



Affluenza, Ethics, and Power: A Qur'anic and Allegorical Reading of Tom Buchanan in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

A Paper by

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Received Jun. 21, 2026

Revised Jul.20, 2026

Accepted Aug 31, 2026

Online October1, 2026

ABSTRACT

The present study aims to explore the character of Tom Buchanan in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). It sheds light on ethical, psychological, and dominant behavior to fill the research gap stemming from the critical overemphasis on Jay Gatsby and the American Dream. The present study implements the concept of 'hoarding' allegorically, psychologically, and sociologically to interpret the personal desire to control and hoard. It also implements Thorstein Veblen's concepts of 'affluenza', status, and relations. Hence, the theoretical framework bridges the relationship between affluenza, conspicuous consumption, and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social capital, in addition to mixing it with the Qur'anic ethics of 'kanz', 'israf' and 'mizan'. The study exposes that the inherited wealth of Buchanan does not simply foster an acute sense of class arrogance and an evasion of ethical duties, but forms a compensatory defense mechanism to deal with the psychological sense of insecurity and the fear of social displacement. Eventually, the study demonstrates that the novel critique of material decadence during the era of the 'Jazz Age' intersects with the universal Qur'anic ethical principles. This situates Buchanan's behavior as a modern manifestation of moral chaos equivalent to the concept of 'Jahiliyah' (the dark age of ignorance and disorder) before Islam.

Keywords: Affluenza, Tom Buchanan, Conspicuous consumption, Qur'anic ethics, hoarding, mizan (balance).

متلازمة الثراء, الاخلاقيات, والقوة: قراءة قرآنية لتوم بكنان في رواية فيتزجيرالد, كاتسبي العظيم
بحث تقدمت به

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المخلص

تهدف الدراسة الحالية لاستكشاف شخصية توم بكنان في رواية اف سكوت فيتزجيرالد كاتسبي العظيم (1925). كما تسلط الضوء على التصرفات السائدة أخلاقيا ونفسيا لتملا الفراغ البحثي الناجم عن الدراسات النقدية التي كثفت التركيز على جي كاتسبي والحلم الأميركي. وظفت الدراسة الحالية مفهوم الاكتناز مجازيا, نفسيا, و اجتماعيا لترجم الرغبة الشخصية للسيطرة و الاكتناز. كذلك وظفت الدراسة مفهوم ثورستين فيبلن لمتلازمة الثراء, المنزل, والعلاقات. فالأطار النظري هنا ينشيء جسورا من العاقات بين الاستهلاك التفاخري ومفهوم الراسمال الاجتماعي لبير بورديو, إضافة لدمجه مع المفاهيم القرآنية للكنز, لاسراف, والميزان. تكشف الدراسة بان ثروة بكنان المتوارثة لم تغذي فقط الشعور الحاد بالخطيئة والتخلص من المهام الأخلاقية وحسب, وانما اشكال من اليات الدفاع التعويضي للتعامل مع الشعور النفسي بعدم الأمان والخوف من الاختلال الطبقي. وختاما توضح الدراسة بان نقد الرواية للتحلل المادي خلال عصر الجاز يتداخل مع المبادئ القرآنية الكونية. وهذا يوضح ان تصرفات

بكنان انما هي تجليات للفوضى الحديثة و التي تكافيء مفهوم الجاهلية (العصور المظلمة من جهل وتخلف وفوضى) قبل الإسلام

الكلمات المفتاحية: متلازمة الثراء, توم بكنان, الاستهلاك التفاخري, الاخلاقيات القرآنية, الاكتناز, الميزان.

