

Reevaluating the Canon of the Great American Novel in the Context of Global Migration and Cultural Displacement

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Abstract: The article refers to the rethinking of the Great American Novel (GAN) in the context of global migration and cultural diversity. Traditionally, the GAN has been defined as texts that describe a white male vision of American identity. However, the U.S has been diversified in its cultural context because of the demographic changes induced by immigration, particularly the Latin American, Asian, and African immigrants. This essay claims that the conventional GAN canon should be changed to incorporate the voices of minority citizens and immigrants, and provide a more representative view of American society. In this paper, classic GAN works, such as *Moby-Dick* and *The Great Gatsby*, will be compared and contrasted with more diverse ones, such as *The Namesake* and *The Underground Railroad*, to discuss the changes in themes and narratives that can be observed as manifestations of the complexity of American identity during the modern period. The re-evaluation of the GAN poses vital implications for the study of literature and the education industry, challenging the more inclusive and representative canon, which would be more reflective of the diverse experiences that make up the nation. The paper also addresses how the changes can create an impact on teaching American literature and influence the perception of national identity of future generations. Lastly, the paper gives recommendations on future studies, such as the intersectionality of race, gender, and migration, and how digital media can be used to broaden the youthful voices in literature.

Key Words: great american novel, migration, cultural diversity, literary canon, immigrant voices, american identity

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Introduction

The Great American Novel (GAN) is a literary theory that traditionally has embodied the American identity, reflecting the values, hardships, and experiences of the country (Cohen, 2025). It is traditionally considered to be a work that stipulates the American spirit and reflects such themes as liberty, individualism, and the pursuit of happiness. The definition of the GAN is based on considering the classic works of literature that have influenced and manifested the cultural discourse of the United States. These have frequently been written about particular events of American history and the intricacies of a society through a national prism (Di Leo, 2021).

The social and cultural landscape of the United States has been altered drastically in recent decades due to the processes of global migration and cultural diversity (Carpio, 2023; Perry, 2017). It has changed the nation in terms of demographics, bringing new cultures, new languages, and new identities into the American melting pot. These waves of immigration have brought a variety of political and economic effects on the country, but have also brought new cultural representations of the country, which include American literature (Menger, 2018; Koh, 2015; Flynn & van Doorslaer, 2016). The effect of these waves of

immigration is reflected in American literature, in the form of immigrant stories of the world (Alemán, 2008; De Bruyn, 2020).

In the current paper, the classicism of the Great American Novel in relation to migration and cultural diversity will be discussed again. The focus will be made on the study of the necessity for the history of American identity which once belonged to only few people to become diversified as it should embrace the experience of all those individuals that became immigrants themselves. In order to define the Great American Novel of the 21st century in the literal sense, it becomes necessary to add all those marginalized voices to it, which can speak about the complexity of cultural relocation.

The paper is organized into several sections as follows: Section II focuses on the discussion of the Great American Novel in connection with some significant literary works and criticism. Section III addresses how the concept of global migration and cultural diversity has impacted U.S. literature. Section IV reconsiders the canon, emphasizing the non-representation of immigrant and minority voices. Section V will be case studies on comparing the traditional and contemporary diverse works. Section VI concludes with a summary and suggestions for further research.

Evolution of the Great American Novel

The Great American Novel (GAN) is a literary notion that has changed with time and is meant to describe the American identity in literature (Manshel, 2025). It appeared in the 19th century as a means of emphasizing works that reflected the social, political, and cultural complexity of the United States. The GAN has been regarded as a standard of American literary success, which mirrors the changing self-image and values of the nation.

