

**IMMIGRANTS' DIFFICULTIES IN PURSUING THE AMERICAN
DREAM PORTRAYED IN IMBOLO MBUE'S *BEHOLD THE DREAMERS***

(2016)

THESIS

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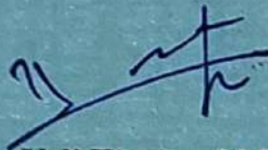


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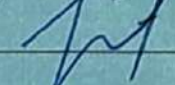
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Dengan ini menyatakan, bahwa Tugas Akhir saya dengan Judul "Immigrants' Difficulties in Pursuing the American Dream Portrayed in Imbolo Mbue's Behold the Dreamers (2016)" adalah benar merupakan hasil karya saya dan bukan merupakan plagiat dari karya orang lain. Apabila suatu saat saya terbukti melakukan plagiat maka saya bersedia diproses dan menerima sanksi akademis maupun hukuman sesuai dengan hukum dan ketentuan yang berlaku, baik di institusi Universitas Negeri Padang maupun masyarakat dan negara.

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In humble admiration, I send shalawat and greetings and express my deepest appreciation and respectful salutations to the Prophet Muhammad SAW, whose wisdom and compassion have illuminated the paths of knowledge and goodness for humanity. His tireless efforts to conquer ignorance and encourage a world of kindness serve as an endless source of inspiration.

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ABSTRACT

ALFANUARI. (2023). **IMMIGRANTS' DIFFICULTIES IN PURSUING THE AMERICAN DREAM PORTRAYED IN IMBOLO MBUE'S *BEHOLD THE DREAMERS* (2016)**. Padang: English Department, Faculty of Language and Arts, Universitas Negeri Padang.

As the national ethos of the United States, the American Dream promises a better life for all Americans, including immigrants. Yet, achieving it has not always been easy for them. This research reveals the difficulties that immigrants experience in pursuing the American Dream. This research employs a descriptive qualitative method, applying Terry Eagleton's Marxist theory and Jim Cullen's American Dream theory. This research aims to identify the versions of the American Dream that immigrants want to achieve and examine its difficulties stemming from the capitalist economic system. The results of this research found that there are six versions of the American Dream that immigrants want to achieve, including The Puritan Enterprise, Declaration of Independence, Upward Mobility, The Dream of Equality, The Dream of Home Ownership, and The Coast. This research also found that negative aspects of the capitalist economic system, including inequality, exploitation, alienation, and ideological power, become barriers for immigrants in pursuing the American Dream. The irony lies in perceiving the capitalist system as a means to achieve the American Dream, as it paradoxically creates barriers for immigrants. This research concludes that the American Dream does not truly promise a better life for everyone, especially immigrants facing socio-economic disadvantages.

Keywords: *American Dream, United States, Immigrants, Marxist, Capitalist Economic System*

ABSTRAK

ALFANUARI. (2023). **IMMIGRANTS' DIFFICULTIES IN PURSUING THE AMERICAN DREAM PORTRAYED IN IMBOLO MBUE'S *BEHOLD THE DREAMERS* (2016)**. Padang: Program Studi Bahasa dan Sastra Inggris, Fakultas Bahasa dan Seni, Universitas Negeri Padang.

Sebagai etos nasional Amerika Serikat, Impian Amerika menjanjikan kehidupan yang lebih baik bagi seluruh warga Amerika, termasuk para imigran. Namun, untuk mencapainya tidak selalu mudah bagi mereka. Penelitian ini mengungkap kesulitan yang dialami para imigran dalam mengejar Impian Amerika. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif, dengan menerapkan teori Marxis Terry Eagleton dan teori Impian Amerika dari Jim Cullen. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi versi Impian Amerika yang ingin dicapai oleh para imigran dan meneliti kesulitan-kesulitan yang muncul akibat sistem ekonomi kapitalis. Hasil dari penelitian ini menemukan bahwa terdapat enam versi American Dream yang ingin dicapai oleh para imigran, yaitu The Puritan Enterprise, Declaration of Independence, Upward Mobility, The Dream of Equality, The Dream of Home Ownership, dan The Coast. Penelitian ini juga menemukan bahwa aspek-aspek negatif dari sistem ekonomi kapitalis, seperti ketidaksetaraan, eksploitasi, keterasingan, dan kekuatan ideologi, menjadi penghalang bagi para imigran dalam mengejar Impian Amerika. Ironisnya, sistem kapitalis yang dianggap sebagai sarana untuk mencapai Impian Amerika justru secara paradoks menciptakan hambatan bagi para imigran. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa Impian Amerika tidak benar-benar menjanjikan kehidupan yang lebih baik bagi semua orang, terutama bagi para imigran yang mengalami kesulitan dalam perekonomian.

