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## The Orientalist Discourse in *The Great Gatsby*

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Edward Said's use of the notion of the 'other' and 'othering' is in debt to his study of Orientalism, and mainly the contact of the Westerner with the Oriental. The suggestion is that many critics of Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* "have missed" to study the novel in relation to global issues of the time, or to deal not only with the domestic other, but also with the foreign one. Images of the Orient appear daily in American life and the Orient and its people have been stereotyped as violent and backward, a fact which is not necessarily a recent phenomenon, but rather a part of American history and the development of American national identity. (Kareem Habib Captan, 2008: 2) The Orient is divided into two main regions. The Near Orient comprises Southeastern Europe, Mediterranean regions and regions of Western Asia. The Far East includes the rest of Asian territories. This division may provide a starting point for the study of *The Great Gatsby* in relation to global discourses of whiteness, Oriental backwardness and the construction of the other. The popularization of the Orient during the nineteen twenties led to the success of a number of motion pictures dealing with Oriental life and settings. The American interest in the Orient during the twenties, centered on seduction and sexuality (ibid: 99). Before the movie revolution, the Orient was presented to the American public either in literature or fine arts.

The technological advancements of the early decades of the twentieth century dissolved many boundaries, and the "Orient was mass-produced for the purpose of amusement, entertainment and profit." (ibid: 100) The Orient became a marketable cultural symbol that incarnated themes of sex, exoticism and seduction. (ibid) The exoticism of the Orient included desert adventures and romantic encounters; themes linked to increasing sexual identities and consumerism of the American urban spaces of the time, especially New York. Kareem Captan labels the twenties the American Orientalist Renaissance. (ibid: 104) Edward Said has observed that the Orient has been one of the "deepest and most recurrent images of the Other" for the Orientalists. (Said, 1991: 1) As early as the 1920s famous European newspapermen traveled to the United States to diffuse lectures about the difference between the Orient and the Occident, and to convince young educated Americans that the East was not really as far as they believed. (ibid: 251-2) About 150 films about Oriental themes and settings were realized during the period. (Saleh Alaswad, 2000: 2)

In spite of "sites of memory being in the nostalgic past" Ymitri Jayasundera states, "the empire becomes a stable reference for defining 'civilized' identity against the exoticized Other." (Jayasundera, 2001: viii) The American expatriates (artists, writers and philosophers), among whom Fitzgerald was a member, living or traveling to Europe started consuming

European culture, and they were becoming imperial themselves. (ibid: 3-4) In literature, the foreign others are exoticized and sexualized in order to reinforce their otherness and to consolidate the subject's identity. (ibid: 12) Jayasundera continues that the domestic racial oppression of African Americans or other ethnic groups can be linked to imperialism; it just paralleled the external colonization and domination of "less developed countries." (ibid: 17) In this sense Edward Said maintains that all texts are "worldly and circumstantial", and that literary culture and society can only be studied together. (Said, 1991: 23)

Scott Fitzgerald's reference, in *The Great Gatsby*, to Rudolph Valentino and Orientalist movies through a fragment of song by passing children "I'm the Sheikh of Araby/ Your Love belongs to me/ At night when you're asleep/ Into your tent I'll creep" (Fitzgerald, 1994:85) connects *Gatsby* with Valentino's "ethnic, dangerous and paradoxically effeminized sexuality." (37) The emphasis here is rather directed to the way the song links the novel with the so-called American Orientalist Renaissance. James Gatz's transformation to Jay Gatsby of Long Island is read as an attempt at the appropriation of Englishness and its embodiment of a particular lifestyle. (38) Gatsby re-creates an Anglicized past as he narrates to Nick: "I am the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West...I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford, because all my parents have been educated there for many years." (71) Gatsby often imitates an English gentleman's speech by ending or concluding with the phrase "old sport". Gatsby's attempt at the appropriation of Englishness is shown by his having a man for the special purpose of sending him clothes from England for "the beginning of each season, spring and fall. (99) Gatsby's picture of classmates at Oxford where he holds a cricket bat impresses Nick and induces him to believe that Gatsby takes seat with future Earl of Doncaster. (73) It is for Jayasundera a sign of the "Americans' romance with the English aristocracy"(Jayasundera, 2001: 39). Nick's immediate reaction to the story is romantic visualization of Gatsby as an adventurer of the British Empire: "I saw the skins of tigers flaying in his palace of Grand Canal; I saw him opening a chest of rubies, with his crimson-lighted depths, the gnawing of his broken heart." (Fitzgerald, 1994: 73) Having both Gatsby and Nick make references to British imperialism gives evidence to the cultural brotherhood linking the Americans to the British emporium.