Table 1: Comparison of Traditional and Contemporary Great American Novels

Title	Author	Main Themes	Historical Context	Representation of Race/Culture
Moby-Dick (Sanborn, 2022)	Herman Melville	Obsession, Freedom, Nature	19th-century America	Limited racial/cultural diversity
The Great Gatsby (Durlauf et al., 2022)	F. Scott Fitzgerald	The American Dream, Class, Love	1920s America	Primarily white, upper-class focus
The Namesake (Ilyas & Afzal, 2021)	Jhumpa Lahiri	Identity, Immigration, Family	Late 20th-century America	Indian-American experience
The Underground Railroad (Dischinger, 2017)	Colson Whitehead	Slavery, Freedom, Race	19th-century America	African-American perspective
The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (Gonzalez, 2016)	Junot Díaz	Immigration, Identity, Family	Late 20th-century America	Dominican-American experience

Table 1 on the similarities of significant traditional works (e.g., Moby-Dick, The Great Gatsby, Huckleberry Finn) and recent works that are diverse (e.g., The Namesake, The Underground Railroad, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao). These columns can be the title, the author, the main themes, the historical context, and racial/cultural representation.

Moby-Dick by Herman Melville, The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain are some of the classic works that have been regarded as a part of the GAN canon (Rupp, 2020). It is generally known that these novels have a rich exploration of themes like individualism, freedom, and the American Dream (Carpio, 2012). They are considered to be pillars of texts that not only mirror but also construct the national consciousness, and provide information about the ideals and contradictions of American life (Haddad, 2022).

The traditional canon has also been heavily criticized due to its lack of diversity, even though it is important. Researchers have mentioned that the GAN has been largely influenced by the views of white, male writers, and thus, the experiences of women, immigrants, and racial minorities are not taken into account (Valladares-Ruiz, 2025; Friedman & McMann, 2020). This exclusion has led to the need for greater accommodation on the part of the GAN, in order to recognize the diverse experiences that have been influential in shaping the country's literary environment.

The history behind the development of the Great American Novel, of great historical importance as it is, has proved the limitations that come with the classical format of the novel in capturing the complete experience of America. This is because there are so many voices that have not been heard in such literature, and the GAN must be revisited and approached from a much more inclusive perspective.

Global Migration and Cultural Diversity in the United States

Demographic Shifts Due to Immigration

The global phenomenon of migration has had tremendous effects on the demographic setting of the United States, particularly during the 20th and 21st centuries. The nation has changed the cultural composition of its citizens due to immigrants from other countries such as Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. It is these types of population shifts that have led to diversity in the population, and therefore, the blending of languages, customs, and cultures. Immigrant groups have played an integral part in the socio-economic development of the country. These changing demographic trends have added to the changing rhetoric of what it means to be an American to the ambiguities of identity, belonging, and citizenship in a multicultural society.

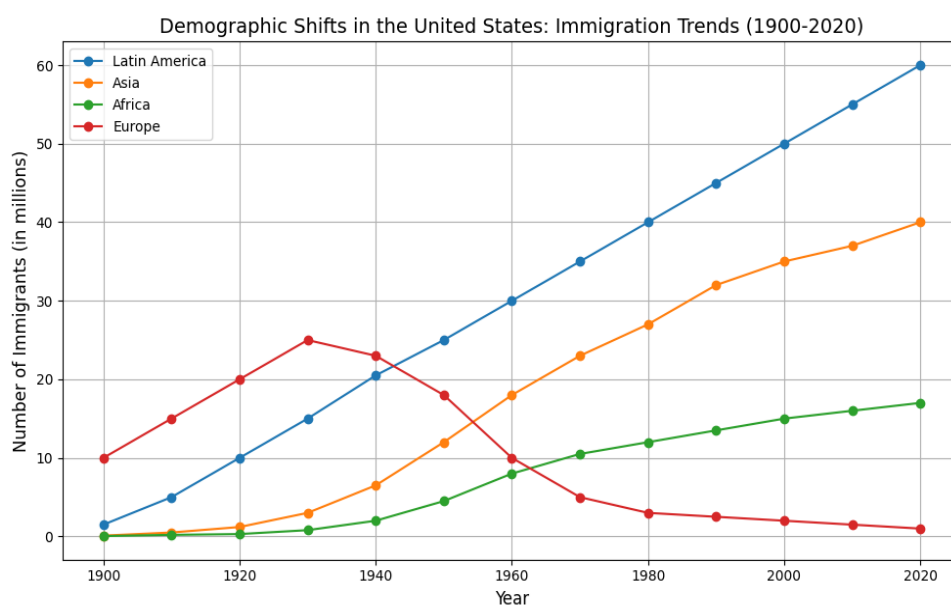


Figure 1: Demographic Shifts in the United States: Immigration Trends (1900-2020)