1 Introduction

The ethical status of wealth is the core of modern social and religious theories. Although modern capitalist societies usually link wealth accumulation to success and status, the ethical Qur'anic discourse situates wealth within an 'ethical economy' framework which is governed by the core principles of moderation, responsibility, and social contentment. The Holly Qur'an does not reject wealth per se, nor prohibit possessing it, but rather warns of deviating wealth from higher objectives via unethical behavior like wasteful and imbalanced spending 'israf' and material hoarding of wealth without social redistribution, which leads to 'kanz'-accumulation. Moreover, the Qur'anic perspective establishes these two concepts as a cornerstone of classic discrepancy and social inequality in addition to a manifestation of spiritual psychological and spiritual distortion. (Abdel Haleem, 2005, pp. 124-126; Chapra, 1992, pp 118-121)

This Qur'anic ethical framework is vividly embodied in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925/ 2004), where the era of the Jazz Age in the twentieth century becomes a background for the novel. This era witnesses a rapid economic growth and conspicuous consumption. The novel examines the dialectic between ethical responsibility on the one hand and wealth and power on the other. Since Jay Gatsby's character embodies illusion and allegorical aspiration, it draws many scholars' and critics' attention. Herein lies the research gap, for Buchanan's character remains not explored adequately. At least not in the way that suits his central role, for he embodies immorality within society in addition to the social hierarchy found in the text.

The study argues that Buchanan's moral conduct does not necessarily expose individual corruption, but rather a global phenomenon (affluenza) where inherited material privilege fosters a fake sense of moral entitlement, detachment from human suffering, and irresponsibility in inflicting harm and misfortunes upon other people. (De Graaf et al., 2002, pp. 2-5). Moreover, Buchanan's behaviors expose a sort of material excess, class-based hegemony, and psychological manipulation.

Such dimensions intersect structurally with the Qur`anic concepts of 'Israf' (wasteful expenditure), 'Mizan' (balance), and 'Kanz' (hoarding). Eventually, the current study aims at deconstructing and reevaluating the ethical ramifications of wealth through the character of Tom Buchanan. Doing so, it establishes a systematic intersection between allegorical imagery of hoarding, sociological theories of class reproduction, and the Qur`anic universal ethics.

2 Literature Review

Although the critical literary studies around *The Great Gatsby* (1925) constitute a rich reservoir for epistemology, the prevailing studies almost generally focus on either deconstructing the failure of the American Dream or on J Gatsby. Consequently, this emphasis delivers a critical bias that leaves the ethical and social forces driving the underlying dysfunction in the text unexplored.

2. 1. Prevailing Critical Trends that Focus on Gatsby and the American Dream

Not only classical critical scholars have predominantly shed light on the character of Jay Gatsby, but also contemporary ones. They propose that he is a tragic victim of American materialism. Many early sociological and historical studies view him as a symbol of self-made ambition in addition to a struggle with a closed class hierarchy. (Cain, 2020, pp. 45-48). Hence, such recurring studies examine the illusory nature of the American Dream and the moral decay of the Jazz Age, effectively confining the critical perspective to an internal material and class evaluation of Western American society without diving into the characters that stand behind privilege and power.

2.2 The Character of Tom Buchanan in the previous Literary Studies.

Dealing with the previous literary studies that explore the character of Tom Buchanan, it becomes evident that most of them deal with him as a secondary character who stands as the antagonist of J. Gatsby or a mere shallow symbol of racial and social arrogance. (Cain, 2020, pp. 52-55). Although some sociological studies propose that he stands for old inherited money and he enacts class superiority through violence, they haven't deconstructed his compensatory psychological dynamics specifically, how metaphorical hoarding and retention function as a psychological safeguard protecting his social status against any expected social challenge to his class superiority.

2.3 Qur`anic Ethics and Comparative Literary Criticism

Although many studies try to read and explore Western literature via ethical and religious frameworks, critical applications that are based on Qur`anic concepts remain restricted to Eastern or Arabic literature, or applying Islamic economic regulations strictly within the bonds of finance and

commerce. (Chapra, 1992, pp. 118-121; Rahman, 1980, pp. 38-42). Anyway, essential Qur'anic concepts such as mizan, kanz, and israf are rarely deployed as deconstructive critical means for interpreting modern Western literary texts like *The Great Gatsby*.

2.4 Research Gap

The gap which the present study addresses has three major dimensions:

1. **Formal lack dealing with Tom Buchanan's character:** a clear absence of critical scholarly discourses dedicated to deconstructing psychological and ethical aspects of Buchanan's personality being the sovereign of the empowered class and the motivator of the tragedy.
2. **The conceptual absence of hoarding and affluenza:** earlier critical scholarship clearly lacks integrating the concepts of hoarding and affluenza (Frost & Hartl, 1996, pp. 341-343) being a metaphorical construct for monopolistic authority, and its subsequent linking to affluenza from a sociological perspective. (De Graaf et al., 2002, pp. 2-5).
3. **Monopolization of Western Epistemology:** the prevailing critical reading is limited to Western epistemology. This necessitates an alternative deconstructive reading that is based on the Qur'anic ethical lens to shed light on global ethical dimensions related to human responsibility and material excess.

3. Theoretical Framework

The present study encompasses several layers under one umbrella. It synthesizes psycho-behavioral dynamics and sociological insights with the Qur'anic ethical perspective. Doing so, it exposes how material excess in *The Great Gatsby* shifts from mere possession of wealth into a means of supremacy ethically and psychologically.

3.1 Sociological Dimension: Class reproduction and Capitalism

Thorstein Veblen's (1899/1994, pp. 60-64) concept of conspicuous consumption clarifies structurally how wasteful activities aim primarily to demonstrate financial supremacy, gaining social status and recognition without a direct utilitarian purpose, where wealthy people cling to it, displaying empowerment in a way to affirm their reticence of labor and its wage. In the same way, Pierre Bourdieu (1986, pp. 241-258) states that power is perpetuated via conversion and accumulation of non-economic forms of capital. This includes social, cultural, and symbolic capital (like pedigree, prestige, and social networks). The formula of all these networks exemplifies how Buchanan's hegemony is instilled in social and economic structures that prefer lineage, social reproduction, and exclusivity to the traits that individuals gain through transaction.

3.2 Psycho-Behavioral Dimension: Compensatory Control and Metaphorical Hoarding

Dealing with hoarding as a cognitive-behavioral model of the psyche (Frost & Hartl, 1996, pp. 341-343; Timpano et al., 2009, pp. 1005-1008) is deployed as a metaphorical and behavioral construct that deconstructs the internal dynamics of monopolistic drive rather than a clinical diagnosis. In this sense, hoarding is intertwined with deep-rooted anxiety, a deep need to control, and a strong desire to control relationships and other individuals. Consequently, Tom Buchanan's resistance to social alter, his desire to enforce his authority over other individuals, in addition to his aggression to sustain his privilege, are manifestations of his potential feeling of insecurity. Eventually, his excess operates as a compensatory strategy to fulfil internal stability rather than merely a mark of his external power.

3.2 Qur`anic Ethical Economy: Kanz and Israf:

From a Qur`anic ethical perspective, wealth is governed by a normative system. This system prioritizes accountability, social justice, and balance, rather than treating it as a mere possession to fulfil personal whims or market apparatus. Hereby, Israf and Kanz become a fundamental pillar within this system.

Israf as an ethical and qualitative category: it is not merely confined to wealth wastefulness, but rather extends to exceeding limits of authority and behavior. It operates as an evaluative category that decides the moral orientation of deeds. For example, a certain deed might look negligible financially while it constitutes Israf when it is accompanied by disregard for others' rights, arrogance, and injustice (Chapra, 1992, pp. 122-125; Rahman, 1980, pp. 38- 41)

Hoarding as an imprisonment of Economic Structure: Hoarding is represented through wealth accumulation, preventing it from effective circulation, which in return impedes social redistribution. This creates a big gap between various social classes, for privilege and wealth is exclusively preserved via inheritance. The Holly Qur`an draws attention to the ethical responsibility of wealth through redistributing it across various social channels. It refers to kanz as the major player in framing deprivation and excessive concentration of power and hegemony (Nasr, 2002, pp. 115-118).

