

## “*Sitr Awra*”: Employing Style for Self-Staging and Identity-Reconstruction in Abdel Quddous’s “I’m Not Lying, but I’m Beautifying” (1975)<sup>1</sup> and Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925)

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### Abstract

The short story “I’m Not Lying, but I’m Beautifying” (1975), by the Egyptian writer Ihsan Abdel Quddous, and the novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925), by the American writer F. Scott Fitzgerald, are separated by vast temporal and physical spaces and represent different societies and cultures; yet, they tackle social problems that are timeless and universal. Their two protagonists, who come from poor working-class backgrounds, aspire to and dream of social mobility and recognition. However, in their stratified societies, which ascribe status based on birth and economic status, they are made to perceive their poverty and working-class status as “*Awra*” or social nakedness. To cover this nakedness and gain acceptance, they construct a stylized commodified image of themselves. This paper attempts a comparison of the two literary works, focusing on their representations of the two protagonists in a modern world ravaged by consumerism and market culture. Relying on anthropological and consumer culture studies, the paper argues that though influenced by local social and historical happenstances, the two protagonists’ self-reconstruction is motivated by an inherently universal human need for social recognition in a modern world in which the dream of social mobility is abetted by consumerism, yet hindered by deep-seated ideologies of social stratification.

**Key words:** style, self-construction, social stratification, consumerism, Abdel Quddous, Fitzgerald.

The short story “I’m Not Lying, but I’m Beautifying”, included in the short story collection *The Name of Defeat Was Fatema* (1975) by the prominent Egyptian writer Ihsan Abdel Quddous (1919-1990), explores social problems

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<sup>1</sup> All translations of the Arabic text are done by the researcher

which have always touched human sensibilities. The protagonist, Ibrahim, a poor, but ambitious university student, falls in love with his colleague Khaireya, a young woman way above him in wealth and social status. To cover up for his poverty and humble background, he dresses in style and weaves an elaborate web of lies about himself, but when the lies are exposed, he claims that he is not lying, but is “socially beautifying” himself. What is striking about his claim is the expression he uses in explaining his ‘beautification’ as “*Sitr Awra*” (131), an Arabic expression which literally means ‘to cover up (shameful) nakedness or weaknesses’. Ibrahim’s elaborate lies about his family, where he comes from and where he lives, and especially the way he dresses and presents himself recall Jay Gatsby, in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), who weaves a comparable, albeit more glamorous, web of lies about himself to appeal to Daisy, the upper class woman he loves. The two literary works have gained great popularity over time and have been repeatedly adapted to different media. “I’m Not Lying, but I’m Beautifying” was made into a radio series and shortly after into a television film in 1981. The story and the film remain very popular until today as they tackle “a problem that still exists in our [Egyptian] society today—class conflict and the fear of the poor of not being accepted in society” (Elleithy n.p. my translation). *The Great Gatsby* has also been adapted twice to the cinema, first in 1974 and more recently in 2013. The recent film was a huge box-office success and has affected a considerable surge in the sales of the novel, amounting to more than one million copies in 2013 alone. This success, according to Joseph Vogel, indicates that the novel still “resonates” today and that “like its protagonist [is] amenable to regeneration” (30). The popularity of the two works which transcends physical and time borders, and the intriguing similarities between Ibrahim and Gatsby suggest an enduring universality of human experience and beg for investigation to explore the forces which cause them, in spite of their vast temporal, physical, and cultural difference, to perceive their realities and social positions as ‘*Awra*’ or shameful nakedness which they must strive to cover. The portrayals of Gatsby and Ibrahim urge the questions, what are the social values which cause these two young men to see their poverty and working class status as *Awra*? Why and how do they use style and material possessions as a means to gain social recognition? How does social stratification affect an individual’s identity and self-conception? Does the fact that the two literary works expose similar social problems, in spite of difference in society and historical period, indicate that these problems are timeless and universal? This paper attempts a comparison of the two literary works, focusing on their representations of the two

protagonists and the process of their self-reconstruction in which issues of consumption, style, and social status intersect. It aims to investigate how the similarities between Ibrahim and Gatsby reveal a commonality in human experience that allows the details of the portrayal of one to fill in the gaps in the portrayal, and deepen our understanding, of the other. Approaching the two works from anthropological and consumer culture perspectives, the paper argues that though shaped by local social and historical happenstances, Ibrahim’s and Gatsby’s self-reconstructions is self-dramatization motivated by an inherently universal human need for social recognition in a modern world in which the dream of social mobility is abetted by consumerism, yet hindered by deep-seated ideologies of social stratification.