Figure 1 shows the radical changes in immigration patterns to the United States over the last century. It comes after the immigration of four main regions: Latin America (blue), Asia (orange), Africa (green), and Europe (red). The graph is able to capture vital changes where Latin American and Asian immigration has been experiencing a steep increase, with European immigration declining consistently. The trends demonstrate how the Latin American and Asian populations are becoming more and more significant in the U.S., which can be traced to social and cultural changes on a larger scale. The demographic transition has been extremely significant to the cultural and social context of the U.S. and has affected American literature and identity.

Impact of Cultural Diversity on Literature and Art

Cultural diversity in the United States has far-reaching implications on literature and art. With the emergence of immigrant communities, their stories have added to the cultural production of the country, offering fresh insights into literature, music, visual arts, and film. Authors with varied experiences have used their experiences to create works that challenge the American traditional norms, and many of them have explored the theme of displacement, assimilation, racial identity, and the immigrant experience. These works have not only contributed to American culture but also given a more global portrayal of the American identity and a more in-depth insight into the history of the country. The arts have emerged as a voice of the immigrants, a focus on the challenges and achievements of the marginalized communities.

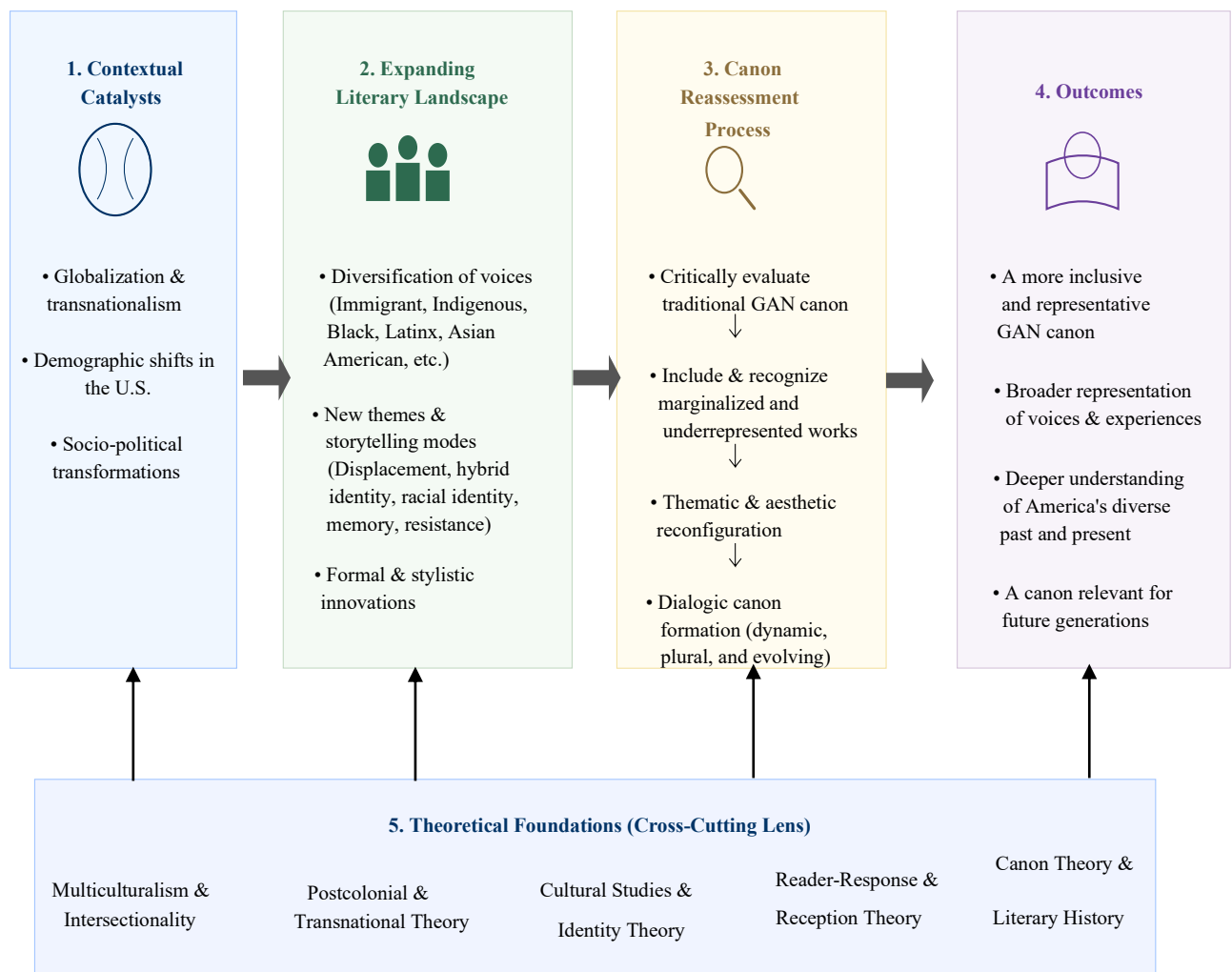


Figure 2: Reimagining the Great American Novel Canon in the Contemporary Era

Figure 2 gives a simplified idea of the conceptual scheme of reconsidering the Great American Novel (GAN) canon. It opens with contextual catalysts, including globalization, demographic changes, and socio-political changes that broaden the literary field. The following phase is concerned with the development of voices and the addition of new themes and ways of telling stories, which reflect different cultural experiences. Reconsideration of the canon refers to critical re-examination of the traditional GAN, which takes into account the voice of the marginalized in order to reconstruct the themes and aesthetics of the genre. The outcome of this theory is the identification of the revised form of the GAN, which enhances the knowledge about the history of the country, and which will be useful for future generations as well. These considerations are based on theoretical underpinnings such as multiculturalism and cultural identity theories.

