

THE AMERICAN DREAM 'IGNIS FATUUS' OR A SURE BET? A POSTMODERN DOGMATIC INTERPRETATION OF AMERICAN NOVELS

Saima Asim

Department Of English, University Of Wah
Saimamurtaza0786@gmail.com

Shahida Riaz

Department of English, University of Wah
Shahida.riaz@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This paper explores a very contentious and intriguing term that is The American Dream. The terrain or terra firma of opportunity; this is how America is generally esteemed. The dissentients and aficionados of the American Dream stand abreast. For some, the corollary of the pursuance of the American Dream is diddly squat and for the rest it is fructuous. But the Big Bang Theory of the American Dream virtually transcends all geographic boundaries hence it cannot be talked about only concerning America. It is something ecumenical and hence is the dream which can be pursued by every individual living in any part of the world. People are more obsessed with the materialistic interpretation of the dream and consumption which they regard as the main components of happiness (Calder, 1999). This study deals with the unveiling of the true spirit of the American Dream. The researcher explores that the success of an individual rests on how much effort he puts into and the political, individual, and economic independence as asserted by the ideology of the American Dream, is attainable.

Keywords: American Dream, Capitalism, Sure Bet, 'Ignis Fatuus', Capitalism, Alternative to Capitalism, Consumerism

INTRODUCTION

The phrase “American Dream” was coined in 1931 and originated with historian James Truslow Adams in the period of the Great Depression in America as succor. He wrote (1931), “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, according to his ability or achievement” (p. xii). Wolfe (1940) viewed the American Dream as follows:

“So then, to every man his chance.....his shining golden opportunity....to live, to work, to be himself. And to become whatever thing his manhood and his vision can combine to make him. This seeker is the promise of America” (p. 508)

The American Dream is a unique idea that is formed by such collective values as individualism, persistence, and self-sufficiency. Adam’s vision of the American Dream transcended pecuniary aspects. Adam states:

“.....it is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.”(p.404)

For Adams, the American Dream is the dream of the fullest development of all men and women, and the effort to realize this dream cannot be hampered by the already erected social barriers or social classes. Likewise, Jim Cullen also stressed that the American Dream is a quest for self-realization and personal fulfillment. In his book *American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (2003), Cullen states:

“The Dream also involves acknowledging another important reality: that beyond an abstract belief in possibility, there is no one American Dream. Instead, there are many American Dreams, their appeal simultaneously resting on their variety and their specificity...Sometimes “better and richer and fuller” is defined in terms of money in the contemporary United States, one could almost believe this is the only definition-but there are others”(p.7).

What Cullen ascertains here is that material prosperity is only one dimension of the American Dream. The American Dream is an aspiration for a fuller life not only in terms of money but also beyond money. Material growth and spiritual growth are integrated ideas. Nevertheless, an individual manifests his vision of the dream in the course of the affairs of his life. Many historians agree that though the American Dream seems to conceptualize contemporary American Identity yet it rests on certain traditions. They contend that the dream can be traced back throughout the History of American Politics as an assortment of ambition, freedom, individualism, and opportunity. America pursued these values even before it got its identity as an independent America by seeking separation from Britain. They revered their presidents Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson who promoted these values. The downfall of the nation during the civil war and the release of the Emancipation Proclamation by Lincoln is ample evidence of their belief in the aforesaid values which are part of the American Dream. This Proclamation liberated slaves and provided white and black alike with equal opportunity. The core values of the American Dream have evolved in response to the changing social, political, and economic factors. Despite its long- standing history, the historians agree that the American Dream is gradually transforming into, as Sam Sieber (2005) states, the “American Myth.”

The underlying promises of the Dream have inherent shortcomings particularly for minorities who are the victims of racism and bias in society. In *Facing up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*, Jennifer Hochschild contends that the Dream instead of uniting Americans, has divided them. Blacks do not believe that the dream works for them. For them, it contradicts its very supposed nature.

