

Illusion or Reality: A Recontextualized Perspective of ‘the American Dream’ in Imbolo Mbue’s *Behold the Dreamers*

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Abstract

‘The American Dream’ motif is one that has been deployed in productions of American literary icons for centuries with different outcomes for the characters portrayed. Despite a plethora of fiction being devoted to the motif from African migrants’ perspective, not many studies have explored the actualization of the Dream by characters in such texts. In *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), Imbolo Mbue presents the lived experiences of new African diasporans. This study looks at the outcomes of the quest for ‘the Dream’ by Mbue’s characters, through a mimetic reading of her novel and based on Harold Bloom’s notion of ‘Party of Hope’ and ‘the American Nightmare’ as exemplified in the treatments of the Dream motif by several writers. Mbue, while presenting the paradoxical notions of illusion and reality of the Dream, also portrays struggles by both citizens and migrants, to achieve the tangible and intangible of its ideals. Findings reveal that essentialization and discrimination inhibit the attainment of the Dream by many African migrants; that the attainment of college education is a huge factor in the realization of the tangible of its ideals, while the attainment of the intangible seems illusory for many migrants. The conclusion is that several factors prevent the realization of the Dream by many contemporary African migrants. Notwithstanding the haziness of the distinction between the tangible and intangible of the

Dream, the attainment of materiality by citizens themselves creates more problems than happiness, an integral part of the Dream, remains elusive.

Keywords: The American Dream; African migrants; mimetic; motif

Introduction

“Everyone wants to come to America, sir. Everyone. To be in this country, sir. To live in this country. Ah! It is the greatest thing in the world” (*Behold the Dreamers*, p. 39).

The above quote from Imbolo Mbue’s debut novel, *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), encapsulates the mis/conception of America by many citizens of countries of the global south. The American Dream, an enduring motif of the American literary tradition, is one expressed in great literary works by generations of writers. It is not only a metaphor encapsulating the very crux of American life, it is a trope central to works of American literary writers across generations and races. It is also one deployed by writers of both the old and the new African diaspora.

For so long, America has remained the desideratum of many aspiring migrants from several countries because of images projected of the country in both traditional and new media. Mbue’s *Behold the Dreamers* explores the motif, from an African migrant writer’s perspective, thereby exposing its complexities. This assertion is evident in the portrayal of the novel’s characters, Americans and migrants, males and females, who are deemed to be in pursuit of one dream or the other. The novelist’s witty depictions of the ambivalences and ironies of both the tangible and the intangible of the American Dream’s ideals can be gleaned from the experiences of the characters vis-a-vis the backdrop of the United States of America epitomizing migration as the story of mankind. The deployment of the motif, whether deliberate or otherwise, gives an insight into its relevance as a literary aesthetic even in contemporary times.

This analysis of Mbue’s novel draws on Harold Bloom’s grouping of parties of ‘hope’

and ‘nightmare’, as presented in the edited book, *Bloom’s Literary Theme: The American Dream* (2009). In the introduction of the book of twenty essays, Bloom asserts that the treatment of the theme by Ralph Waldo Emerson is hinged on hope, hence his tag of some writers, who have treated the theme the same way, as belonging to Emerson’s ‘Party of Hope’. The other side, he labels, ‘American Nightmare’. This category features writers like Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, T. S. Elliot and Bloom’s own contemporary, Phillip Roth based on his notion that they have propagated the theme as a nightmare. The categorizations by Bloom are based on the following: the outcomes of the motif’s engagement by various writers and the haziness and attendant ironies of the trope. Irrespective of the ambivalences that may exist in the treatment of the American Dream motif by various writers, Bloom concludes his introduction by affirming that literary metaphors’ treatment by writers may be varied but they are welcome as they are enablers of persuasion. He declares, “We welcome literary metaphor because it enables fictions to persuade us of beautiful untrue things” (xi). This study acquiesces to the notion of motifs and themes in literature, being not only useful in expressing the thoughts of writers but also connecting them to readers.

