

Women Under Gazes in *The Great Gatsby*

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Much more than simple viewing, gaze, which is a kind of concentrated thorough long-term viewing, makes the gazer and the gazed establish a complicated power relationship. Frequently, women are in a position of being gazed at by others instead of taking the initiative to have a counter gaze. Consequently, they are confronted with abnormal self identity construction and alienation under the gazes of others and the self gaze brought by others' gazes. This is fully revealed in the experiences of three representative female characters in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. This paper elaborates on their experiences and the relative consequences under gazes—deviation of femininity and other aspects, in the hope of providing a refreshing perspective for the study on this novel, gaze and gender issues.

Keywords: Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, gaze, deviation of femininity, materialistic, aphasia

Introduction

"It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire," F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) thus describes the Jazz Age in his 1931 article "Echoes of the Jazz Age" (2014). In such a society where significant or extraordinary progress has been made in various aspects such as economy, politics, social structure and culture, most Americans are passively immersed in the vortex of the times. The individuals, whether male or female, to some degree suffer from inner conflicts and the confrontations between them. The outside world has become increasingly strange, causing people's ways of seeing inseparable from the colors of the times and society in spite of various specific forms. The world people face, organize, and utilize as an instrumental whole has become the world of others. They are no longer the masters of the situation, nor are they the master of themselves. They have become slaves (Sartre, 1993). People are constantly under the gazes of others, and these gazes are a kind of pressure on "me," which makes "me" lose oneself. More frequently, women are in such a position of being gazed at by others and seldom take the initiative to have a counter gaze. Consequently, they are confronted with abnormal self identity construction and alienation under the gazes of others and the self gaze brought by others' gazes. This is fully revealed in the experiences of three representative female characters in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), which has been studied from various perspectives (Tyson, 2006; Curnutt, 2008). In the hope of providing a refreshing perspective for the study on this novel, gaze

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and gender issues, this paper will examine their experiences and the relative consequences under gazes—deviation of femininity and other aspects.

Deviation of Femininity Under Gazes

Femininity generally refers to some psychological characteristics, personality traits, behavior, interests, and activities that women share or should have, such as carefulness and gentleness. Anyhow it is concerned with not only psychological gender but also social gender. Female groups formed in social culture, which forms a binary opposition with male social groups or masculinity that precisely causes people to have prejudice against women and have a specific biased perception to constrain women. Due to gender inequality, women have been placed under male visual hegemony and their bodies are used as display items for various exposed and ornamental activities. Meanwhile women's natural desires as a complete and independent individual are suppressed or even ignored, only serving as male dolls for entertainment, appreciation, and benefits. "Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 6).

In the novel, Daisy chooses willingly to cater to the preference, orientation even kinks of men so as to maintain or obtain a better life even being gazed at by men from various aspects. When Daisy first meets her cousin and whispers and exchanges convention greetings to him, Nick comments: "I've heard it said that Daisy's murmur was only to make people lean towards her" (Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 11). She has been accustomed to making others actively lean towards her during conversations due to the frequent wanders in a male dominated world. Such a making-people-lean-towards-her habit is hard not to be seen as a willing attempt to please men as coquetry, which is constructed by a social and cultural form centered on patriarchy. The process of shaping women's coquetry is a process of enhancing their awareness of being gazed. Women cast their gaze inward, observe their own words and actions, restrain themselves, and then turn themselves externally into male's objects to satisfy the expectations for women. Consequently, Daisy alienates herself by enjoying playing coquetries, immersed in the desire and satisfaction brought by money through pleasing men by utilizing her beauty. She completes self hypnosis with deviation of real femininity.

As for Mrs. Wilson, her deviation of femininity is manifested in giving up marriage ethics and sex morality to satisfy her desire for money and status. Unlike Daisy's noble background, Mrs. Wilson is the wife of a poor car dealership owner. She is supposed to be in a state of disheveled and listless marriage in the garage, but "there was an immediately perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually smoldering" (Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 32). She feels despair towards Wilson, who is vulgar, contemptuous, and impoverished. She does not want to endure the constraints of oppressive, passive, and decadent traditional marriage, nor the shackles and constraints of various female desires inherent in the traditional marriage. Ultimately she completes the alienation of her identity under the oppression of the traditional gaze, breaks through the cage of gaze, breaks through Wilson's status and subjectivity of gaze in marriage under the patriarchal system, and becomes Tom's mistress. She pins the satisfaction and realization of her desire on marrying a wealthy person, eager to achieve a leap from the lower class to the upper class through ascending as a mistress. In the gaze of class, her approach is ridiculous and useless. As an elite white supremacist and class

defender, Tom holds that “It’s up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things” (Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 17). Inferior dolls and tools like Mrs. Wilson must live under gaze, surveillance, and control of the upper social class and patriarchal culture. Once Mrs. Wilson wants to break through the cage of gaze and strive for her dominant position, without hesitation the power of gaze suppresses and tames her, transforming her into the appearance she deserves.