In spite of their obvious differences in genre, language, style, period and culture, *The Great Gatsby* and “I’m Not Lying, but I’m Beautifying” are essentially similar in their core story and in their representations of their protagonists, Gatsby and Ibrahim, respectively. *The Great Gatsby* is an American novel set in America during the Roaring Twenties after WWI, while “I’m Not Lying, but I’m Beautifying” is an Egyptian short story set in Egypt during the 1970s, 20 years after the 1952 Revolution. As a novel, *The Great Gatsby* gives detailed descriptions of the glamorous and loud social life in America during the 1920s’ economic boom before the Great Depression, while “I’m Not Lying, but I’m Beautifying” focuses on the broad lines of the relationship between the two main characters, with very little detail of social interactions. However, in spite of these differences, the two literary works are strikingly similar in their narrative technique and storyline. Employing the second person point of view of narrators who observe and report the action (Nick in *The Great Gatsby* and the unnamed narrator of “I’m Not Lying”), the two works tell the common enough doomed love story of a young man of humble background falling in love with a beautiful young woman above his socio-economic class; and they utilize the story to explore what seem to be entrenched problems in stratified societies. Fitzgerald’s Gatsby is a young man whose parents “were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people” whom “his imagination had never really accepted as his parents at all” (78). His childhood “platonic conception of himself” (78) and his ambition to be a gentleman crystalize when he meets the wealthy “golden girl” (96), Daisy. However, Daisy marries the “enormously wealthy” Tom Buchanan, and Gatsby, “a penniless young man without a past” (118), embarks on a journey of self-reconstruction which he hopes would gain him admittance into her world and allow him to win her back. The position of Abdel Quddous’s Ibrahim is similar

to *Gatsby*’s. He is an intelligent and ambitious young man who aspires to become a university professor, but he comes from a poor working class family—his father is a cemetery guard and care-taker and his mother is a laundress and he lives with them in a room annexed to the cemetery his father guards. He falls in love with Khaireya, the pampered, stylish only daughter of a wealthy middle-class family whose father is a university professor. Thus, he too, like *Gatsby*, embarks on a journey of self-reconstruction to be accepted in her world. The two young men are aware of their socio-economic deficiency and seek to ‘beautify’ themselves, employing style and material possession, or at least the pretention to it in Ibrahim’s case, and inventing a family history to cover up what Ibrahim sees as social “*Awra*” and be socially recognized and accepted. They seem to validate Stuart Ewen’s statement, in his groundbreaking book *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* (1988/1999): “for the people without money or cachet, particularly those who desire to be admired or accepted, the acquisition of style is a must” (xviii).

Roman Meinhold contends, in “Philosophic-Anthropological Implications of Fashion”, that man does not live in isolation, but “moves primarily within groups, which means that human reality is constantly social.” Within groups, man “needs his fellow humans in an essential and existential way” to satisfy his basic human needs for “recognition and self-esteem.” To gain recognition in a modern class-society ravaged by a predominantly consumer culture, man “makes use of (imitative) staging” in which “consumption [is] activated for self-dramatisation” (37-38). Thus, the houses/areas we live in, the products we buy, the cars we drive, and the clothes and accessories we wear are not mere objects of utility. Jennifer Edson Escalas and James R. Bettman maintain, in “Self-Construal, Reference Groups, and Brand Meaning”, that “people do not buy products just for what they do, but also for what the product means.” Products and goods have symbolic psychological and social meanings which are “used to create and define a consumer’s self-concept.” People “construct their self-identity and present themselves to others through their brand choices” (378). The goods we consume, therefore, aim at “self-construction” (379). They are, in Meinhold’s terms, “staging elements ... suitable for human movements on the stage of social everyday life” (37-38). They are not primarily important in themselves, but in the “meta-goods” (39) they represent and presumably satisfy, namely, man’s need for social recognition and acceptance within his society. The concepts of self-construction and self-staging and dramatization through consumption and style

for the purpose of social recognition and acceptance are clearly obvious in “I’m Not Lying, but I’m Beautifying” and *The Great Gatsby*.

In *All Consuming Images*, Ewen contends that “the seeds of the modern market in style” were sown centuries before the rise of industrialism and the middle class in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. “Fueled by their desire for franchise and status” the lower classes “mimicked and appropriated consumption practices of the nobility” to “obtain the imagistic trappings of landed heritage.” Clothing, he adds, is one of the elements of style which was and is “commonly understood [as a] mark of power” and reflects a “hierarchic world view” (26-29). In *The Great Gatsby* and “I’m Not Lying”<sup>2</sup> all the characters seem to be aware of the role the consumption of style, particularly of clothes and fashion, plays “in the consolidation of social relations and the expression of identities and values” (Schneider 409). This is made clear as early as the second chapter in *The Great Gatsby* in Fitzgerald’s portrayal of the character Myrtle Wilson. Eleven years married to George Wilson, one of the “ash-gray men” living in the valley of ashes (21), Myrtle entertains dreams of wealth and social status which cannot possibly be fulfilled by her poor working class husband. Thus, she is attracted to and starts an immediate affair with Tom Buchanan, Daisy’s husband, when she meets him for the first time on a train because of his “dress suit and patent leather shoes” (31) which announce him a wealthy gentleman. Her husband, on the other hand, falls out of her graces because before marrying him she thought he was a gentleman who knew something about “breeding,” but after the marriage she “knew right away I made a mistake” when she discovers that “he borrowed somebody’s best suit to get married in” (30). Myrtle obviously judges and evaluates the two men based on their appearance and style, and Tom’s stylish clothing signifies wealth and status, things that she aspires to. In the small apartment Tom rents for their love affair, Myrtle changes her “costume” and with the change of dress “her personality had also undergone a change,” assuming the “impressive hauteur” (26) she believes Tom’s wealth and status confer on her. Myrtle’s attitudes and behavior shed clarifying light on Gatsby’s as well as Ibrahim’s use of fashion and clothing in self-staging and dramatization. On first meeting Daisy when he was an officer in the army in 1917, Gatsby is “overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves, of the freshness of many clothes, and of Daisy gleaming like silver” (119). Daisy’s ‘wealth’ and ‘many clothes’ make him realize that being an officer is the “colossal accident” that made it