Edward Said's study of Orientalism, as he puts it, uses the devices called 'strategic location' which is a "way of describing the author's position in a text with regard to Oriental material he writes about", as well as the 'strategic formation' which is a way of analyzing the "relationship between texts and the way in which groups of texts, types of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter in the culture at large". (Said, 1991: 20) It is usually an involvement in a certain brotherhood based upon a "common discourse, a common praxis, a library, a set of received ideas." (ibid: 121) One of the probable writers who influenced Fitzgerald while he was composing *The Great Gatsby* is Rudyard Kipling, with his British characters living in the Orient. (James Path in *Journal of Modern Literature*, 2002: 133) Kipling wrote: "East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet." (Qtd in ibid: 132) According to Edward Said Orientalism is a style of thought transmitted among poets, novelists, and imperial administrators who have accepted the basic distinctions between East and West as the starting point for "elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions... concerning the Orient, its people, customs, 'mind', destiny and so on". (Said, 1991: 2-3) Nick Caraway comments that East Egg and

West Egg are different in every detail, except for size and shape (Fitzgerald, 1994: 11), which is the reproduction of the parallel train-track-like separation of the British and colonial subjects in *Kim*. Nick's conclusion of *The Great Gatsby* suggests that the novel "has been a story of the West, after all – Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly inadaptable to Eastern life." (183)

The echoes of Western European imperialism and its modes of functioning are frequent in *The Great Gatsby*. Tom's rhetoric about "civilization going to pieces" situates Fitzgerald's work with the Western claim of power in the name of civilization and knowledge. One of the effects of the devastating World War I is the widespread of Woodrow Wilson's "Fourteen Points", particularly the freedom of nations to self-determination of their respective fates. Many colonized peoples started questioning the colonial domination and rule, and the imperial powers were in a phase of decline. Beginning in the twenties, as Edward Said suggests, the world map of imperial powers began to change as the United States showed signs of eventual world leadership, which would be just to intensify after World War II. (Said, 1991: 104) With Europe in disarray after the Versailles Treaty, America has suddenly taken, if not all the mission of the traditional colonial giants, their rationale and modes of justification. (Betsy Nies, 1998: 188) The Orient is often made up of a set of characteristics which separate it from the West, but at the same time invites, especially for Americans, the West to control, and otherwise govern the Other. (Edward Said, 1991: 48) The work the United States has been called upon to carry was "civilization- oh science and art, and all that", to use Fitzgerald's words. (1994: 20) In an article entitled "Undiscovering the Country: Conrad, Fitzgerald, and Meta-National Form" Peter Mallios quotes Fitzgerald who once wrote that "America's 'utterly national' vision would become written with the literary advent of 'our' Conrad." (In Mallios in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 2001: 357) Mallios assumes that Joseph Conrad and Scott Fitzgerald shared a preoccupation with modern cultural and geographical problematic of nationality and nationhood. (ibid: 358) Conrad's first and only visit to the United States in 1923 made the headlines of the time.

Conrad is a major reference of British Empire adventure and literature, and the case here is not dealing with his arguments as much as it is with the way they are related to *The Great Gatsby*. Nick's reference to the New World in the Dutch Sailors' eyes, by the end of the novel, is an echo of Marlow's speech, at the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*, about how London and the Thames must have looked to the Roman explorers and occupants. Moreover, Fitzgerald's prediction of the American future with "boats against the current" and by having Gatsby a sailor by profession constitute a striking reference to Marlow and the Nelly; one of Gatsby's guests says the host does not live in a house but in a yacht. Both Kurtz and Gatsby are respective mysteries to the narrators of their stories. Both of them stir ambivalence, admiration, and scorn. Kurtz is the product of all Europe and its imperialism, and Gatsby strives to imitate and appropriate the English imperial adventurer's life who "lived as a young rajah" in different capitals. (Fitzgerald, 1994: 71) Gatsby is also the product of Dan Cody who initiated him to travel all around the continent and even to the Barbary Coast. It seems that the United States was said to begin where other traditional imperial powers were about to cease. Like Conrad's Marlow, Fitzgerald's Nick gives himself a high dimension in the narrative: "I was guide, a pathfinder, an original settler." (20) After exhibiting his English-like lifestyle, Gatsby tells Nick that he did not want him to "think that [I] was just some nobody." (73)