Representation of Diverse Voices in Contemporary American Literature

More voices from other communities can be found within the scope of modern American literature, where the number of writings on immigrants, refugees, and disadvantaged communities increases greatly. Moreover, other ethnicities have also influenced American literature, and writers from African, Latinx, Asian American, and Native American communities have helped to transform the modern literary landscape. The complexity of cross-cultural identity issues and problems encountered in the course of the immigrant experience have become evident in the writings of authors like Jhumpa Lahiri, Sandra Cisneros, Junot Diaz, and Viet Thanh Nguyen. Modern American literature is becoming more diverse due to the involvement of other voices in it, which broadens the perspective of the narration. This change is important to the development of the canon of American literature to capture the reality of the diversity of voices that shape the nation today.

Reevaluating the Canon

Exclusion of Immigrant and Minority Voices in the Traditional Canon

The classic canon of the Great American Novel has been denounced due to its lack of the voices of immigrants and minorities, which capture the multidimensionality of American society. In the past, the canon has been strictly white and male-dominated, and it is usually characterized by works that tend to dwell on specific aspects of the American identity at the expense of marginalized groups. Canonical discussions have mostly excluded or underrepresented the work of immigrant and minority writers, whose work has a voice on the questions of displacement, assimilation, and cultural identity. This exclusion not only makes the American literary experience narrow, but it also serves to strengthen a narrow, frequently homogenized, definition of the American condition.

Analysis of New Works that Challenge the Traditional Canon

In the last few years, a new literary trend has emerged, which challenges the conventional wisdom regarding the Great American Novel. Moreover, immigrant and minority authors are now being appreciated for their contributions to American literature, and they are challenging the way that the American identity was depicted. Books like *The Namesake*, written by Jhumpa Lahiri; *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, authored by Junot Diaz; and *The Underground Railroad*, penned by Colson Whitehead, all explore the themes of migration, cultural mixing, and racial identities, respectively. In other words, they present an entirely different perspective than the one that is usually associated with the GAN.