Unlike Daisy and Mrs. Wilson, who are dominated by men throughout their lives and served as adjuncts or embellishments of male life, and are in the entanglement of their husbands’ or lover’s desires, Jordan is an unmarried representative of the “new women,” being “cynical, boyish, and self-centered” (Phillips, 2003, p. 17). In the novel, Nick gazes at her in a masculinization way. Her body is not graceful and soft, but hard and vigorous. She proudly wears a conservative long dress that is not conducive to sports. She has neither Daisy’s sentimentality nor Mrs. Wilson’s allure. Nevertheless, even such a rebellious female image cannot escape being objectified by male gaze. As the heir of a wealthy aunt, Jordan is symbolized as “money,” and her feminine traits are brutally ignored. In a male dominated society, women’s golf is seen as a decent and socially entertaining activity rather than a competitive event, and at that time, women’s golf tournament bonuses are not enough to make ends meet, making it difficult to identify Jordan as an athlete. We cannot see Jordan’s specific achievements in golf in the novel. We can only see her bad deeds—“she cheated in order to win her first golf tournament and continually bends the truth” (Phillips, 2003, p. 17). Nick doesn’t say a word about her sports career, instead he only has some impression of her frequent feminine photos in sports newspapers. When Jordan tells Tom that she receives strict training, Tom looks at her incredulously and says that he can’t figure out how Jordan has “get anything done” beyond him. Jordan does not actively please men, but her energetic female stance has undoubtedly been suppressed under male power discourse, and thus withers prematurely with deviation from femininity.

Other Consequences for Women Under Gazes

In addition to deviation from femininity, there are more consequences for women under gazes, including the dependence of materialistic life and women’s aphasia of social rights. Under the intermediate gaze of patriarchy in society, Daisy is lost in a state of emptiness in both her spiritual and material life. When Gatsby goes overseas to participate in the war, Daisy feels the pressure of external “gaze.” She can not resist and resolve it, instead, she silently becomes the object of gaze and oppression. Her heart desperately needs the strength to support her hope, but she deeply feels the insignificance and illusion of this hope, so she needs some concrete and tangible things to ensure. Due to the gaze pressure and material temptation of patriarchal society, she can only accept reality and marry Tom Buchanan. She is controlled like a shackle by a 350,000 yuan pearl necklace, which is objectified as a symbol of his wealth, identity, and status. When Daisy returns from her honeymoon trip, she becomes totally dependent on Tom both physically and mentally, for she can only rely on this marriage to meet her needs for wealth and status. However, after marriage, Tom disregards Daisy’s feelings and rumors continues. Therefore, after a brief period of satisfaction, Daisy’s heart is quickly occupied again by emptiness—“The hollowness of the upper class” (Phillips, 2003, p. 35). However, she seems to enjoy the “happiness” numbly, and this numbness is precisely the reaction and inevitable result of her loss of identity and personality after self gazing under the male gazes.

In “the culture of indulgence” and “[f]launting recreations” (Curnutt, 2008, p. 36), all three women in the novel make the attempts to strive for happiness but all end in failure or lack of results. Daisy longs for love but is seduced by material and fame. She is clear headed but willingly pretends to be foolish for her desire. Jordan pursues independence in life but cannot live without the help of men. She is clear and helpless about this, and ultimately holds a cold attitude. Unlike the clear headed Daisy and Jordan, Mrs. Wilson, one of the lower class women living in that era, cannot realize the tragic nature behind the behaviors of relying on men for a comfortable life. She is a woman with stronger materialistic desires. With “a fierce vitality,” she doomed to look for “a way to improve her situation” (Phillips, 2003, p. 17). She keeps her mentally searching for new sustenance. Her cheating behavior violates the traditional virtues of marriage in a patriarchal society, but perhaps it is the only feasible means for her to change her class status as a disadvantaged woman. As she embarks on the wrong path, she actively becomes an object to cater to the dominant subject male, taking pride in being treated as male’s playthings, being gazed at, and being objectified. The spiritual dependence formed in a patriarchal society contributes to her inability to be independent in materialic aspect terms. She always adheres to men both in materialistic and spiritual terms. If there were no Buchanan, Mrs. Wilson would still have cheated on someone else of his status, in that pathetically she can’t distinguish between true happiness and desires. Mrs. Wilson’s disillusionment is fundamentally rooted in imbalanced social structure and gender issues.