3.4 Methodological Synthesis and Analytical Integration

There is a mutual relationship between Israf and Kanz resembling an interchangeable reinforcement; as kanz (accumulating wealth monopolistically) formulates the core of israf (excessive conspicuous consumption), Israf, in return, is achieved through hoarding of social status and conditions, which perpetuate social privilege. Applying this to *The Great Gatsby*, such an

integrated formula establishes a rigorous assessment to evaluate the personality of Tom Buchanan, resembling a broader structural and ethical dysfunction exceeding individual deviation.

4. Buchanan's Character and Textual Analysis

4.1 Tom Buchanan: The Embodiment of Allegorical Excess, Hoarding, and Ethical Dysfunction

Tom Buchanan's personality reflects reciprocal multilayered dimensions of excess that go beyond mere material dimensions to encompass social hegemony and psychological control. He had a special central personality driven by his inherited wealth, which enables him to achieve authority and social empowerment, while shielding him from ethical scrutiny. The narrator of *The Great Gatsby* (Nick Carraway) refers to the nature of this wealth, "His family were enormously wealthy-even in college his freedom with money was a matter for reproach" (Fitzgerald, 1925/ 2004, p. 6). Thorstein Veblen's conspicuous consumption's concept aligns with this. The display of abundance and expenditure functions as evidence of sovereignty and superiority rather than a need.

Analyzing Buchanan's wealth materially, it lacks any functional or productive purpose due to its purely inherited nature. It is idle, unable to make any growth, and has no purpose other than displaying social status and erasing competitors. Consequently, His leisure time, property, and excessive lifestyle are not merely manifestations of luxury, but a perpetual performance of his class hegemony. This aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social and symbolic capital (1986, pp, 241-258). Hence, Buchanan's dominance is achieved through exclusive economic and social privileges that are inherited across lines of lineage and barred to outsiders.

4.2 Allegorical Hoarding of Authority and Dominating Relations

The accumulated wealth of Buchanan transcends the physical realm to become an allegorical retention and hoarding of power and social dominance. Nick Carraway exposes this as describing Buchanan physically, "a sturdy-straw-haired man of thirty with a rather hard mouth and a supercilious manner.... Two shining arrogant eyes has established dominance over his face, endowing him with an appearance of always leaning forward aggressively" (Fitzgerald, 2004, p, 7). William E Cain (2020, pp. 45- 48) argues that this descriptive language of Buchanan's physical appearance interprets his social status, for his wealth empowers him to subjugate others while sustaining his social immobility.

Based on his dominance, Buchanan practices a relational hoarding whereby he treats others as objects or even possessed things. Carraway states that he possesses a "body capable of enormous leverage-a cruel body" (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 7). His mistress Myrtle is a mere sign of his social dominance, and her value is dedicated to the extent she satisfies his whims, while his wife Daisy functions as a symbolic instrument for sustaining class purity rather than being an autonomous

subject. Bourdieu's concept of social capital aligns with this, whereby power is sustained through networks of exclusion and control manifesting in Buchanan's deeds as a hoarding drive that exploits and appropriates the relationships of people.

4.3 Psychodynamic Mechanics: Insecurity and Defense of Class Privilege

Understanding the behavioral psychological perspective of compulsive acquisition and resistance to social mobility should pass through allegorical defense mechanisms delivered from underlying psychological insecurity and deep-rooted anxiety. Jay Gatsby's emergence directly threatens social immobility and inherited class hierarchy, which Buchanan strives to preserve. This exemplifies his hostility towards Gatsby, which he never hides: "I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from nowhere make love to your wife" (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 130). Hence, his outburst exposes a profound structural anxiety because any mobility in the inherited social classes disturbs his possessive sense of security and thereby drives his hostile actions to function as a psychological shelter to preserve the privileges he acquires from his fragile inherited status.