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<sup>2</sup> Henceforth, the shortened title of the short story will be used for convenience.

possible for him to cross the social “indiscernible barbed wire” that separates them and to be invited to her house (118). His officer uniform, especially in a time of war, confers on him a social respectability that grants him admittance into her world, but he is painfully aware that “at any moment the invisible cloak of his uniform might slip from his shoulders” (118) and expose the reality of his social nakedness. In a comparable reference to the relevance of fashion to social class, the narrator of “I’m Not Lying” describes Khaireya as “beautiful, with an exquisite taste in choosing her clothes,” a taste that is cultivated and provided for “by the wealth of her family” (126). Ibrahim, too, is aware of the role the consumption of clothes and fashion plays when he tells the narrator, “the shirt I’m wearing does not represent my father’s society ... my father wears the *Jilbab* ... and the pajamas you saw me wearing the other day has only recently entered our family” (131). He is consciously aware that the *Jilbab* is the dress of the working class and that it separates him and his family from Khaireya.

It is clear in the two texts that the protagonists are aware of the fact that, as Lizette Gradén points out, dress and clothing are “tools for negotiating identities” (341) and “dressing up ... is an opportunity to negotiate respectability, style, status, and personal image through the dressed body” (365). Thus, to match Khaireya’s ‘exquisite taste’, Ibrahim “takes care of his appearance and is elegant without being ostentatious,” and the only thing that seems overdone and attracts the narrator’s attention is the “extreme shiny brightness” of Ibrahim’s shoes which suggests “deliberate personal care not usually exhibited by hired help” (126). If Ibrahim’s unexaggerated elegance is designed to convey refined taste, the extra personal care he takes with his shoes reflects his attempt to wipe away, literally and figuratively, all traces of the dusty roads and narrow alleys he has to traverse walking to and from his home in the cemeteries (133). Gatsby’s clothes, on the other hand, are conspicuously flashy. The “caramel-colored” (52) and “pink” suits (97) he often wears, the “white flannel suit, silver shirt, and gold-colored tie” he puts on for his reunion with Daisy (67), and “the hulking patent cabinets which held his massed suits, dressing-gowns and ties, and his shirts, piled like bricks in stacks a dozen high” (73) are designed to reflect a glamour of wealth that would dazzle Daisy and match, if not exceed, the wealth of her husband. While ‘hulking patent cabinets’ and the ‘piled bricks’ of stacked clothing particularly, as Meredith Goldsmith suggests, give the impression of a construction in which Gatsby “appropriates images of might to mask the deficiencies of his origins” (447), Ibrahim’s elegant suits, as he says, “are an attempt to achieve that which is better, more beautiful ... elite” (131). Thus, Ibrahim’s and Gatsby’s clothing and style of

dress are indeed “costumes” used as “a mode of performance” (Gradén 341) with which they practice the ‘imitative self-staging’, pointed out by Meinhold, to gain recognition and acceptance in the socio-economic class of the women they love.

Despite the similarity in their dependence on clothing in their performative self-dramatization on the social stage, there is a marked difference between Gatsby and Ibrahim implied in the style of dressing which reflects their individual self-concepts. “Self-concept” or “self-construal”, as Escalas and Bettman explain, is a “mental representation of self” which is informed both by “personality traits” as well as by “social aspects of self” or “social roles.” Self-construction is, in turn, dependent on individuals’ self-concept or self-construal, their “ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming” (380). The narrator of “I’m Not Lying” describes Ibrahim as “intellectually serious,”

He does not speak much, but when he does speak, you get the impression that he does not speak because he is in love with his own voice, but because he has something worthwhile to say, an opinion to express. His knowledge is broader than his field of study at the university—his studies are scientific, but his knowledge expands to include politics and literature, and his words give you the impression that he loves reading and that he has read much. (126)

As a serious and intellectual young man, Ibrahim’s ambition is to become a university professor like Khaireya’s father. He is confident in his ability to graduate at the top of his class, earn a scholarship and travel abroad to obtain a PhD and return as a professor. Becoming a professor would fulfil Khaireya’s cherished dream of marrying a man like her father (135) and Ibrahim’s cherished dream of escaping his working-class status and becoming socially recognized. His erudition and unostentatious style of dressing, therefore, is congruent with his self-concept as a serious and intellectual professor.

Gatsby’s style, on the other hand, betrays the “Platonic conception of himself” to which he “was faithful to the end” and which was formed when he was “a seventeen-year-old boy” entertaining unformed and ill-directed dreams of grandeur and of “a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty” represented by his first mentor Dan Cody, the self-made millionaire (79-80). Attracted and mesmerized

by “the stories of the self-made men that dotted the history of America,” and by materialistic and frivolous ideas of grandeur, Gatsby “created himself, literally patched himself up out of popular ideas and books about self-improvement and success that he encountered during his difficult journey from youth to manhood” (Prigozy xxvii). His expensive style of dress, and flashy colors which are supposed to reflect class and refinement ironically reflect the enduring immature self-conception of a seventeen-year-old boy who, at thirty, is still perceived by the narrator, Nick, as “an elegant young rough-neck” who picked “his words with care” and whose “elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd” (40). His style of dress and his guarded speech, therefore, betray the transparent fragility of the ‘patched’ image he is constructing of himself. The “*correct* use of style” in clothing, Ewen maintains, is “a device for blending in, conforming to the expectations of the society at large. Being noticed approvingly [is] something to be desired, but being overly ‘conspicuous’ [is] something to be avoided, even feared” (79). It seems that Ibrahim is aware of this social rule of ‘style’ in his choice of clothes, while Gatsby is not. This is the reason the narrator of “I’m Not Lying”, completely taken in by Ibrahim’s ‘correct’ elegance, is “flooded with surprise” when he accidentally meets him at the cemeteries and realizes the reality of his social background (128). Gatsby’s ‘conspicuous’ style, on the other hand, is immediately seen through, by Nick and the other characters in *The Great Gatsby*, branding him as a ‘young rough-neck’ or “a person of undefined consequence” (51).

It is essential to point out that, as Ewen explains, style is “definitely more than a question of fashion in clothing;” it is a “part of an ether, a general sensibility that touched on countless arenas of everyday life, yet was limited by none of them.” Style “is a way that the human values, structures, and assumptions in a given society are aesthetically expressed and received” and is “an accolade applied to people, places, attitudes, and things” (2-3). Thus, Ibrahim’s and Gatsby’s choice of clothes is not the only element of style employed in the reconstruction of self. If, as Meinhold contends, prestige, recognition and self-esteem are, from an anthropological point of view, “human motivators” (40) which lead to self-staging and self-dramatization, “the ‘inclination to imitate’ is an anthropological constant that cannot be removed from man” (47). In human societies, individuals imitate ‘better’ and ‘elite’ social models “to gain prestige and a feeling of belonging” (40); however, “imitation via clothing merely serves as camouflage” a mere “protective shield” (49) which may not afford the imitator the assuredness of belonging and recognition he needs. In this case, a conscious

copying of a model not only in costume, but also in values, attitudes and behavior to the point of resemblance “gives the imitator (self-)assuredness, because he looks, believes and acts like the person who is more ‘successful’, ‘distinguished’” (50). Gatsby’s and Ibrahim’s self-staging styles of dress are mere camouflage, what Meinhold calls outer “wrappings” (49) that would not give them a secure assuredness of belonging. They need background and lineage, a ‘history’ that would further cover up their social nakedness and tie them to the class to which they want to belong. Gatsby, thus, completely obliterates the existence of his ‘shiftless, unsuccessful’ farming family and invents a family and a history which would give him a prestige comparable to that of Daisy and her husband. In his own self-construction, he represents himself as “the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West—all dead now. I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford, because my ancestors have been educated there for many years. It is a family tradition.” Conveniently, too, all his family died, and he “came into a good deal of money” and afterwards “lived like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe—Paris, Venice, Rome—collecting jewels, chiefly rubies, hunting big game, painting a little ...” (52). Wanting to give himself an ‘ancestry’ and a ‘tradition’, Gatsby presents himself as some imaginary romantic aristocratic hero and consolidates this image by flaunting his wealth and material possessions in his “colossal” mansion. Yet, even the mansion in “the less fashionable” (8) West Egg is merely a “feudal silhouette” (72), patched up of “Marie Antoinette music rooms and Restoration salons ... the ‘Merton College Library’ ... period bedrooms ...” (118). The model of life-style he pretends to, therefore, is both outdated and unrealistic; and rather than confirming his tie to the social group he aspires to belong to, it evokes a theatrical “threadbare ... image ... of a turbaned ‘character’ leaking sawdust at every pore” (52).

Unlike Gatsby, Ibrahim does not kill his family nor does he deny their existence, but he invents for them a history more grounded in reality along the model of social respectability in the society of his place and time. Instead of a poor cemetery care-taker, his father is transformed in Ibrahim’s reconstruction of identity into a land-owning farmer living in the village, but he is apparently well-off enough to send his son to be educated at the university in Cairo. To consolidate this invented identity, Ibrahim, who does not have the material resources available for Gatsby, merely dresses elegantly and pressures his mother “to learn how to prepare *fetir Meshaltet*, the expensive pastry wealthy families in rural villages are famous for,” to gift to his friends in Cairo (133). In Cairo, Ibrahim claims to live with an imaginary maternal uncle who lives in Garden City, a wealthy area in

Cairo traditionally known to have been home to old established families. He thus constructs a believable family history along established models of social respectability—his father is a well-to-do farmer in a new post-Revolution social system which values the land-owning farmers, and his mother has ties to an old aristocratic family who was privileged in the old pre-Revolution feudal social system.

In their self-reconstruction both Gatsby and Ibrahim are hostage to, and seem to have completely internalized, the deeply ingrained exclusionary values and attitudes of stratified social systems. They live, in their respective societies, in historical periods of time which are supposed to be revolutionary, affecting social change and fostering liberal social equality. However, their experiences and their self-staging expose the almost impossible-to-eradicate social divisions in human society based on wealth and status. *The Great Gatsby* communicates the euphoric sense of freedom which prevailed in America after the end of WWI and which was intensified by the economic boom that followed the war. The advancement of manufacturing and production, especially of luxury goods, and of the advertising and entertainment industries improved the quality of life for the working and middle classes and created a sense of “unmatched prosperity ... accompanied by intense social unrest and reaction” (Zeitzy n.p.). Many “instant millionaires” like Gatsby appeared on the social stage (Prigozy xix), and new mass-produced luxury goods became relatively affordable or could be bought on credit to be enjoyed by almost all classes. This resulted, as David Brody Dumenil and James Henretta maintain, in a fading away of “Protestant work ethic and old values of self-denial and frugality” which gave way “to the fascination with consumption, leisure and self-realization that is the essence of modern American culture” (qtd. in Thulin n.p.). The advertising industry which was also advancing very rapidly exploited and played on the heart-strings of desire and targeted people’s dreams. According to William Leach, advertisements were designed to “sell them what they longed for and hoped for and almost despaired of having ... [to] sell them dreams—dreams of country clubs and proms and visions of what might happen if only.” Leach gives validity to the contentions of Meinhold and Escalas and Bettman about the social and psychological meaning of goods. People, he adds, “don’t buy things to have them,” but they “buy hope—hope of what merchandise might do for them” (298). The Roaring Twenties then was a time of hope in which, as Nick says, “anything can happen ... Even Gatsby could happen, without any particular wonder” (55). The prosperity and its attending consumerism and euphoric sense of freedom that prevailed at the time,

communicated in the detailed descriptions of the lavish parties Gatsby throws every weekend at his “colossal affair” (8) of a mansion, give Gatsby and others the impression and hope that “the old boundaries that separated the classes were being broken” (Prigozy xix); hence Gatsby’s “extraordinary gift for hope” (6) which makes him believe that he can, with his ‘new money’ “repeat the past” (88) and win Daisy back, for now he has the ‘goods’ that would qualify him.

Though consumerism is not as overtly emphasized in “I’m Not Lying” as it is in *The Great Gatsby*, its promise is certainly implied in Ibrahim’s use of style. Yet, Ibrahim is also seduced by the promise of social change in the socialist rhetoric adopted in Egypt after the 1952 Revolution. “The revolutionary regime,” says Emily Cupito and Ray Langsten, “committed itself to expanding educational opportunity in pursuit of social justice and economic development” (184), and one of the avowed principles and aims of the Revolution was to

emancipate the poor from their state of perennial poverty, and to offer the destitute an opportunity to break free from the devilish cycle of poverty, disease and ignorance. It was for this reason that he [President Nasser] introduced free education for all. He believed that no one should be deprived of the chance to go to school or university because his family lacked the financial resources. (Haridy n.p.)

It is obvious that Ibrahim is one of ‘the poor and destitute’ who benefited from the new opportunities which give him equal rights to education; and he believes that education would empower him to change his status and reception in society. It is worth noting here that ‘education’ itself is seen as a ‘commodity’ which was mostly affordable in the pre-revolutionary era only for the wealthy upper classes; but now in the post-revolution socialist system it has become ‘free’. The acquisition of this commodity then is supposed to affect change in social status. Ibrahim hopes that if he manages through hard work and studiousness to become a university professor, “it would not matter that his father is a cemetery janitor as long as he becomes a professor” (135).

Both Ibrahim and Gatsby live in eras which promise change and empowerment and both dream of self-actualization and social acceptance, yet their adoption of ‘imitative self-staging’ to fulfil their dreams reveals a profound paradox. For, the ‘costumed’ images they present of themselves, their imitative life-styles and invention of family histories and lineages are built on the model of those they perceive to be their ‘betters’ and from whom they seek to gain

recognition. The problem is that in so doing they act a part that, as Meinhold contends, “does not agree with [their] own individual nature[s]” and reveals their “complete acceptance of the social role” which involves “the excision of the own self” (41-42). Ibrahim is “tormented” and “pained” by a sense of loss of self and of self-worth as he ‘beautifies’ himself to fit into a world where he cannot be himself (133). Moreover, the “something gorgeous” about Gatsby, his “sensitivity” and “responsiveness” (6) metaphorically represented in “his bedroom [which] is the simplest room of all” (73) in his glamorous mansion, are buried. In consequence, rather than self-actualization, they reproduce the same oppressive values that exclude them and deny their worth as human beings. What is also paradoxical is that their staged selves break up and shatter “like glass” (117), to use Nick’s expression, against the hard rock of the entrenched values of social stratification which they themselves seem to unconsciously perpetuate. In spite of all his wealth and efforts, Gatsby is denounced as “Mr. Nobody from Nowhere” (103) by Tom Buchanan who is, as Vogel puts it, “the embodiment of the traditional, masculine Anglo-Saxon aristocracy” and who has the social power that allows him to “call ... the shots and do ... as he pleases” (35). The way Tom exploits and abuses his working class mistress, Myrtle, striking her and breaking her nose when she dares to even utter Daisy’s name (31-32), is a clear indication of his arrogant belief in his and Daisy’s social superiority. It also foreshadows his attitude towards Gatsby and functions as “a sharp reminder that for life’s variety, men like Tom still dictate the terms” (Vogel 34) of social acceptability. For Tom, Gatsby is not good enough to come “within a mile” of Daisy unless he “brought the groceries to the back door” (104). It seems that in spite of the hope of social change that the economic prosperity of the 1920s promised, Gatsby, with his humble background, does not stand a chance in competing with “the descendants of ‘old money’ ... who invent a royal ancestry” (Pigozy xxxiv) that admits only their own kind. Though Ibrahim does not have a rival for Khaireya’s love and there is no individual person corresponding to Tom in “I’m Not Lying”, he is, nevertheless, in the same situation Gatsby is in. In his case, however, and in spite of his intelligence, intellectuality and education, he is up against a whole society where

people judge each other based on the place they stand on the social ladder. Janitor, undertaker, barber, head of board of directors, laborer, undersecretary, farmer. The formal title decides the position of a person in society, not his reality or his morality. People would say that a head of a board of directors or an undersecretary is a thief,

an embezzler, a hypocrite, a social climber, but still hold him in awe and wish to be his friends and would be honored to ask him to their homes and introduce him to their wives and daughters. And they would say that a farmer or a janitor is clean, honest, hardworking, truthful, honorable, but no one would shake his hand, or even think of inviting him to their homes. If this farmer or janitor went to the house of one of the elites, he will be admitted through a special door, the back door. If my father went to Khaireya’s home today, he would enter through the servants’ door. (132-133)

It seems that the revolutionary expansion of educational opportunities does not necessarily guarantee social inclusiveness or the reduction of social stratification (Cupito and Langsten 185).

It is worth noting that both *The Great Gatsby* and “I’m Not lying” use the same image of exclusion: If allowed at all into the domain of the rich and powerful, Ibrahim and Gatsby would be admitted through the ‘back door’ reserved for the socially marginalized and disenfranchised.

The failure of Ibrahim and Gatsby to achieve their goals of social recognition and acceptance in spite of their self-staging and ‘acquisition’ of material possessions or education necessarily poses the question, what is it that they really lack? And why is it important? A closer look at the women they love, Daisy and Khaireya, their characters and their positions, can provide an answer to this question. Interestingly enough, Daisy and Khaireya are as similar and different as Gatsby and Ibrahim are. They are both beautiful and they are both born to socio-economic privilege. Yet, they are different as individuals. Both women are pampered and used to luxury, but Khaireya

is also a serious girl who inherited her father’s love of knowledge. She is an outstanding student and she is determined to graduate with distinction and to start her professional life as a teaching assistant and then become a university professor like her father. (126)

Daisy, on the other hand, is a frivolous woman whose “impersonal eyes” reflect “the absence of all desire” and whose conversation is “chatter” that betrays “bantering inconsequence” (13) and “basic insincerity” (17). Unlike Khaireya, she is no intellectual and she seems to have no defined purpose in life except to move “with a fast crowd, all of them young and rich and wild” (61). The relationships of Daisy and Khaireya with Gatsby and Ibrahim, respectively, are in

keeping with the two women’s characters. While Khaireya is obviously attracted to Ibrahim because of his seriousness and intellectuality, in addition, of course, to his elegant appearance, Daisy was first attracted to Gatsby because he was a handsome officer in uniform and later because of his wealth and crafted gentlemanly manners. What is intriguing, therefore, is the similarity in the two women’s responses when the reality of the two men is exposed. In the last confrontation between Tom and Gatsby, Tom exposes Gatsby as a bootlegger and a ‘Mr. Nobody from Nowhere’, so when Gatsby presses Daisy to tell Tom about their love, she “hesitated” with “perceptible reluctance” (105) and then she becomes “alarmed”, “frightened” and finally “terrified” (107) as she realizes, Judith P. Saunders explains, that marriage to Gatsby “would take her out of the privileged socio-economic milieu in which she always lived. The safety net provided by high status, social influence, and prestigious connections would be lost to her” (156-157). This realization is confirmed after she (accidentally) runs over and kills Myrtle, for it is Tom’s social status that can shield and protect her. She, therefore, immediately severs all connections with Gatsby without looking back, leaving him to take the blame for Myrtle’s death and face his doom.