Importance of Including Diverse Perspectives in Defining the Great American Novel

Alternative perspectives play a major role in the Great American Novel definition due to their contribution towards making the definition able to communicate the complexities of the contemporary American identity. These are some of the things experienced by immigrants, racial minorities, and marginalized members of society, whose experiences will point out the changes made in American culture and society. The Great American Novel definition could therefore be modified to include all forms of writings that communicate these multiple perspectives on the American identity, such that the Great American Novel will now be able to speak for a bigger part of the American identity. In addition to enriching the literary tradition, such a canon is guaranteed to remain relevant in future generations.

Case Studies

Comparison of Traditional Canon Works with Contemporary Diverse Works

This part compares the traditional literature that has been previously discussed within the context of the Great American Novel and the contemporary literature written by immigrants and minorities. Classic works such as *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, are juxtaposed with such modern works as *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz. Whereas the former revolve around the themes based on individualism, the American Dream, and the journey of national identity, based on the dominant cultural viewpoints, the latter anticipate the themes of migration, displacement, and the issue of belonging in a multicultural society. This comparison underlines how American literature has been transformed to no longer be a single and homogeneous narrative but one that represents the different voices and experiences.

Table 2: Migration and Cultural Diversity Representation in American Literature

Text	Immigrant Themes	Racial Diversity	Cultural Integration
<i>Moby-Dick</i> (Sanborn, 2022)	No	Limited	Limited
<i>The Great Gatsby</i> (Durlauf et al., 2022)	No	Limited	Limited
<i>The Namesake</i> (Ilyas & Afzal, 2021)	Yes	High	High
<i>The Underground Railroad</i> (Dischinger, 2017)	Yes	High	High
<i>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao</i> (Gonzalez, 2016)	Yes	High	High

Table 2 compares how the traditional and contemporary texts represented the issues of migration and cultural diversity with such criteria as immigrant themes, racial diversity, and cultural integration.

Examination of Themes Related to Global Migration and Cultural Diversity in Selected Novels

The present section examines the representation of global migration and cultural diversity in some of the selected novels in the traditional canon and modern works of diversity. The theme of obsession in *Moby-Dick* is contrasted with the death of the diverse crew of the ship *Pequod*, which serves as an allegory of the issues of identity and unity in a multi-ethnic society. Conversely, novels such as *The Namesake* and *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead explore the theme of migration, identity search, and cultural assimilation challenges in depth. Not only do these works speak about the hardships of immigrant communities, but they also praise the power and adaptability of the people who know the way to walk between the cultural and societal borders. These themes in literature are also explored to highlight the need to comprehend American identity as a result of historical and current migrations in the world.

