intricate relationship between gender, class, and modernity across divergent cultural settings. By examining the struggles faced by female characters within these narratives, the current paper reveals how literature mirrors the broader historical transformations that redefined women's lives during the early twentieth century.

References:

Abood, A. (1999). *Al-adab al-muqaran: Mush'kilat wa afaq* (Comparative literature: Problems and horizons), Damascus: Arabic Writers' Union.

- al-Ghitani, J. (1987). Naguib Mahfouz Yatadhakkar (Naguib Mahfouz remembers), Cairo: Mu'assasat Akhbar al-Yawm
- al-Qaisi, M. A. (2004). Naguib Mahfouz, namathij al-shakhsiat al-mukararah (Patterns of repeated characters in Mahfouz's novels), Amman: Dar el-Yazori.
- al-Said, S. (1978). Trends of Egyptian novel from the second world war to 1967, Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif.
- Amīn, Q. (1899). Tahrir al-mara'a [Woman emancipation]. Cairo: Al-Turqi Library.
- De Beauvoir, S. (1953). The second sex. (H. M. Parshley, Ed. & Trans.). London: Jonathan Cape. (Original work published 1949)
- Berman, R. (2001). The Great Gatsby and the twenties. In R. Prigozy (Ed.), The Cambridge companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald (pp. 79-94). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bewley, M. (1954). Scott Fitzgerald's criticism of America. The Sewanee Review, 62(2), 223-246.
- Booker, M. K. (1996). A practical introduction to literary theory and criticism. New York: Longman Publishers.
- Choudhury, Z. (2000). Dream to delusion; Gatsby's tragic pursuit of the American dream. The Chittagong University Journal of Arts and Humanities, 16, 28-34.
- Curnutt, K. (2001). F. Scott Fitzgerald, age consciousness, and the rise of American youth culture. In R. Prigozy (Ed.), The Cambridge companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald (pp. 28-47). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- El-Enany, R. (1993). Naguib Mahfouz: The pursuit of meaning. London: Routledge.
- Fitzgerald, F. S. (1993). The great Gatsby. Hertfordshire, England: Wordsworth Editions Limited. (Original work published 1925)
- Haddad, Y. Y. (1984). "Islam, women and revolution in twentieth-century Arab thought". The Muslim World, 74(3-4), 137-160. doi: 10.1111/j.1478-1913.1984.tb03451.
- Hilal, M. G. (1953). Al-adab al-moqaran (Comparative literature). Beirut: Dar-o-al-audah and Dar-o-al-thagafah.
- Lane-Poole, S. (1906). The story of Cairo. London: J. M. Dent & Co. (Original work written 1902)
- Mahfouz, N. (1972). Zuqāq al-Midaq (Midaq Alley) Beirut: Dar al-Qalam. (Original work published 1966)
- Raleigh, J. H. (1957). F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby: Legendary bases and allegorical significances. The University of Kansas City Review, 24(1), 55-58.
- Shamsuddin S. M. & Abd Rahman M. Z. (2012). A note on French and American theories in comparative literature. International Science and Investigation Journal, 1-10.
- Tyson, L. (2006). Critical theory today: A user-friendly guide (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wellek, R. & Warren, A. (1942). Theory of literature. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc.