Anusandhanvallari
Vol 2024, No.1
January 2024
ISSN 2229-3388

Icons of New Women and Flapper: A Perspective of Liberated Modernity and Rebellion in Female Characters of Fitzgerald

[1]Priyank Sonwani, [2]Dr Ravi Kumar Yadav

Research Scholar, Department of English, Kalinga University, Naya Raipur.

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Kalinga University, Naya Raipur.

Abstract: F. Scott Fitzgerald's representation of women is complex and often contradictory, reflecting the paradoxes of the Jazz Age. He is celebrated for creating the *"New Woman"* and the *"flapper,"* iconic symbols of liberation and rebellion. Yet, his female characters are frequently portrayed as victims of their patriarchal society, defined by men's desires, and ultimately trapped by their limited choices. Fitzgerald's women are a microcosm of a society obsessed with wealth, beauty, and social status, revealing the devastating consequences of these values on female identity and autonomy.

Keywords: *Women liberation, Feminism, New Women, Resistance, Identity*

Fitzgerald is best known for creating the literary archetype of the flapper, a figure who challenged traditional Victorian norms. These young women were characterized by their short dresses, bobbed hair, and carefree attitudes. They smoked, drank, and engaged in a more open sexuality, representing a break from the rigid social constraints of the past. Fitzgerald's early works, such as the short stories collected in *Flappers and Philosophers*, enthusiastically presented these women as embodiments of individualism and liberation.

Gloria Gilbert in *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922) is an early and quintessential example of this archetype. She is a beautiful and self-absorbed "jazz baby" who believes her beauty is her most valuable asset. Gloria represents a new kind of modern woman—one who is not defined by domesticity but by her pursuit of pleasure and her magnetic social presence. Her refusal to conform to traditional roles and her unyielding belief in her own allure were seen as a form of freedom. **Gloria Gilbert** is a quintessential representative of the Jazz Age "New Woman." As F. Scott Fitzgerald's muse for the character, she embodies the spirit of rebellion and moral ambiguity that defined the 1920s. Gloria is a beautiful, self-absorbed, and charming socialite who lives life as a performance. Her character is defined by her desire for constant pleasure and her rejection of traditional domestic roles.

Gloria's beauty is her primary source of power and her greatest weakness. She is aware that her looks grant her access to a world of wealth and privilege, but this also means her value is tied to a fleeting attribute. Her marriage to Anthony Patch, an equally aimless socialite, is not based on a deep, enduring love but on a mutual fascination with each other's beauty and an indulgent lifestyle.

Gloria Gilbert's dialogues in *The Beautiful and Damned* are often filled with a cynical wit and a bold disregard for conventional morality, showcasing her as a liberated flapper. She uses her words to express a sense of autonomy and to challenge the social expectations placed upon women of her time.

Gloria's dialogues reveal her apprehension about marriage, which she views as a form of social entrapment that can curb her freedom. When Anthony suggests they get married, she responds with a defiant mix of sarcasm and honesty. Her words reflect the flapper's desire for independence and their rejection of a life defined solely by domesticity.

"I want to be a bad wife," she declared, "I want to be a wife who drinks and gambles and has an affair with every man she sees. I want to be a wife who won't cook or sew or clean, but will only spend money and amuse herself."

This dialogue not only shows her contempt for traditional wifely duties but also her desire for a life of pleasure and personal freedom. Gloria frequently expresses her boredom with and contempt for the societal expectations of her class. She is an intellectual and emotional rebel, who finds the superficiality of high society stifling. Her dialogues often contain a sharp, observational wit that cuts through the hypocrisy of those around her.

"She's afraid of being bored," Gloria explained. "That's why she won't marry him. And that's why she'll go on marrying, and marrying, and marrying, because every man she meets is just a new kind of boredom."

Her perspective here is a direct challenge to the idea that marriage is a woman's ultimate goal. It shows her as a woman who values emotional and intellectual stimulation over social conformity.

Gloria is intensely aware of her own beauty and uses it as a tool for power. Her dialogues show a self-possession that was unconventional for women of her era. She doesn't apologize for her vanity; rather, she uses it to define her identity.

"I don't want to be a saint or a martyr or a nun. I want to be me," she says. "I want to be a woman who is loved and who loves herself."

This statement is a rejection of the self-sacrificial roles traditionally expected of women. It is a declaration of her right to exist on her own terms, to be beautiful, and to be loved for who she is, not for who she pretends to be.

As the novel progresses, Gloria's character arc is a tragic one. Her refusal to work or to adapt to a life without inherited wealth leads to a slow descent into poverty and disillusionment. She becomes a symbol of the Jazz Age's excesses and its ultimate emptiness. While she initially represents the liberated "flapper," she is ultimately a victim of a society that values women for their superficial qualities and offers them no meaningful path to self-fulfilment outside of their beauty and social status. In the end, Gloria's story is a cautionary tale, illustrating that a life built on a foundation of fleeting youth and materialism is destined to crumble.

Jordan Baker in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) also embodies the "New Woman." As a professional golfer, she has a career and an independence that were rare for women of her social class at the time. Her cynical, aloof demeanour and her "erect carriage" are often described with masculine terms, highlighting her rejection of traditional, submissive femininity. She is a confident and independent woman who lives life on her own terms, free from the confines of marriage and domestic life.

However, even as Fitzgerald celebrated this new femininity, he often depicted it with a sense of underlying hollowness. The flapper's liberation was often superficial, based on fleeting fads and a materialistic lifestyle. Their rebellion was more a performance than a deep-seated change, a reflection of a society that was just as concerned with appearance as the Victorian era it claimed to reject.

Despite their apparent freedom, many of Fitzgerald's female characters are ultimately powerless and trapped by their social circumstances. They are often defined by the men in their lives, and their worth is measured by their beauty and their ability to secure a wealthy husband. This portrayal suggests a deeper critique of the patriarchal society that confines women to passive roles.

Daisy Buchanan from *The Great Gatsby* is the most tragic example of this. She is not a liberated flapper but a woman who, in her own words, hopes her daughter will be "a beautiful little fool." This cynical wish reveals her profound awareness of a world that values women for their looks and docility rather than their intellect or agency. Daisy's famous "low, thrilling voice" is described as her most powerful tool, a seductive quality that makes men "lean toward her" and a symbol of how she has learned to manipulate her limited power. She is a

product of her society—she chooses the security of Tom Buchanan's inherited wealth over Gatsby's love, not out of malice but out of a desperate, pragmatic need for survival in a world where women are treated as commodities.

Daisy Buchanan's dialogues in *The Great Gatsby* are a master class in manipulation. She uses her voice, her words, and her carefully crafted persona to exert a subtle but powerful influence over the men in her life. Her speech often blends a fragile vulnerability with a seductive charm, making her seem helpless while she subtly orchestrates the emotions of those around her.

Daisy's voice is her most potent tool. Narrator Nick Carraway is immediately captivated by it, describing it in terms that hint at its manipulative power. She uses it to draw men in, making them feel as if she is confiding a great secret to them.

"I'm p-paralyzed with happiness."

Daisy's famous line is a perfect example. The slight stammer is a theatrical touch, designed to make her seem overwhelmed by emotion. It's a calculated performance of vulnerability that makes Nick and Gatsby feel a sense of intimacy and importance. Nick even notes that her voice is "full of money," an observation that suggests it has been cultivated to appeal to a world of wealth and privilege, and that it carries a hypnotic allure to those who desire it.

Daisy often presents herself as a fragile, delicate woman who is a victim of circumstances. This persona allows her to evade responsibility for her actions and to manipulate men into feeling protective of her.

"I'm glad it's a girl. And I hope she'll be a fool—that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool."

This cynical and seemingly self-aware dialogue is a chilling example of her manipulation. By voicing such a shocking sentiment, Daisy makes Nick feel as if he has been given a glimpse into her deepest, most painful truths. It is a moment of false intimacy that makes him, and by extension the reader, sympathetic to her. It is a calculated move that justifies her own choice of marrying for money and security.

Daisy uses her emotional displays to control the men vying for her attention. She understands that men like Tom and Gatsby are driven by their desire for her, and she skilfully uses this to her advantage.

"You always look so cool," she says to Gatsby. "You resemble the advertisement of the man who sells you a soda."

This seemingly innocent compliment is, in fact, a powerful act of seduction and manipulation. It's a double-edged sword: it is both a public show of affection for Gatsby and a coded message that allows her to communicate her feelings for him right in front of her husband, Tom. This moment of calculated vulnerability effectively heightens the tension between the two men and places Daisy at the centre of their power struggle. She thrives on being the prize in their contest.

Myrtle Wilson, from the same novel, is another victim. She is a working-class woman who seeks to escape her miserable life by having an affair with the wealthy Tom Buchanan. Myrtle Wilson's dialogues in *The Great Gatsby* reveal her as a victim of a rigid social system. Her words, often loud and vulgar, are not just a reflection of her personality but a desperate attempt to assert herself and climb the social ladder. They expose her entrapment and her ultimate powerlessness in a world that uses and discards people like her.

Myrtle's dialogue with Nick and the guests at her apartment party shows her living in a world of self-delusion. She's desperate to belong to Tom's world, but her words expose her as an outsider.

"I told that boy about the ice, he said it wasn't cold enough. He's a bootblack, not a butler."

This dialogue is poignant because it shows Myrtle attempting to perform the role of a wealthy socialite. She uses the pretentious word "butler" to elevate her status, but the correction to "bootblack" reveals her lack of genuine class and her limited understanding of the very world she's trying to enter. Her attempt to assert authority is undermined by her own social naivety, a symptom of her victimhood.

Myrtle's words also expose her emotional and financial vulnerability in her relationship with Tom. She sees her affair as a way out of her miserable life with her husband, George Wilson, but her dialogues show that she is completely dependent on Tom's whims.

"You can't live forever; you can't be a fool forever."

She says this to her sister, Catherine, as a justification for her affair. The line reveals her desperation to seize a better life before it's too late. It shows her as a pragmatic victim of a system that offers her no other way out. Her fleeting hope for a better life is hinged on a man who treats her as a possession, not a person.

Myrtle's victimization culminates in a moment of physical violence, where her dialogue is cut short by Tom's brutal act. When she dares to defy him by repeatedly mentioning Daisy's name, Tom strikes her.

"Daisy! Daisy! Daisy! I'll say it whenever I want to!"

This line, just before Tom breaks her nose, is the ultimate expression of her powerlessness. It is a moment of verbal defiance, but it only provokes a violent reaction that proves her lack of power. Her attempt to speak her mind and assert her will is physically silenced by the same man who promised her an escape. Her death later in the novel, run over by Daisy's car, is symbolic of a social system that literally and figuratively crushes her for trying to overstep her bounds.

Myrtle's vitality and ambition are admirable, but they ultimately lead to her destruction. Her tragic death, run over by Daisy's car, is symbolic of a society that punishes women who dare to overstep their social boundaries. She is destroyed by the same system she desperately tried to climb.

Nicole Diver in *Tender Is the Night* (1934) represents a more complex form of female victimization. Traumatized by incest, she is financially dependent on her father and psychologically dependent on her husband, Dick Diver. While she eventually regains her mental health and independence, her journey is a long and painful one, highlighting how women's psychological well-being is often sacrificed in a patriarchal system. The novel's focus on Dick's tragic decline, while Nicole gains strength, reveals Fitzgerald's complex view on the power dynamics within relationships.

Fitzgerald’s representation of women is further complicated by the fact that they are often viewed through the male gaze of his narrators. Nick Carraway and Dick Diver’s perspectives shape how readers see Daisy, Jordan, and Nicole. This narrative choice can make the female characters feel less like fully realized individuals and more like idealized objects of male desire or disillusioned reflections of their male counterparts’ failures.

However, this doesn't diminish the power of Fitzgerald’s critique. In fact, it sharpens it. By showing us how men like Gatsby, Tom, and Dick see women, Fitzgerald exposes the very system that objectifies them. He portrays women as products of their hostile environment, a world that values money and appearance over spirituality and genuine connection. Ultimately, Fitzgerald's female characters are not just beautiful or damned; they are poignant reflections of a society in moral decay, where even the most alluring and seemingly liberated women are still, in many ways, trapped in the glittering cage of the Jazz Age.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's representation of women is complex and deeply contradictory. While his novels appear to celebrate the liberated "flapper," they ultimately reveal the ways in which these women are victims of a patriarchal social system that values them for their beauty and wealth rather than their intellect or character.

Fitzgerald's female characters, from the beautiful and damned Gloria Gilbert to the alluring and tragic Daisy Buchanan, are symbols of the Jazz Age's paradoxical ideals. They possess a newfound independence and a rebellious spirit that challenges Victorian norms. Gloria's dialogues, for instance, are full of defiant wit and a clear rejection of traditional wifely duties. However, their liberation is often superficial, built on a foundation of fleeting beauty and inherited wealth. Their freedom is an illusion; they remain fundamentally trapped within a system that gives them no meaningful power.

The women in Fitzgerald's novels are ultimately portrayed as victims of their societal constraints. Daisy Buchanan's famous wish for her daughter to be "a beautiful little fool" is a chilling acknowledgment of the limited options available to women. Her decisions, particularly her choice to stay with Tom Buchanan, are not acts of malice but of pragmatic survival in a world where women are treated as commodities.

Similarly, Myrtle Wilson's story is a tragic one of a woman who tries to climb the social ladder only to be destroyed by the very system she desperately sought to join. Her defiance is met with violence, symbolizing how the system crushes those who dare to overstep their bounds. Fitzgerald's narrative choices, particularly his use of male narrators like Nick Carraway, reinforce this sense of female disempowerment.

The women are often seen through the male gaze, idealized as objects of desire or blamed for men's failures. This narrative perspective, while seemingly limiting, serves a powerful critical function. It exposes the very mindset that objectifies women and strips them of their agency. In the end, Fitzgerald's women are a poignant reflection of a society in moral decay. Their struggles are not merely personal but are symptoms of a larger societal sickness, where even the most alluring and seemingly free women are still confined by the glittering cage of the Jazz Age.

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