



The Global Classroom Life of The Great Gatsby: Translation, Paratext, and Canonization in India and Bangladesh

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Abstract

F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby is full of the particular features of 1920s America, such as bootlegging, the worries of people who have recently become rich, and the specific American idea of self-invention, yet it has become a standard part of the secondary and university teaching programmes in places like Delhi and Dhaka, even though none of these features are part of the lived experience of the students. The present paper examines how a book so closely tied to a particular place can be taught in both countries and maintains that the explanation lies not in the content of the novel but in the local processes which grant it legitimacy for use in classrooms. By referring to Damrosch's idea of world literature as circulation and re-reading, Bourdieu's theory of institutionalised cultural capital, and Genette's theory of the paratext, the paper compares Bangladesh and India as two hybrid cases of canonization. In Bangladesh, the reputation of a single translator, Kabir Chowdhury, transfers legitimacy onto the novel even though English remains the language of classroom instruction. In India, English is already the medium of higher education, so translation is not required for the novel's inclusion in the curriculum, even though vernacular translations circulate separately for general readers across several regional languages – a division which in fact sharpens the comparison. In brief, the two cases suggest that the mediation by which a nation grants a novel its canonical status will depend on the position of English in its domestic institutional hierarchy, and this observation has implications for world literature beyond the phenomenon of canon formation.

Keywords: world literature; paratext; translation studies; cultural capital; canon formation

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is rich with the details of 1920s America, still relevant today, capturing the narrator's disillusionment, a dream already turning into myth, the secret trade of alcohol, and the constant display of wealth by the newly rich. Its concerns appear, on their face, strictly local: anxieties over the social standing of Long Island's newly rich, the peculiar economic delusions of the Jazz Age, and a scathing critique of American identity and moral decay. What is most surprising, then, is that this novel has found a fixed place in the reading lists of secondary and higher education institutions around the world, from Delhi to Dhaka, even though none of its main themes, such as bootlegging, the Jazz Age, or the American Dream, relate to the actual cultural experiences of the students who study it there.

It is most appropriate to view the teaching of *The Great Gatsby* in these different countries as being a matter of 'indigenization', something that is not due to any particular feature of the novel but rather to the position which English language and literature hold within the educational system of a particular country. In certain countries a novel's acceptance in the classroom is determined by the fact that it has been translated: if a well-known writer or thinker translates the book and acquires a reputation for doing so, then that reputation gives the novel local prestige and legitimacy. But in places where English is already the language used in higher education, translation is not needed. Instead, the novel gained legitimacy through the novel's inclusion in official examination syllabi, university courses, or commercial study guides. Even translations into local languages often continue to circulate for general readers outside the classroom, shaping the novel's reception in parallel.

This argument draws on Bangladesh and India, both examples of hybrid situations, even though the way in which this works is different. In the case of Bangladesh, the reputation of a single translator gives the translation credibility even though English is still the language used for teaching, whereas in India translation is spread out among the various regional languages and takes place independently of an English-based curriculum, which already has no need for translation in order to gain status. *The Great Gatsby* is central to both types of teaching and can be used with relative ease. Its symbolism may not be subverted but is always made applicable to local social realities about class, money and aspiration; it is still a text of great worth and as such has transcended its original context as an American import. This is similar to the paradox which Cain (2020) finds within the novel itself that readers can perceive both its American Dimension and the global range. The American Dimension allows the novel to have a meaning that is not confined to just America, instead enabling its influence to go beyond the culture. Read against Cain's claim, educational indigenization can be understood as a process through which institutions and translators revitalize, rather than dilute, the novel's American character so that translations and curricula featuring *The Great Gatsby*, whether in Bangladesh or India, come to illuminate local dynamics of class, wealth, and aspiration in their own right.

Three theoretical frameworks structure this analysis, each addressing a distinct dimension of *Gatsby*'s global classroom life: why the novel circulates internationally at all, who authorizes its place within a given curriculum, and how it is made interpretable to readers once it arrives there.