Kata Kunci: *Impian Amerika, Amerika Serikat, Imigran, Marxis, Sistem Ekonomi Kapitalis*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Research

The American Dream has been a central concept in American society for decades. It is a belief held by people in the United States, including immigrants. An early definition of the American Dream appeared in James Truslow Adams's book, *The Epic of America*, which stated that "dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement." (Adams, 1931, p. 404). Following this, the phrase rapidly became a common parlance (Cullen, 2003, p. 4). Although people's definitions of the American Dream may vary, the essence remains that every individual willing to work hard can achieve success in the United States.

The earliest stories of the American Dream can be traced back to the book *A General History of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* by English writer and sailor John Smith. Smith in his book described America as a place where "...every man be master of his own labour and land... and if he have nothing but his hands, he may...by industries quickly grow rich." (Smith, 1624, p. 214). He considered that America was a land of opportunity, where everyone could work hard and prosper through their own labor and hard work. This idea then resonated with the following generation as they attempted to construct a new nation, giving rise to the concept of the American Dream.

The first wave of European immigrants to North America by the Puritans in the seventeenth century laid the foundation of religious freedom in the United States. They came as a result of religious discrimination that limited them in their home countries. They thought that they would practice their own religious beliefs and practices in the new land as they saw fit and without any limitations. Puritans' focus was drawn to the afterlife and making the world a better and holier place (Cullen, 2003, p. 34). The religious purpose that anchored the early understanding of prosperity is one of the pillars that underpinned the foundations of the American Dream.

Another pillar that underpinned the foundation of the American Dream is the Founding Fathers, who were strong spokespersons for the American Dream in the Declaration of Independence. The declaration, which was executed on July 4, 1776, stated, "...that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." (Declaration of Independence: A Transcription, 2015). This declaration captured the reasons for the arrival of European settlers and colonizers, most of whom came to escape tyranny, religious and political persecution, or poverty (Murtoff, 2023).

As the idea of the American Dream developed in nineteenth century, successive waves of immigrants arrived in the United States. People continued to arrive from Germany, England, and Ireland, along with China. Among the wave of immigrants who arrived, Africans arrived forcibly as slaves. Despite the fact that importing slaves into the country was illegal, the practice of owning slaves

and their descendants remained. It was later abolished throughout the United States in 1865 with the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment to the country's Constitution. However, despite the end of slavery, black Americans still struggled for opportunities due to segregation and poor education (Christopher, 1997).

In the twentieth century, the phrase American Dream was first coined by historian James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book, *The Epic of America*. Adams says that the American Dream is a means, regardless of origin or social status, to achieve prosperity in a society founded on freedom and equal opportunity for all citizens of the United States. He emphasized that the American Dream is more than a pursuit for wealth or material things, but also a quest for personal fulfillment and a vision of self-actualization (Adams, 1931, p. 404).

In this era, real-world conditions such as income inequality and prospects for social mobility influence American society's belief in the American Dream. People are more optimistic that the American Dream can be achieved when income inequality is lower and prospects for social mobility are higher (Wolak & Peterson, 2020). As income inequality has risen significantly since the 1970s, the American Dream has become less achievable for individuals who are not already wealthy or born into wealth (Barone, 2023). The American Dream has always been associated with economic achievement and prosperity, but as getting rich becomes harder to achieve, American society are embracing a new definition. According to a GoDaddy survey, American small business owners think that the American Dream includes more about feeling a sense of belonging, freedom, happiness and work-life balance than revenue and sales growth (Jackson, 2023).

As the national ethos of the United States, American Dream has provided great hope for the success of American society, including immigrants. Through the promise of prosperity and happiness offered, many immigrants have come to this country over time to improve their lives (Murphy, 2010). The main attraction of the American Dream for immigrants is the comfort that immigrants can achieve in terms of economic advancement (Carballo, 2019). The availability of better jobs compared to their home countries and relatively higher wages are the reasons immigrants decide to migrate to the United States (Gogol, 2023).