Having established West Egg as the parallel of the East, Nick confesses that “West Egg especially, still figures in my more fantastic dreams. It is what Edward Said refers to as the orientalist’s “day-dream of the Orient”, given that “Orientalism is rooted in Romanticism”, and is “the purest form of Romanticism.” (Said, 1991: 52- 130- 138) The going abroad of Americans is mentioned in the novel as Nick talks about one of Gatsby’s last visitors who had been in one of the ends of the earth and did not know the party was over. (Fitzgerald, 1994: 187) According to Said the justification in the name of the enterprises of civilization provoke such outgoing activities as travel, conquest, and new experiences. (Said, 1991: 57) Just after this mention of American expatriates, Fitzgerald goes to the prophecy of the American future imperialism. Nick says that Gatsby who, for William Trilling comes to stand inevitably for America itself (in Jeffrey L Decker *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 1994: 55)

believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter now, tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther...And one fine morning-... So we beat on boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly in the past.

(Fitzgerald, 1994: 188[emphasis mine])

Fitzgerald concludes the novel by situating the present “now” of his country amid a prediction of an imperial “future” for stretching out of arms farther and a “past” of northwestern European explorers and conquistadors. Fitzgerald once wrote that he finally believed in “the white man’s burden.” (In Peter Gregg Slater in *Twentieth Century Literature*, 1973: 60) There is a general tendency among Orientalists to emphasize on “the White Man’s difficult civilizing mission”. (Edward Said, 1991: 254)

According to Edward Said the encounter between the Occident and Orient occurs primarily, but not exclusively, in the context of colonialism. Arguing that “Orientalism is a rationalization of colonialism is to ignore the extent to which colonial rule is justified in advance, rather than after the fact.” (ibid: 39) David Robert Jansson points out that imperialism should not exclusively be equated with Orientalism; we should rather try to understand the way the character of their relationship and their modes of operating reinforce mutually the one and the other. (Jansson, 2005: 43) The Orient was first presented to Americans (not in literature and fine arts) during the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, which had driven crowds of as many people as not less than seventy million fairgoers. (Kareem H Captan, 2008: 75) Historian Robert Rydell assumes that the world’s fairs bear an imperialist nature and “offered Americans a powerful and highly visible, modern, evolutionary justification for long standing racial and cultural prejudices.” (Qtd in ibid: 76) Edward Said maintains that Orientalism is characterized by a permanent “will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is manifestly different”. (Said, 1991: 12) The major ambition of Orientalism, Said continues, is to master all of a world, not only part of it. (ibid: 109)

The depiction of the Orient as highly exotic and its usual associations with feminine penetrability are not the innovation of the “American Orientalist Renaissance” of the nineteen twenties. Orientalism has been a perpetual reconstruction and repetition, it is a set of

“structures inherited from the past, secularized, redisposed, and re-formed”. (ibid: 122) Here are the words written in one of the New York Times reports to describe Arabs who had come to exhibit in the Fair:

The steamship Guildhall arrived from Alexandria, Egypt, yesterday having on board 166 Egyptians, men and women, who are intended for exhibition at the World’s Fair at Chicago...The men are wrestlers, acrobats, sword swallows, fire eaters, and snake charmers, the women are flower and dancing girls, and fortune tellers.  
(Qtd in Kareem H Captan, 2008: 80)

The Chicago Tribune wrote:

At 11 o’clock somebody blew a strange kind of horns which included small boys out of hidden corners, caused dancing girls to skip out of the theaters in haste, and called forth a solemn procession of veiled beauties from the harem... Musicians mounted the camels and began grinding music that was out of tympani horns and stringed instruments...It was Cairo all through, an old traveler said, with the exception of ‘stifled filth’ of the Egyptian city. (Qtd in ibid)