Dreamers, situated within the new African diaspora fiction, offers a lens to view the antithetical realization of the American Dream by migrants and Americans alike. It is an African migrant tale that reflects the quest for the American Dream by the subjects of the novel. Mbue’s engagement with the theme is an addition to the literature already produced on it. The Dream is veiled by the novelist in a way that shows the interconnectedness of hope and nightmare, as her characters contend with its ideals. The paradoxical nature of the Dream, especially its intangible ideals, is expressed by Neni, Mbue’s deuteragonist in *Dreamers*, in the following quote: “How could anyone have so much happiness and unhappiness skillfully wrapped up together?” (p. 157). This paper, therefore, examines

Mbue's intervention in African migrancy discourse in *Dreamers* as a reflection, a representation and an interpretation of the world of African migrants in America; a world that the writer is equally a part of.

The novelist's use of non-fictional details and perceived representation of the realities of many African migrants inform the mimetic reading of *Dreamers*. The representations of real events, with effects over the novel's plot and setting, make the migrant tale a compelling one. Some of the non-fictional elements of the novel are the 2008 financial crisis in the United States of America, a financial meltdown with domino effect in most parts of the world; and the references to the 44th President of the United States of America, Barack Obama, the very first non-white president of the nation. His emergence is considered both a modern and classic example of the attainment of the American Dream.

This effort, therefore, is an exploration of a contemporary African migrants' narrative that focuses on the American Dream motif from Bloom's critical perspective of parties of 'hope' and 'nightmare'. Insights can be drawn from the depiction of the importance of the motif, and its contradictory manifestations in the lives of many of Mbue's characters. Not only do we have the concurrence of hope and nightmare in the experiences of the characters, the tangible and the intangible ideals of the Dream seem to be about the characters' upward social mobility alone. The perceived realistic representations of the lives of many African migrants in the United States informs the inference that Mbue has undertaken the process of depiction, a sort of mimicry. Through the juxtaposition of some Americans' experiences in the novel with those of migrants, Mbue is seen to be beaming a light on everyone considered to be in the same pursuits for a better life. A mimetic reading of *Dreamers* enables the realistic assessment of the representation and interpretation of migrants' worlds in it.

Literature Review

Kimberly Wong in a 2016 article makes a clear assertion that the notion of equal opportunity touted in the United States Declaration of Independence is clearly appealing and drawing migrants to the United States from all over the world. Wong asks a pertinent question as to whether the Dream has ever been accessible to everyone. The question may have been answered by a recent article written by Clara R. Riggio (2021) on defining the American Dream, a quantitative work, which sees the attainment of the Dream in the 21st century as clouded by various interpretations of the motif itself. Sandra Sousa's study is one of the few on Mbue's novel that considers the quest for the dream or a journey by African migrants as a means of representing and understanding what is considered foreign and 'Other'. In her article, she posits that many writers of the new African diaspora are all developing the journey motif narratives of confrontation of Western and African values. To her, the Jongas' dream in *Dreamers* remains solely a dream.

Mbue's novel has also received the attention of Saray Wyman (2019) with focus on the role of food in the text. She recognizes the fact that the novelist may have achieved her own American Dream, but the same cannot be said of her African migrant characters. Irrespective of the interpretations of many critics, the novel's importance lies in its depictions of the realities of many contemporary African migrants. Another study on the *Dreamers* and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* is the one by Odey Okache (2022) which looks at the concepts of migration and return in both novels. The crux of the study is the identification of push and pull factors of migration and the conditions that propel return migration. While these cited works are of utilitarian value to a better appreciation of Mbue's *Dreamers*, this paper aims at exploring the Dream motif, considered not an old myth, but rather one for the ages.

The American Dream, More Than a Cliché!

That the ubiquitous American Dream has gained traction in many of its literary and artistic productions needs no gainsaying. It is a dream couched in some set of ideals with roots in the United States Declaration of Independence (1776); a phrase regarded by many as a myth. Its ethos is contained in the following well-crafted sentence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, 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” (United States Declaration of Independence, paragraph 3). This quote spells out the equality of all men and their rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Of all the definitions of the phrase given, the one by James Truslow Adams in *The Epic of America* (1931), a book written during the Great Depression, is one often quoted by scholars and critics. To Adams, ‘the American Dream’ is a “dream of land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with the opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (p. 404).

Many writers, who have deployed the dream motif as an aesthetic in their works, are well aware of its haziness and attendant ironies. Scholars and critics, who engage with its discourse from several perspectives, consider it to be raising the hope and optimism of Americans as well as that of migrants. William A.V. Clark (2003) in his discourse of the dream, observes that those “who have sought to interpret the American Dream have suggested that it has always been more than the search for material wellbeing. Even so, the evidence suggests that the search has been more material than not” (5). In a recent study by Jennifer Wolak and David Petersen (2020), the authors look at the dynamism of the Dream from 1973 to 2018. The data gathered suggest the Dream’s realization may be responding to changes. While Clark views the Dream as extending beyond materiality, Wolak and Petersen finger racial inequality as reason for its decline.