David Damrosch's theory of world literature addresses the first question. Damrosch argues that world literature is best understood not as a fixed or canonical list of texts but as a mode of reading that is distanced from worlds beyond one's own time and place (as cited in O'Dea, 2005, p. 282). This leads to the second question: whether a text belongs to some settled global canon. Damrosch's framework attracts attention to the ways literary works circulate across cultures and acquire new meaning in different contexts. This theory offers a productive lens for examining the afterlife of *Gatsby*. How it is read, translated, and disseminated after leaving its original culture and the analytical foundation for the national case studies is more significant than the novel's inclusion in any established canon. Damrosch explains why *The Great Gatsby* travels, and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital explains who decides if it is worth teaching. For Bourdieu, the value and status of a literary work are not determined solely by the book itself but by the cultural and

educational institutions that recognize and reproduce its significance (Bourdieu, 1986). He identifies three forms of cultural capital: embodied, in an individual's acquired dispositions and linguistic competencies; objectified, in material cultural goods such as books; and institutionalized, in formal recognition through educational qualifications, curricula, and credentials (Bourdieu, 1986). Institutionalized form matters the most directly in *Gatsby's* case. For example, the novel's involvement in university reading lists, examination syllabi, and commercial study guides reflects the role of educational institutions in strengthening and sustaining its status. According to Damrosch, *Gatsby's* global presence cannot be explained by circulation alone; it depends equally on the institutional structures that decide to teach in each national context. Once a text has circulated around the world (Damrosch) and been institutionally authorized (Bourdieu), a final question remains: how did it become relevant to the readers who actually encounter it in the classroom? Gérard Genette's theory of the paratext helps to understand this concept. It is first presented in *Seuils* (1987) and later translated as *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997). Genette argues that titles, covers, introductions, prefaces, footnotes, and other accompanying materials, which are called paratextual elements, function as a starting point between a text and its reader. It creates expectations and shapes interpretation before the main text is even read. He distinguishes the peritext, elements physically attached to the book (a translator's preface, cover art, and footnotes), from the epitext, materials that circulate around the book but outside it (reviews, study guides, publishers' catalogues, and interviews). Together, peritext and epitext constitute the threshold through which a foreign novel is presented to, and made accessible within, a given cultural and educational context. Bringing together these three sites of analysis, this paper moves from the simple observation that *Gatsby* is taught internationally to the questions of why it travels, who places it on the syllabus and how it becomes interpretable in the receiving context, which are the three questions explored in detail in the national case studies below. Beyond the national cases, this way of analyzing literary pedagogy also gives us tools for thinking more broadly about literary retranslation as a way of ensuring that canonical works remain legible in new contexts for future cohorts. Following Damrosch (2003), this is how a text survives as world literature: not as a fixed artifact, but through the text's continually circulation and reading.

Bangladesh:

The *Great Gatsby's* 'global classroom life' in Bangladesh emerges through English language teaching and text-based features in a pedagogical context available to both students and general readers. In Bangladesh, the study of English is closely linked with the study of English literature. Up to 1985, the study of English in Bangladesh was dominated by departments of English literature at various universities. The study of English language pedagogy began to gain momentum when the first Master's program in English Language Teaching was introduced. However, even after the expansion, English literature retained its dominant position and remains the major component of the English curriculum (Shamsuzzaman, 2017).

The curriculum for English language and literature in Bangladeshi universities typically includes core courses in British literature, American literature, and world literature, alongside specialized courses in areas such as psychology, sociology, postcolonial theory, and translation studies. Teaching methodologies combine traditional lectures with modern

pedagogical practices, including seminars, workshops, and digital learning tools (Ahamed, 2024, p. 10).