The cardinal proposition which underlies the American Dream is that it is the individuals who have to embark upon the journey of life to get the final point of disembarkation and for this, they have to be indefatigable, persistent, and ambitious, aspirant, zealous, impassioned, committed, etc. The fruit they achieve is verily the upshot of the efforts they put into it. The one who is phlegmatic, lethargic, bone idle, derelict, etc. hardly finds any desirability in American Dream. To attain affluence, competitiveness, amelioration, prosperity are the main constituents of the American Dream. Ehrenreich (2016) contends that people can come out of their poverty according to their struggle as being destitute is not a fixed status. The American Dream gives equal chances of prosperity to all.

Research Objectives

To provide a new perspective in approaching the American Dream by hinting at the ambivalent attitude of people towards it and suggesting a solution to it.

Research Question

1. How has an understanding of American Dream changed over the years?
2. Is The American Dream a delusion or a reality?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is qualitative in nature. It explores the origin, the historical perspective of the term, American Dream, in the context of reflections articulated by James Truslow Adams and Jim Cullen, which serve as the theoretical framework of this study. Content analysis a qualitative research technique is used to make valid inferences by evaluating and interpreting the textual material. The *Great Gatsby* (1925), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), *The American Dream* (1961), are selected as purposive samples as the researcher finds them apposite to the topic under discussion. The study ventures to locate where the problem lies with American Dream or with the working system where the dream is being operated.

Varieties of the American Dream

Cullen (2003) in his book: *“AMERICAN DREAM: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation”* traced the different varieties of the American Dream. He wrote that the first American Dream was the dream of a small group of English religious nonconformists who crossed an ocean mainly in their pursuit of how to worship God. Cullen further mentioned the charter of the American Dream: the declaration of independence or the American War of independence which they fought against British dominance. Another most au fait variant of the American Dream: that is the dream of economic hegemony or financial mobility was born too early. In retrospect, he regarded the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision of 1896, which sustained facilities for people based on ethnic discrimination under the dogma of “*separate but equal*” as the most unsuccessful and infamous American Dream. Lincoln signed the *Homestead Act* in 1862 and the dream of homeownership became the most cherished

of all dreams. But the most glamorous and menacing of all the dreams is the dream of sudden fame and opulence which became preponderant in the first half of the 21st Century. The kaleidoscopic nature of the American Dream as suggested by Cullen (2003) takes one to the most recent American dream; the dream to protect Americans from foreign annexation. The Chameleon-like state of the American Dream is the prognosis of the American psyche in totality. Cullen (2003) spoke about the evolutionary process of the American Dream within American geographical precincts but the dream is ubiquitous. Archer (2014) enunciated in “*The Resilience of Myth: The Politics of the American Dream*” that the history of the evolution of the American Dream demonstrates the American Dream myth as resilient and irrepressible. Archer (2014) states that it is a pliable social and political hypothesis that serves as evolving tool to homogenize and amalgamate the common interests of diverse social associates. During the period of economic depression or political disorder, myth can serve as a propelling force for individuals.

American Dream: A Dream or a Nightmare?

Is the American Dream really a dream to be pursued or it is a nightmare; a terrible delusion? That is an enigma for those who are not well informed about the exact nature or scope of the American Dream. The researcher explores that though aforesaid idiosyncrasies retain pretty flattering connotations; yet the phrase American Dream has become a derogatory expression for conceiving the inconceivable, something which is contrary to reason-a no-go, a no-win- a no-way. English literature seems to be the hieroglyphic expression of the American nightmare not of American Dream. *The Great Gatsby* (1925), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *The Death of A sales Man* (1949), *American Dream* (1961), etc. are quintessential oeuvres of the declaration of the saga of the American nightmare. The picture of the American Dream as painted in all this literature is the secularization of all struggle ending in nullity and the cessation of life as we have seen in Arthur Miller’s Play, *The Death of a Salesman* (1949). In the mentioned play, for Willy Lowman, the key to success and the reason for social and economic ascendancy is the charismatic personality with total disregard for hard work and innovation. For Ben, American Dream is starting from scratch and ending as a rich man-the way between is all mysterious. The author has shown all the characters following their own version of the American Dream. Again in *American Dream* by Edward Albee we find disemboweled, mutilated young man to be the incarnation of the American Dream. The American Dream of characters in these mentioned plays American Dream turns out to be a treasure hunt-the vicious cycle. In truth, American Dream is metamorphosed into an American nightmare by the playwrights which is not the veritable painting of the American Dream. Azar Nafisi quotes – “the negative side of the American Dream comes when people pursue success at any cost, which in turn destroys the vision and the dream”. (Samuel (2012) further interprets The American Dream:

“The Dream is both radical and conservative, spiritual and secular, home to a red state and blue state, and accommodating of virtually any preconception of agenda” (p.42). Further to it, probing the expectations and apprehensions of whites and especially of blacks of numerous social classes, Hochschild (1996) establishes that America’s unifying vision may soon disappear when confronted with racial and ethnic conflicts.

Maybe Willy Loman could not reach social and economic ascendancy but one should always remain contended like the old man Santiago, *The Old Man and the Sea*, to never give up. For Fitzgerald, the American Dream is just a myth lacking optimism. His character Gatsby craved for the dream at any cost by any means, which resulted in his isolated death. All these specimens of literature provide experiences that illustrate the profoundly personal and individual lived experiences of the American Dream. What Cullen believes in is the Puritan dream- the belief in ultimate effort and determination which may lead things to a satisfactory end.

Demystification of the American Dream

Mesmerized by the very ethos of the American Dream I just want to take the phrase out of its territorial American fortification to discern its quintessence of universality. The American Dream or in more practical terms- the dream by ripping the term American off its phrase, to rise to ascend the ladder of success is everywhere in every part of the world. For some, it is an exciting ding dong battle and for the rest, it is a Herculean task. Archer (2014) - “*The Resilience of Myth: The Politics of the American Dream*”- that the American Dream is closely connected with America’s culture and it is emblematic of America’s national life not only this rather it is nexus which joins together people of diverse cultures, races, religions make a bedrock of global harmony where all assimilate themselves. It is a template of

an American family. Why it appears illusory more specifically to Americans and the world in general? Where does the fault lie? Either with the American Dream or with the political and socio-economic structures in which the struggle for the accomplishment of the American Dream has to be made. This Gordian knot has to be cut.

The American Dream and Consumerism

'*Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*' this is what in fact is the American Dream. The later versions of the dream have created the soulless, materialistic consumer society (for which Adams blamed Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal) and made the public deeply skeptical about the American Dream. Americans and non-Americans seem to get oblivious to the true spirit of the American Dream that materialistic things cannot be the assurance of ones' happiness Dream of Liberty cannot be realized by subjugating others. The secular and non-spiritual dream which has become a fashion in the most recent times among the masses is only illusory. "*The charm of anticipated success*"; what Tocqueville (1840) said about American Dream has changed into repulsion for anticipated failure. Laeven, Luc, Popov, and Alexander (2016) in their paper "*Waking Up From the American Dream: On the Experience of Young Americans During the Housing Boom of the 2000s*" have given rather a murky picture of the American Dream. They suggested that in the presence of the boom-bust cycle which is the key characteristic of the capitalist system, the undertaking of homeownership is fairly cumbersome. The shift from renting to possessing house wrecks one's expectations of marriage and choices of fertility. This according to them may result in considerably greater debts. The question is why has the original, the archetype American Dream that concerns itself with the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness been displaced? Today's world is the world of consumerism or consumer culture. It is concerned with purchasing goods and services and an individual least bothers about the high transaction value and is more succumbed to profligate lifestyle. Consumerism as a globalized phenomenon has become an essential part of the ideology of a nation. Media is playing an important role in its proliferation. Shopping Marts are jam-packed with affluent consumers who are the bull's eye of enterprisers. The phobia of brand and the accumulation of high technological home appliances are driving people mad and compelling the individuals of low income to suffer from an inferiority complex which subsequently can result in a social anarchy. But the American Dream is not all about consumption and transaction. The possession of materialistic objects can provide temporary rapture but it cannot be the guarantee of true ecstasy which is the state of self-transcendence advocated by Adams and Cullen.