4.4 The Qur'anic Assessment: Israf, Kanz, and Ethical Evasion

Assessing Buchanan's lifestyle via Qur'anic ethics, a mixture of Israf and Kanz surfaces. As the Qur'anic perspective permits wholesome provisions (Al-Tayyibat), it prohibits violating its ethics like modesty and responsibility, "Children of Adam, dress well whenever you are at worship, and eat and drink [as We have permitted] but do not be extravagant; God does not like extravagant people" (Qur'an 7:31). Here extravagance exceeds wealth wastefulness to social frivolity and disregard for the imperative of justice. (Rahman, 1980). Having no ethical aim, nor redistribution, Buchanan's wealth becomes an instrument for tyranny and superciliousness.

All in all, Buchanan's israf is a hegemonic strategy and a means for material, relational, and psychological hoarding that preserves his social status from alteration as well as prevents others from achieving stability. This analysis reaches its peak when Nick Carraway says his word about Buchanan and his wife, "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy-They smashed up things and creatures and then retreated into their money" (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 179). This exemplifies how Buchanan's wealth becomes a means for escaping responsibility, and this makes it the fortress that perpetuates their authority and excess without any moral sense towards ethics, responsibility, or accountability.

5. Spatial Dimension and Human Impact

The Valley of Ashes has a great symbolic weight in the novel. It exposes structural discrepancies and a marginal environment due to the excessive actions of Buchanan and the ruling

class. Fitzgerald portrays this dismal space, “This is a valley of ashes-a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens” (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 23). This portrait does not resemble mere material decay and special pollution, but also the high cost of a socio-economic system that safeguards the privilege of East Egg at the expense of smashing West Egg.

5.1 Imbalance of Mizan and Spatial Justice from a Qur’anic Perspective to Affluenza

The Qur’anic concept of mizan (balance via heavenly justice) can be used to examine spatial and class imbalance as stated in the Qur’anic verse, “He has raised up the sky. He has set up the balance, so that you may not exceed the balance” (Qur’an 55:7-9, Abdel Haleem, 2004, p. 353). Therefore, mizan (balance) is a heavenly ethical law to set balance alongside social and economic justice (Chapra, 1992). Accordingly, the Valley of Ashes resembles a spatial testament to the disruption and tyranny of mizan. This is due to the hoarding of wealth and other resources in the East Egg monopolistically. Meanwhile, moral, social, and even ecological degradation are imposed on the Valley of Ashes, creating an atmosphere where heavenly justice seems to be absent.

The Valley of Ashes is a destination that Buchanan frequently travels to by his luxury vehicle. Yet, he is detached from that unfortunate atmosphere morally and emotionally. His detachment allegorically mirrors the concept of ‘affluenza’. It is a state of material and moral detachment resulting from unjustified profusion where consuming desire increases while awareness of moral and human consequences imposed on others diminishes. (De Graaf et al., 2002). Hence, the inherited misery in the Valley of Ashes reflects Buchanan’s ethical framework, which grants him a deceptive immunity to misjudge lower classes without any self-reckoning.

5.2 The Human Cost and the Contradicted Reaction: Myrtle Wilson as a Case Study

The imbalance of human cost is unveiled through the character of Myrtle Wilson-Buchanan’s mistress. She strives to gain wealth and to climb the social class, bridging Buchanan to this aim. Eventually, she falls victim to this gravity. Anyway, the social class system prohibits social mobility. The absolute culmination of the irresponsibility and immorality stemming from excessive wealth is clearly unveiled by linking her death to “the death car” that “didn’t stop” (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 137).

Fundamentally, the ethical gap in Tom Buchanan’s reaction after the accident that leads to the death of Myrtle raises two important issues:

- 1- **Initial emotional shock and escaping accountability:** seeing Myrtle’s corpse after the accident, Buchanan shows brief grief, yet his psychological self-defense mechanism

quickly shifts to self-guarding to avoid suspension from himself and to escape ethical and legal responsibility. He shakes George Wilson, forcefully imposing his innocence, “I just got here a minute ago, from New York. I was bringing the couple back, as I promised you. That yellow car I was driving this afternoon wasn’t mine- do you hear? I haven’t seen it all afternoon” (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 133). Buchanan’s primary impulse is clearly exposed here. It is not an ethical reckoning, but rather a swift preservation of his class immunity. Standing over his mistress’s body and denying the driving of the yellow car, he avoids scrutiny and pushes suspicion away from his close circle and him.