In the English departments of Bangladeshi universities, *The Great Gatsby* is being taught in the original English version. English as a medium and subject creates a didactic environment for students to interact with the source literature and materials. Institutional data also confirm the same practice on the part of universities as academic organizations offering courses on English literature. The curricula of the University of Dhaka, as an example, bear testimony to the fact that undergraduates and graduates follow the English literature canon (University of Dhaka, n.d.). Similar tendencies can be observed in other educational organizations, including Jahangirnagar University and the University of Chittagong in Bangladesh's government universities. In private universities, the Green University of Bangladesh, and the University of Brahmanbaria, students also study *The Great Gatsby* in its original English version as a work of American literature and fiction (University of Brahmanbaria, 2019; University of Dhaka, 2020; Jahangirnagar University, n.d; Green University of Bangladesh, n.d.). The implication of *The Great Gatsby* in Bangladesh is reflected in three ways: its inclusion in university curricula, its regularity in classroom teaching, and its continued presence in examination systems. Kabir Chowdhury's 1971 Bengali Translation of *The Great Gatsby* by Bright Book House is thus seen to participate in the literary conversion not merely as a textual supplement but as a cultural mediator, which was further enhanced by his own credibility as a scholar of English and American literature. Having acquired his academic qualifications in the United States, Chowdhury translated the given work with the reputation of a bright scholar and a future leader of the country. His later appointment as the National Professor of Bangladesh further cemented the prestige of his endeavor. The translation, therefore, may be seen as the institutional act of fitting Fitzgerald's work into the cultural domain of Bengali through the enhancement of its literary value capital (Bourdieu, 1986). The status of the language itself was particularly significant for the Republic of Bangladesh shortly after the language movement of 1952, which proclaimed Bangla as the symbol of the nation's cultural sovereignty. Thus, apart from introducing wider audiences to one of the masterpieces of American literature, the translated work by Kabir Chowdhury has taken its place in the literary history of Bangladesh as a respected possession of the nation's cultural capital.

Other notable Bengali adaptations include the entire version translated by Laila Farzana (published by Maula Brothers), Sumanta Adhikari's version (published by Boibhashik Prokashoni), and the illustrated adaptation by Jannatul Naim Pial specially designed for younger readers. Thus, multiple translations were made to expand the book's Bengali readership and interest in the novel among different groups of people.

Pial's illustrated adaptation is especially engaging for younger readers since its cover, illustrations, typography, and layout draw the eye towards the text. Genette's account of paratexts was particularly relevant to this edition in terms of his emphasis on the importance of such devices as covers, illustrations, typography, titles, and even the name and credentials of the person translating the book. After all, the reputation of the academic scholar involved and the publisher holding the rights to the resource also contribute to the overall impression and response generated by the work.

With *The Great Gatsby*'s entrance into the Bengali literary and educational sphere, the novel takes on new significance and roles as world literature, according to Darmosh's definition. The text ceases to be simply an American classic and gains new dimensions and meanings through its reception there. Its presence in that culture's pedagogical and institutional frameworks makes it a work that is continuously reinvented and recontextualized in acts of translation, education, and exchange.

India:

India presents a hybrid case in this regard, as both English-reading and vernacular-reading audiences see *The Great Gatsby* published amongst them, neither being completely reliant on the other. Chandra (2012) notes that the novel has "arrived in India," not just entered the country but integrated into it. Mukherjee (2025) believes that in *The Great Gatsby*, "wealth alone cannot secure legitimacy or belonging", citing the novel's themes of class and caste, making it relevant to Indian society. In turn, Indian criticism perceives Fitzgerald's work as a reflection of Indian society's preoccupations with riches and status, not exclusively the domain of English-only readers.

The institutional foundations of this reception can be traced to the colonial origins of English-language education in India. The Charter Act of 1813 marked the first step toward educational reform by allocating public funds for the "revival and promotion of literature," although it did not designate English as the medium of instruction. That question was resolved two decades later when Governor-General Lord William Bentinck approved the proposal on public instruction (Bentinck, 1835/1920). Based on Macaulay's *Minute on Indian Education*, the policy established English as the primary medium of higher education and envisioned the creation of an English-educated intermediary class that would disseminate Western knowledge through local languages (Macaulay, 1835/1920). As a result, English-medium universities such as the University of Delhi and the University of Calcutta have incorporated *The Great Gatsby* into their curricula, where it is commonly taught through discussions of the American Dream, social ambition, class inequality, and the limitations of social and economic mobility. Official syllabi from the University of Calcutta (MA English, Paper VIII-c: American Literature) and the University of Delhi (BA/MA English, CBCS/NEP syllabi) demonstrate structured teaching of American literature at postgraduate and undergraduate levels. Moreover, IGNOU (Delhi) includes an explicit MA English block on F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (Block-3, eGyanKosh), providing direct textual evidence of *Gatsby*'s presence in Delhi-area curricula. In West Bengal, Jadavpur University's English major has a particular course devoted to the reading of American literature. Taken together, these writings help bridge the evidentiary gap identified above. Outside of academia, *The Great Gatsby* has seen further adaptations in Indian popular culture. First and foremost, numerous essays, reviews, and articles have been published in Indian newspapers and journals. For instance, Nina Martyris's review essay, "*Gatsby Over Gandhi: The Asian Raj*" (2014), reads *The Great Gatsby* as a piece of proto-Indian literature. Martyris tells the story about Jamshedji Tata, an Iranian philanthropist and industrialist who was once refused to enter an exclusive hotel in Bombay because he was not European, leading to the creation of the Taj Mahal Hotel in 1903 (Martyris, 2014). By appealing to *Gatsby* as a cultural reference point, the article invites the reader to make similar associations between Tata's willingness to be validated by society and Jay Gatsby's desire to belong to an elite social circle. In this way,