The American Dream and the American Politics

The slogans of the Post-war time do not sound judicious in the traumatic present times as the world is still in a state of war. Viewed from the American political perspective the war which America has waged on Islamic countries in the name of 'Exterminating all the terrorists' is psychological warfare initiated by America herself against Americans. An individual American, locked in the syndrome of terrorism and insecurity, is drawn away from the pursuance of the American Dream. Moreover, America's obsession to become the exclusive proprietor of the world sounds megalomaniacal and is also a distraction in the political carte blanche of her leaders.

In his work *The Epic of America*, Adams speculated about the American Dream that it bestows the individual an opportunity to rise on the economic scale as per their potential. In the decade of 1920s, Adams regretted the fact that the nation extirpated the soul of the American Dream in its blind pursuit of money and got oblivious to its spiritual side. Forster (1937) in his novel *American Dream* also felt contrition for the sad demise of the spirit of the American dream whereby unfolding that altruism is replaced by corruption and acquisitiveness. "*The Lost Cause*" as Forster stated needs to be resuscitated by following the practical personified demonstrations that are the lives of Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Theodore Roosevelt. Americans could learn a lot from Jefferson's concept of social freedom, Emerson's recurring theme of self-reliance, Roosevelt's determination to fight for what was right.

The American Dream and Capitalism

The current world is mainly dominated by capitalism; a system mainly revolves around economic competition and often leads to the exploitation of the working class. The capitalist system consists of proletariats who sell their labor for little wages and the bourgeois who own the means of production. The Bourgeois class cannot exist without the proletariat. According to Rogers (2014), the capitalist system cannot exist without the proletarianized worker, because the latter have no option except to sell their labor to the former. The proletariats are exploited by keeping them apart from their product or

means of subsistence and they are given very little wages. Hence this system promotes impoverishment or destitution and servitude of a large body of population. Another inherent hitch in the capitalist system is the competition between capitalists to seek a competitive edge over one another and to achieve this end they keep low the wages and try to replace the manual labor with machinery subsequently resulting in the unemployment of people. According to Smith (2012), the role of the state is very important for running successfully the economic affairs of the country. Smith admitted that a laborer earns according to his efforts while Marx showed discontentment with capitalism being closely connected to the exploitation of one class by another. The solution to the current complex state of affairs, for the growing disillusionment of people with the American Dream and for those who are censorious champions of capitalism lies not in disparaging the American Dream but in remodeling the political-economic system mainly-capitalism.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion signifies the need for a more diversified economic system where the role of entrepreneurs can be contributory to stabilizing the economy of the country and commiserative with the proletariat class. One possible solution to Americans may be in the form of consumer credit. Through this service consumers get credit which makes it feasible for them the process of buying goods and services. Consumers can also refinance their loans gained for such purposes. One needs more than a credit card for the achievement of the American Dream. This culture of profit and loan has created a materialistic society where the unremitting pursuit of personal wealth and happiness eclipses other metanarratives mainly religion and patriotism. It lets people mortgage their liberty for debt. Shanaan (2010), in his book: *Economic Freedom and the American Dream* stated that humans have lost their finest qualities in the pursuit of the American Dream. However, in recent times consumer credit is regarded as very corroborating in the pursuit of happiness (Calder, 1999).

The state can also finance the American Dream. The role of a state has to be beneficiary for letting the capitalists invest their capital and safeguard the employees from exploitation. The horizon of the economic system has to be broadened concerning wages of work, work hours, and proprietorship. The state should be dynamic enough to edify the capitalists to think of human beings in terms of living entity not in terms of some commodity to make such an environment where the actualization of the American Dream is made possible. The researcher agrees with Rogers who in, *Capitalism and Its Alternatives: A Critical Introduction* (2014), postulates that instead of an 'alternative capitalism' an 'alternative to capitalism' may be introduced which focuses not merely on pecuniary advantages but also on the collective wellbeing of people. Ehrenreich (2016) emphasized assistance schemes for business from the government and demanded it to be free of all government restraints which is the crux of the American Dream. He further suggested that corporations should be treated as persons and their free-spending should be regarded as free speech. If the government fails to provide equal economic opportunity, social security, justice, liberty, health care, education to its people then it is the betrayal of the American Dream.

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