As the American Frontier was declared close, Americans began to look for a new one, and the Orient provided a perfect imagined geography. (ibid: 115) Edward Said explains that the Orient was a European invention, and has been depicted as a place of “romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes”. (Said, 1991: 1) The European encounter with the Orient was due to the contacts their imperial involvements suggested. However, the United States, with the exception of some travelers, traders, and missionaries, did not have that “physical familiarity and geographical closeness with the Orient.” (Kareem H Captan, 2008: 116) The geographical gap was bridged by the Hollywood movie industry. This is how, for Edward Said, the Orient- from being distant- becomes available. (Edward Said, 1991: 129) Motion pictures establish popular beliefs and shape the perceptions of other cultures; they are a tool of experiencing unknown territories. Edward Said points out that the American interest in the Orient, before being political, military, and economic, was dictated by culture which “acted dynamically” on these aspects. (ibid: 12) The American Orientalist Renaissance is called so because of the orientalist films which were highly sexualized and exoticized. (Kareem H Captan, 2008: 115)

Orientalism for Edward Said is a vision of reality whose structure promotes the difference between the familiar (the West “us”) and the strange (the Orient “them”). The fragments of the song some children repeat in *The Great Gatsby* are a reference to one of the earliest and most popular films dealing with Oriental life and settings. *The Sheikh* (1921) was the first Orientalist film to achieve a significant popularity among audiences. It is a cinematographic adaptation of a best-seller novel which has got the same title. It was written by a Derbyshire lady who never traveled beyond London. Nevertheless, the narrative deals

with some European and American expatriates and their enjoying leisure and adventure in the Algerian French-occupied small town around the desert of Biskra. Edward Said argues that texts exist in contexts, and that any individual author is under influences and pressures of conventions, predecessors, and rhetorical styles. (Said, 1991: 13)

The growing widespread of travel literature, imaginary utopias, and different voyages brought the Orient to the Western audiences. (ibid: 117) This kind of orientalist films was a revolution in the United States during the nineteen twenties, but as far as the Orient is concerned, the films “recycled traditional illustrations... [and] recreated narratives of Orientalism” and preserved and maintained the old depiction of the Orient as backward and erotic. (Kareem H Captan, 2008: 116) The transmission of ideas places *The Great Gatsby* in the context of global discourses of Orientalism and the superiority of whiteness. For Said Orientalism is a dynamic exchange between individual authors and the large political concerns shaped by the three great empires: English, French, and American. (Said, 1991: 15)

*The Sheikh* and its cinematographic adaptation are about Diana Mayo’s “tour alone in the desert” (Edith M Haul, 2004: 1) and later on getting kidnapped by Bedouin Arabs. The narrative focuses on Diana’s days of captivity in the tent of Sheikh Ahmed, the chief of the kidnapping tribe and the one who will be revealed as European as herself. The plot centers on the growing love relationship between Diana and Sheikh Ahmed. *The Sheikh* Fitzgerald refers to was the embodiment of the “prototypical orientalist film” of the nineteen twenties. It is a presentation of the Oriental life and settings. Edward Said insists on the point that the Orient is Orientalized, which is a process which forces the Western initiated reader to accept Orientalist codifications and representations as the true Orient. (Said, 1991: 67) The actors chosen to play Arab roles, like Valentino, were rather sexual than masculine. (Kareem H Captan, 2008: 118) Fitzgerald’s structure of the fragment of the song goes with this idea “your love belongs to me”. This reinforces the fact that Orientalism is a male province and that the Orient has been linked with feminine penetrability.

The myth of the superiority of the white race and the fear of miscegenation resulting from mixing with “inferior races” have not been local characteristics to the United States. They have rather been global issues. The same fear of Tom and nativist America of miscegenation is found in Haul’s *The Sheikh*. Before Diana knows about Sheikh Ahmed’s real origins, an eventual mixing with him was her major phobia; the Sheikh amuses himself when saying “what do you hate most?- my kisses?”. (Haul, 2004: 138) However, when Diana becomes aware of the Sheikh’s English origins, she begins to admit the compatibility of the love relationship and says: “I am not afraid of anything with your arms round me, my desert lover, Ahmed, Monseigneur.” (ibid: 280) The scenario of the film also ends with the kiss which “satisfied the fear of miscegenation” among the contemporary audiences of Scott Fitzgerald. (Kareem H Captan, 2008: 119)

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