In a society which cares “purely masculine interest” (Cited by Curnutt, 2008, p. 77), women are in a disadvantaged and minority position in terms of social rights. Accompanied by being gazed at, women are in a state of social aphasia. The three female characters in the novel, regardless of their class status, economic foundation, or marital status, are all unequally subjected to the gaze of patriarchy. For Daisy, who has already formed a family and is in the upper class, the manifestation of her aphasia is being stripped of expressing opinions and being neglected within the family. For example, in the first chapter while Daisy is chatting with Nick and discussing about babies, the conversation is suddenly interrupted by Tom. The topic concerning daily life shifts immediately to that of business and later to those of civilization and race, which carry a masculine temperament. This disrespectful behavior is brought to the objects by subjects of gazing, leaving them losing the voices. As for Jordan, who is emotionally independent and financially independent, she is still in a world where men set and dominate game rules. Only when she changes into a formal dress can she get noticed and respected by men who are the subject of gazing. On the golf course, she has no right to speak. She can only tragically win the game by cheating, which is the alienation caused by her aphasia. Mrs. Wilson’s aphasia can be attributed to both factors of class and sociality. Her death is a manifestation of being deprived of the right to speak concerning the meaning of life. This is a microcosm of the ending of all women who have similar experiences in that era.

From the narrator to the main characters in the novel, it’s the male who hold the discourse power. Female characters are subordinate and in a secondary position under male gazes. The female protagonist Daisy is “capable only of reacting to situations instead of instigating them” (Curnutt, 2008, p. 75). She is exiled to the edge of the story in the text, and the narrator Nick’s description of her is limited to observing her behaviors and other people’s evaluations except for the brief dialogue in the first chapter. Jordan is not written about too much in the whole works, while Mrs. Wilson is only mentioned four times. Besides, they are always in a state of being stared at without active content description, which reflects their passive status and lack of social discourse power. Moreover, in Nick’s concept, women are passive, absent, and mysterious, with tremendous destructive power

over men. In patriarchal culture, women are always acted as the executioners of male destruction—Eve seduces Adam in *The Bible*, causing him to fall and humans being expelled from paradise, while Pandora brings endless disasters and pains to human beings. Similarly, in this novel, Daisy exhausts Gatsby's energy and ultimately makes him her scapegoat, while Mettle directly leads to Gatsby's tragic death. They are "mercenary American women as dangerous to men as classical sorceresses" (O'Connor, 1964, p. 93). To a certain extent, Nick's gazes at these women also represent Fitzgerald's gazes at them and even the gazes of the entire patriarchal society towards women. It is no hard to imagine various consequences for women under such gazes.

Conclusion

Under the gazes of others and the self gaze brought by others' gazes, all three female characters are confronted with abnormal self identity construction and alienation. There are deviation of femininity and other consequences for them in spite of various specific forms. Daisy chooses willingly to cater to the preference, orientation even kinks of men so as to maintain or obtain a better life. She alienates herself by enjoying playing coquetties, immersed in the desire and satisfaction brought by money through pleasing men by utilizing her beauty. Daisy longs for love but is seduced by material and fame. She is clear headed but willingly pretends to be foolish for her desire. Mrs. Wilson faces a dual male gazes, one from the patriarchal system and the other from the social class. Her deviation of femininity is manifested in giving up traditional marriage ethics and sex morality to satisfy her desire for money and status. Pathetically Mrs. Wilson can't distinguish between true happiness and desire. Her disillusionment is fundamentally rooted in imbalance social structure and gender issues. Jordan pursues independence in life but cannot live without the help of men. She is clear and helpless about this, and ultimately holds a cold attitude. In addition, in a male dominated society, women are in a disadvantaged and minority position in terms of social rights. Accompanied by being gazed at, women are in a state of social aphasia. This novel is not a "woman's book" as *Tender Is the Night* (Curnutt, 2008, p. 77). To a certain extent, Nick's gazes at these women also represents Fitzgerald's and even the gazes of the entire patriarchal society at women.

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