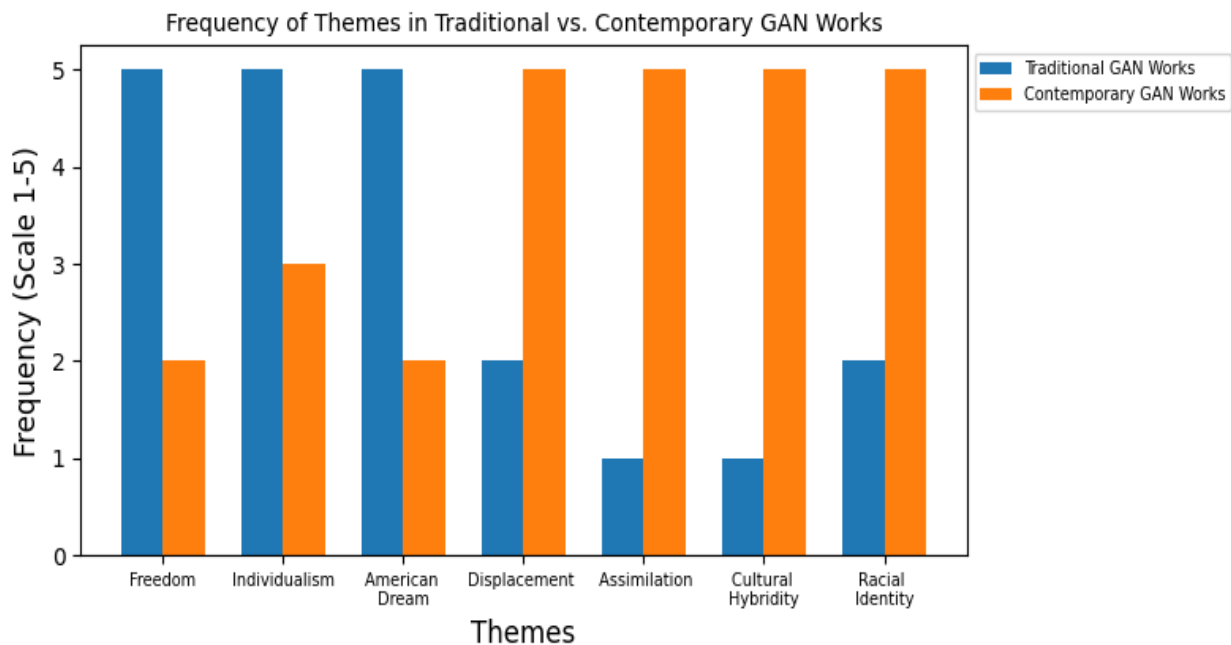


Figure 3: Frequency of Themes in Traditional vs. Contemporary GAN Works

Figure 3 compares the frequency of significant themes in traditional works of the Great American Novel (GAN) and current works. The blue bars are the classic works of GAN, including *Moby-Dick* and *The Great Gatsby*, which are centered on such themes as individualism, freedom, and the American Dream. The bars in orange symbolize recent works of GAN, including *The Namesake* and *The Underground Railroad*, that focus on such themes as displacement, assimilation, and cultural hybridity. The comparison lays emphasis on the changing of themes in American literature as individualistic ideas give way to more sophisticated themes of migration, identity, and racial interaction in contemporary literature.

Critique of How These Works Contribute to the Understanding of the Great American Novel

The introduction of modern writings by minority and immigrant writers adds value to the reinvention of what defines the Great American Novel. These readings give various narratives which are not canon and are more subtle and complex in their approaches to comprehending what it means to be an American. Even though the unitary and privileging understanding of the American identity is presented in the traditional canon literature, the existing locations of diversity literature broaden the unitary framework and enable the voices of the oppressed groups to be represented. With this criticism that the Great American Novel is not a rigid concept but one, which should evolve to be able to reflect the diversity, complexity and dynamism of the American society. With a diversity of stories like this, the canon can be more accommodating and thus comprehensive, a more accurate representation of the American experience.

Conclusion

The paper has explained how the canon of Great American Novel (GAN) has evolved concerning the global migration and diversity. The GAN has always been a prejudiced, frequently exclusionary, conceptualisation of American identity that has been dominated by white, male writers. However, demographic shifts, including the massive influx of people from Latin America, Asia, or Africa, have led to cultural diversification within the American society. The contemporary literature consists of a much larger number of various voices and experiences that shake the conventional definition of the Great American Novel. The canon reconsideration involves the integration of different perspectives, especially

those of immigrants and marginalized groups. The reconsideration of the Great American Novel (GAN) in light of global migrations and cultural diversity bears significant implications both for literary scholarship and the national identity of the country. This phenomenon requires the creation of a more diverse literary canon that will reflect the contributions of various voices and create a more comprehensive image of the American nation's diverse identity. The reconsideration of the great American novel in terms of world migration and cultural diversity is very important concerning the revision of school curricula. In addition, future research can focus on the consequences of migration over time, as well as the perception of cultural integration from the perspectives of different communities, particularly when compared to other communities. Lastly, the impact of digital media on the growth of immigrant and minority authors' literary voice could possibly define the future of the GAN. The study of intersectionality of race, gender, and migration in the formation of modern literary canons can be a great source of information about the changing face of American literature.

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