In spite of the difference in character between the two women, Khaireya’s reaction when the narrator tells her of Ibrahim’s reality is not very different from Daisy’s. Unlike Daisy, she does not panic, but seems to coolly and rationally examine and weigh the situation. She first goes to visit him in the poor room where he and his family live and decides to “start all over again ... to know you now as I have not known you before.” However, she recognizes that society “separates your family and my family and we must experience life in this society before we can decide” (139). Khaireya, unlike Daisy, does not break up abruptly with Ibrahim, but in her subsequent visits to his home she acts more like “a tourist who has returned from a visit to an old archeological site” or even like “a member of a charity organization who is helping the poor” (139). She is a detached “onlooker” who realizes that she is a stranger to this world and “she keeps herself separate from it” (139). She never tells her family about Ibrahim’s reality “as if she is ashamed of the truth” and she finally drifts away from him and decides to “stay with them—her family—in the upper world—the upper class” (140).

Daisy’s and Khaireya’s responses are, thus, fundamentally the same and are founded on similar social ideologies which influence not only women’s, but also men’s choice of mates. Relying on anthropological and evolutionary studies Saunders contends that both men and women choose their marriage partners

depending on their “mate value.” In human societies, she elaborates, “Marriage represents mate choices following predictable patterns” in which desirable partners “come from comparable backgrounds in terms of status, wealth and social milieu” (138). Since Gatsby and Ibrahim do not belong to the same social milieu and status as Daisy and Khaireya, they are undesirable. Saunders adds that “material resources and social reputation play such a decisive role in female mate selection,” but material resources are not equal to, and cannot substitute for, social reputation or status (161). Raymond T. Smith also asserts, in “Anthropology and the Concept of Class”, that money and material possessions are not the sole factor in social stratifications and thus those, like Gatsby, who are “an elite of money and power, trying to be an aristocracy” and those, like Ibrahim, who seek “occupational gentility” to achieve high social status may still be defeated (468-469). They are defeated because most human “systems of social stratification” are founded on “birth-ascribed ranking” (Berreman 388) or what Vogel calls “breeding” which defines and sets the “ultimate hierarchy” in social class interactions (34). Thus, for Daisy, Tom is an “attractive package” and a desirable “long-term mate,” just as she is an “extremely appealing package” for him—because they are almost equal in wealth and status, they are top-value spouses of “roughly equal desirability” (Saunders 139). Gatsby, on the other hand, is not a top-value mate because his wealth does not compensate for his humble origins. The same applies to a larger measure to Ibrahim since he has neither material resources nor social status. It is interesting to note, however, that Daisy and Khaireya are extremely desirable mates for Gatsby and Ibrahim. When Ibrahim says that Khaireya is “everything to me—she is my escape from my reality to the future I wish for” (134), he echoes the “colossal significance” Gatsby ascribes to Daisy (74). For Gatsby and Ibrahim, the two women embody “the ideal of perfection ... an almost unapproachable ideal of social success and self-realization” (Hays 320), a gateway to their dreams of social recognition and acceptance.

Saunders’ use of the terms ‘mate value’ and ‘desirable and attractive package’ makes it impossible to miss the implied intersection of consumer culture ideology with the ideology behind social stratification, resulting in the commodification of both women and men in what one might call the marriage trade or marriage market. Eric J. Arnould and Craig J. Thompson, in “Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)”, maintain that

the market place has become a preeminent source of mythic and symbolic resources through which people, including those who lack recourse to participate in the market as full-fledged consumers, construct narratives of identity ... consumers are conceived as identity seekers and makers. Consumer identity projects are typically considered goal driven. (871)

Ibrahim’s and Gatsby’s ‘narratives of identity’ and ‘identity projects’ which are pursued and constructed through the acquisition of style, material possessions, ‘commodified’ education and even stylish women to achieve social mobility are informed by a consumer culture which itself is “constituted, sustained, transformed, and shaped by broader historical forces (such as cultural narratives, myths, and ideologies) and grounded in specific socio-economic circumstances” (869). In a stratified society where social ideology determines ultimate hierarchy based on ‘birth’ and ‘breeding’, these determinants and those who have them become ‘valuable commodities’, or ‘objects’ for acquisition to validate social identity. Thus, the ideology of social stratification and the ideology of consumer culture overlap and frame “consumers’ horizons of conceivable action, feeling, and thought, making certain patterns of behavior and sense-making interpretations more likely than others” (869). It should not be surprising that Ibrahim and Gatsby follow the house rules of their respective, indeed it seems of all human, societies and seek to acquire the ‘mates’ who have the highest value to complete their identity narratives and attain the goals of their identity projects. It should not be surprising that both Khaireya and Daisy follow the same rules in refusing to be with mates who would not sustain their own social identity.