The United States is commonly referred to as the ‘nation of immigrants’ due to its immigration history and the enormous number of foreigners living there. According to the Migration Policy Institute, as of 2021, immigrants make up approximately 13.6 percent of the total U.S. population, which is about 45.3 million people (Ward & Batalova, 2023). The large number of immigrants in the United States is driven by the idea of the American Dream. One of the immigrants who have achieved success in the United States is Elon Musk. Born in Pretoria, South Africa, he moved to the United States in 1995. Through his past struggles, today he has successfully established his famous companies SpaceX, Tesla, SolarCity and Tesla Energy, Neuralink, The Boring Company, and his latest acquisition Twitter (Towey, 2022).

Achieving the American Dream, however, has not always been easy for immigrants. According to Murphy’s critical view on Adams’s definition of the American Dream, it indicates that from the beginning, this dream was never expected to be fully attainable by all. The word ‘should’ in Adam’s definition in

the sentence “...a land in which life should be better and richer...” indicates that American Dream is never expected to be fully attainable to everyone (Murphy, 2010). In addition, the idea of the American Dream is increasingly being questioned as immigrants realize that achieving the dream is quite complicated. This is due to the fact that the American Dream is not homogeneous and does not apply equally to minorities or immigrants (Carballo, 2019).

Through the economic freedom of capitalism, individuals can achieve the success and happiness promised by the American Dream (Dermo, 2014). Capitalism is seen as a means of achieving the American Dream since it allows individuals to work hard and invest in their future (Grasson, 2012). Eagleton argues that capitalism is an economic system shaped by power relations and social structures, and criticizes the present-day economic system of capitalism based on Marx's ideas, including inequality, exploitation, alienation, and ideological power as a result of this economic system (Eagleton, 2011). Consequently, individuals facing socio-economic disadvantages, notably immigrants, encounter heightened susceptibility to several barriers when pursuing the American Dream, and these barriers are deeply rooted in the capitalist nature of the dream itself.

Behold the Dreamers is a novel that tells the experiences of an immigrant married couple in New York City during the 2008 financial crisis. With great hope and determination, they departed from their home country, Cameroon, and migrated to the United States in pursuit of opportunities for socio-economic advancement. They aspired to upward mobility, a promise ingrained in the American Dream. After several years of low-paid work, Jende eventually secured

a much better job as a chauffeur for the wealthy Edwards family. Jende realized that he was an undocumented immigrant, so he fought hard to obtain asylum and later a green card in order to preserve his current well-paying job. Jende's wife, Neni, is determined to become a pharmacist to pursue socio-economic advancement. She came to the United States on a student visa. To achieve her dream, she studied hard to do well in school, and maintained a B plus average. Unfortunately, this immigrant married couple is always faced with several barriers in pursuing their American Dream. Although they had tried hard to pursue their American Dream, they eventually failed with the collapse of Lehman Brothers, which triggered the 2008 financial crisis, and returned to their home country.

Behold the Dreamers is a debut novel by Imbolo Mbue. Mbue is an American novelist of Cameroonian descent. She traveled to America in 1998 to study management at Rutgers University, where she graduated in 2002. In 2017, she won the PEN/Faulkner Award for this novel. Interestingly, she is the first African writer to win this award (OBI-YOUNG, 2017). As an immigrant in the United States, Mbue writes her work based on her own experiences.

1.2 Focus of the Problem

The researcher would try to analyze immigrants' difficulties in pursuing the American Dream as a result of the capitalist economic system in the novel *Behold the Dreamers* by Imbolo Mbue.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What are the versions of the American Dream that the immigrants want to achieve in *Behold the Dreamers* by Imbolo Mbue (2016)?
2. How does the capitalist economic system cause barriers for immigrants in pursuing the American Dream in *Behold the Dreamers* by Imbolo Mbue (2016)?

1.4 Purpose of the Research

1. To find out the versions of the American Dream that the immigrants want to achieve in *Behold the Dreamers* by Imbolo Mbue (2016)
2. To find out how the capitalist economic system causes barriers for immigrants in pursuing the American Dream in *Behold the Dreamers* by Imbolo Mbue (2016)