The Great Gatsby becomes a tool for criticism as well as an object of critique in the context of modern-day India and, more broadly, Asia.

The Hindi version of *The Great Gatsby* and Sumanta Adhikari's Bengali translation are further proof that the novel has circulated beyond "English" (Amazon.in, n.d.; Boibhashik, n.d.) The circulation of *The Great Gatsby* in India in various Indian languages supports the claim that the novel's reception in India is not limited to one language. In addition, the Indian edition demonstrates that translation and canonization are separate processes. A literary work can gain wide acceptance and popularity through non-English translations, summaries, and teaching resources, while at the same time not being part of the canon. Likewise, a work of literature can be firmly entrenched in the canon of English studies but use Indian translations to increase its accessibility to a wider audience. Thus, the Indian *Gatsby* confirms the different reception processes of translation and canonization.

Comparative Analysis:

The provided comparison allows identifying the global classroom life of *The Great Gatsby* that is connected to its canonicity in both countries. On the one hand, *The Great Gatsby* is taught in the original language within the American literature course at the universities of these countries, and both Bangladesh and India saw the translation of the novel into their local languages for the purpose of distributing this book beyond the educational system. However, on the other hand, there is a significant difference in the level of recognition of the translated version of *The Great Gatsby*. The problem is that in Bangladesh, such famous local writers and bloggers as Kabir Chowdhury play an active role in translating the book and gaining popularity for their own version of the novel. In India, by contrast, although *The Great Gatsby* has been translated into several regional languages, including Bengali, Hindi, Tamil, Marathi, and Malayalam—these translations have not achieved comparable recognition, nor are they associated with the identity of a prominent translator-writer figure whose reputation could lend the text a similar form of paratextual authority.

These comparisons reveal that translation can serve different cultural functions in different contexts. For Bangladesh, it is a process of canonization by which the introduction of the novel gains cultural credibility through the prestige of the translator. By contrast, in India, these functions are combined; institutional teaching and multilingual translations enable the novel's dissemination through different channels.

Conclusion:

Taken together, the discussed examples illustrate the main point that this paper aims to prove. In fact, the foreign literature piece does not become an object of instruction due to its literary merits in a particular teaching environment. Instead, it tends to be imposed through institutional and cultural contingencies in a unique way in each educational establishment. Thus, *The Great Gatsby*, as a literary work with great range and adaptability, can be used in different educational environments, where it undergoes various transformations. However, these transformations are always defined by local agents such as reviewers, translators, examiners, textbook publishers, and educational establishments.

The scope of this study had to be limited in order to achieve the objective of comparing how *The Great Gatsby* was received differently in Bangladesh and India. This is not

necessarily a comprehensive account of how the novel has been presented in the educational institutions of both countries. The study highlights the differences in processes by which the canon was formed. Therefore, the study does not aim to indicate whether *The Great Gatsby* has been taught more widely than other American novels or identify the year it was first included in the canon. Moreover, the study should not be interpreted as a statistical analysis which could show significant variances in either country's attitude toward the book. The study is based on the available data, translations, paratexts, and information from institutions.

In a more general sense, the present study also makes a contribution by fueling the discussion about the nature of world literature. More specifically, while previous research has focused on the mechanisms that allow individual works to cross borders, the current analysis shifts the emphasis to the ways in which the literature that has crossed borders gains acceptance in new territories. The examples considered above demonstrate that such mechanisms are far from being universal, being determined largely by local conditions. The fact that certain works of literature are able to transcend borders several times is explained, to a significant extent, by the presence of specific mechanisms of legitimization that enable their perception within a given educational framework.

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