Throughout his writing career, Abdel Quddous “had one thing to advocate: liberalism and freedoms” (Ezzat n.p.) and his work was always “orientated to the ‘masses’” (Parkinson 32), their struggles and their dreams. Though in “I’m Not Lying” his “pen reflected the Egyptian reality” during a critical period of political and social change (Amer 55 my translation), the short story has a remarkable affinity to *The Great Gatsby* where Fitzgerald “records a moment when the promise of the American dream runs up against the reality of American life as those in power at the time defined it” (Del Gizzo 88). In spite of their distinct historical periods and local and cultural flavors, the two works explore and expose fundamental and universal human concerns. Ibrahim’s and Gatsby’s dream of social mobility and acceptance are defeated by unyielding and deep-seated rigid social stratification systems and a deceptive modern consumer culture that

provides them with “a vast palette of symbolic meanings to be selected and juxtaposed in the assembling of a public self,” but still fails to deliver the “dream of wholeness” (Ewen 79) it promises. Lured by the promise of change and motivated by their human needs, their “assembling of a commodity self” ironically leads to a “crisis of the spirit” (Ewen 79) which is aggravated by the exclusionary ideologies of their societies. At the end of the two works, their dreams are smashed and they disappear from the scene—Gatsby is killed by George Wilson and Ibrahim just fades away as the narrator focuses only on Khaireya’s feelings and reactions. The readers, at the end, are left with the laments of the narrators. The unnamed narrator of “I’m Not Lying” is “troubled” because the forces of “appearances and the old social traditions ... have not changed much in spite of the revolution and in spite of socialism ... twenty years after the revolution we have not changed much” (139-140). Similarly, Nick, at the end of *The Great Gatsby*, laments the passing away of Gatsby and with him the “last and greatest of all human dreams” (143) or what Fitzgerald himself calls “the loss of those illusions that give such colour to the world” (145). Within these laments, however, one may detect a tiny glimmer of hope for humanity. The mere fact that Abdel Quddous’s narrator acknowledges the failure of the communal ‘we’ to change, and that Nick acknowledges that Gatsby’s was the ‘greatest of human dreams’ may after all justify a hope that what eluded Ibrahim and Gatsby could be possible in what Nick calls a distant “organic future” (144).

In conclusion, although Ihsan Abdel Quddous’s “I’m Not Lying, but I’m Beautifying” and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* are separated by a half century and represent two different societies and cultures in two different continents, they, nevertheless, reveal unmistakable similarities in an enduring human condition and social experience. Human societies are stratified structures where hierarchy is essentially determined based on birth, and to a lesser degree on economic status. Those who are placed by accident of birth or economic circumstances at the lower rungs of the social ladder are disenfranchised and excluded and are made to feel ‘naked’ and exposed. The rise of social revolutions and consumer culture in the modern world seemed to offer them a respite, a hope of social mobility and self-actualization, but this hope and the individuals who entertain it find themselves caught in a dilemma of conflicting and contending forces. The protagonists of the two literary works, Ibrahim and Gatsby, are the embodiment of this dilemma. Seduced by the dream of social change and motivated by the fundamental human need for social recognition and self-esteem, they are lured by a market consumer ideology which entices them to use

commodities in the construction of a presumably stylish image of themselves that would grant them social acceptability. However, their commodified selves prove disastrous—not only do the outer wrappings of style smother their real selves, but, equally importantly, they are too fragile to hold in the face of the scrutiny of the powerful and deep-rooted ideology of traditional social stratifications. The two works thus end with a pessimistic note, a profoundly disturbing sense of loss which is faintly ameliorated by a faith in human potential and a hope for the future.

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**"ستر عورة": توظيف نمط الأناقة لتدريج وإعادة بناء الذات في قصة "أنا لا أكذب ولكني أتجمل" لاحسان عبد القدوس و"جاتسبي العظيم" لفتزجيرالد**

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**المستخلص**

القصة القصيرة "أنا لا أكذب ولكني أتجمل" (1975) للكاتب المصري احسان عبد القدوس، و رواية "جاتسبي العظيم" (1925) للكاتب الأمريكي ف سكوت فتزجيرالد منفصلتان انفصالا واسعا في الزمان و المكان، كما انهما تصوران مجتمعين و ثقافتين مختلفتين. و برغم ذلك كلتاهاما تعرضان لنفس المشكلات الاجتماعية العامة التي تتخطى حدود الزمان و المكان. بطلا العملين ينتميان للطبقة العاملة الفقيرة ولكنهما يحلمان بالترقي و القبول الاجتماعي. ولكن مجتمعاتهم الطبقيّة التي تحدد مكانة الفرد تبعا للمولد و المستوى الاقتصادي تجعلهما يرون فقرهم و انتمائهم للطبقة العاملة على انها "عورة" و لاخفاء هذه العورة والحصول على القبول الاجتماعي بينان لأنفسهما صورة سلعية زائفة. تقارن هذه الدراسة بين العملين مع التركيز على تصويرهما للبطلين في عالم حديث مزقته ثقافة الاستهلاك و السوق. تعتمد الدراسة على دراسات في الأنثروبولوجيا و ثقافة المستهلك لتوضح انه برغم تأثرهما بالظروف الاجتماعية و التاريخية المحلية الخاصة بمجتمعاتهما الا أن البناء الذاتي للبطلين مدفوع بحاجة انسانية عامة و طبيعية للقبول الاجتماعي في عالم حديث تقوي النزعة الاستهلاكية فيه حلم الحراك الاجتماعي و مع ذلك تعيقه ايدولوجيات طبقية عميقة الجذور.

**الكلمات الدالة:** نمط الأناقة، إعادة بناء الذات، الطبقة الاجتماعية، الاستهلاكية، عبد القدوس، فتزجيرالد