- 2- **Aggressive Deflection of Guilt:** Instead of confronting his reckless steering through life or his moral responsibility for exploiting others like Myrtle, Tom Buchanan redirects the blame towards Gatsby. Moreover, he manipulates Wilson’s striking grief to free himself from responsibility, transforming the tragic accident into a suicide. Buchanan’s cold confession to Nick Carraway exposes aggressive deflection of guilt,

“I told him the truth.... He came to the door while we were getting ready to leave, and when I sent word in that I wasn’t in, he tried to force his way upstairs... What if I did tell him? That fellow had it coming to him” (Fitzgerald, 2004, p.171).

Disruption of *mizan* and the metaphor of *affluenza* are obvious here, for they exceed material privilege to encompass evasion of consequences and moral triviality. Souls and bodies of people inhabiting the Valley of Ashes are worthless compared to the safeguard of the upper-class and their illusory stability.

6- Moral Decay and Existential Alienation: The intersection of the Qur’anic Lens and Sociological Critique

The concept of *affluenza* encompasses the intersection of moral evaluation and sociological critique (De Graaf et al., 2002). It denotes a condition of existential dissatisfaction, excessive consumption, and cultural decay instilled in a self-possessed materialism. Such irresponsible abundance breeds an illusory sense of entitlement and safeguards individuals from reckoning. Buchanan’s cold moral indifference exemplifies this and also aligns with Erich Fromm’s (1967) critique. Fromm proposes that the human identity is attached to control and possession rather than ethical commitment. Therefore, it is a critique of the shift to the mode of “having” from the mode of “being”.

Using the Qur'anic lens to examine Buchanan's character, his behavioral detachment denotes an obvious denial of Khilafah (the vicegerency), which underlies the ethical duty to wealth. According to Islamic jurisprudence, wealth is not absolute individual possession, but rather a test and an ethical trust (Nasr, 2002). Islamic regulations directly denounce monopolization and hoarding of resources from society. This is obviously stated in the Qur'anic verse, "[Prophet], tell those who hoard gold and silver instead of giving in God's cause that they will have a grievous punishment" (Qur'an 9:34; Abdel Haleem, 2004, p. 123). Meanwhile, Myrtle's tragic death and Buchanan's retreat into his material forte align with the concept of Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic's (2017) about normalizing systemic oppression that prolongs empowered structures. Such ethical dissolution reaches its peak in the following speech by Nick Carraway talking about Tom and his wife Daisy, "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy-they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness... and let other people clean up the mess they made" (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 170). Violating heavenly mizan and ethical justice is evident in this quotation, which exposes how the Buchanans, as members of a higher social class, transcend material luxury to inflict moral, spatial, and environmental pollution, throwing it upon vulnerable individuals.

7. Conclusion

The present study concludes that Tom Buchanan's character in *The Great Gatsby* resembles a critical intersection of moral decay, structural class privilege, and psychological defense mechanisms. Bridging Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption, the affluenza metaphor, and Bourdieu's social and symbolic capital along with the Qur'anic ethical framework, the study exposes how inherited wealth plays the role of a means for moral evasion and material dominance.

While many literary studies on *The Great Gatsby* are devoted to Western paradigms and the American Dream, the present study breaks this limited shell, introducing a comparative framework based on Qur'anic concepts of mizan (heavenly balance), kanz (hoarding), and israf (profligacy). The study has applied these concepts to Buchanan's actions, demonstrating how his class privilege not only extends beyond his individual illusion, but also inflicts environmental, social, and structural damage as exemplified by the Valley of Ashes.

Finally, Buchanan's behavior resembles the fundamental violation of mizan (heavenly justice) and rejection of khilafah (ethical responsibility towards wealth). Putting these issues together, the study underscores the epistemological value of Qur'anic ethics in illuminating unexamined socio-economic and moral dimensions in classical global literary heritage.

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