In spite of the wide usage of the American Dream motif in several literary productions, its clear meanings are yet to be established, even in contemporary works. This is more so as the reality of the Dream infers a better, richer and fuller life “often viewed in terms of economic and material prosperity such as buying your dream house or car” (Madeline High, 2015, p. 1). Equating the Dream with material success alone narrows its definition and conception. For many migrants, their quest is mainly driven by the pursuit of material well-being buoyed by tales of the successes of individuals and the prosperity of the United States. Generations and centuries of flows of immigrants have not diminished the United States’ status as the desired destination of many would-be migrants. Gonzalo Schwarz, a recent migrant to the United States, in a 2018 presentation to the Archbridge Institute reiterates the cliched notion of the Dream being solely about wealth. He submits that for him and many others, their migration has pivoted largely on the country’s culture of entrepreneurship. The lofty American Dream continues to draw immigrants to the United States, even when Edward Hess (2019) observes that the digital age has the potential to be disruptive and transformative of its realization in contemporary times. However, it is not out of place to conclude that the Dream is the very crux of American living. And in Jende’s words at the onset of his American sojourn in *Dreamers*, “America has something for everyone” (p. 40); an obtuse declaration built on hope.

A nuanced perspective of what the Dream encapsulates is expressed by Nurayn F. Alimi (2018), who asserts that it manifests “out of a labyrinth process of experiences that are products of history, politics, race, class, culture, literature, as well as gender and power relations in America” (p. 175). This observation is informed by the differing outcomes of its pursuit for different people based on their gender, class, political leaning and of course their race. The common denominator for all is calling America home. Those who constitute the old African diaspora in America have been because of almost 400 years of slavery, rendered

powerless and are largely disenfranchised from the full realization of the Dream. For those who constitute the new African diaspora in America, the dialectic of 'Centre' and 'Margin' are thrown into the mix. The same status, which was accorded to their kin of the old African diaspora, is extended to them. The otherness of African migrants makes the attainment of the Dream herculean and for some, insurmountable. The Dream, a motivating force of American civilization, thus becomes elusive to many African migrants.

With the views of various scholars and critics in mind, and with the dream motif being an enduring one in literary productions across genres, generations and races, it is worth examining how Mbue's subjects in her novel, *Dreamers*, have fared in living 'the American Dream'. The illusory Dream is considered central to Mbue's narrative, as her characters find themselves in a struggle to actualize its tangible and intangible ideals. Much of contemporary African diaspora fiction is devoted to exposing the lives of African migrants in the West and their efforts at surmounting the obstacles they face while integrating into their new society. Their quest for a better life or El Dorado is premised on the belief that their dreams of success and ideals of the good life are realizable in the West, most especially, in the United States. This is underscored by the lack of opportunities in home countries making the power of the Dream more alluring. Whether openly stated in such works or not, there is the perceived notion of journeys, both physical and metaphorical, undertaken by African migrants for a better life in the global north. Unfortunately for many African migrants, they realize their 'otherness' only upon arriving at their preferred destination (America) and the cliché, 'the grass may not be greener on the other side', becomes real. In fact, many African migrants erroneously assume that the dream of success and upward mobility works for everyone in America.

Reality of the American Dream

Since its entrance into the public domain and national consciousness, the phrase, ‘the American Dream’, has assumed a life of its own. In Mbue’s *Dreamers*, there are representations of the quests by African migrants to attain material success, considered to be the tangible aspects of the American Dream. The experiences of the Jongas are captured in *Dreamers* and are juxtaposed against those of the white American family, the Edwardses. This narrative technique draws parallels between the unique experiences of the two families. The parallels are what Alimi (2018) refers to as “existential ambivalences and attendant ironies of the American Dream experience” (p. 5). This implies that for the Jongas, who are African migrants, the tangible is unrealizable. Jende Jonga loses his job and his asylum application and therefore his family has to return to Africa thereby signaling the end of the Dream for them. For the Edwardses, the American family that Jende works for, the tangible is realized and is reflected in their material well-being. Besides the two families, there are other African migrants and Americans in the novel who constitute a synthesis of the conceptualization of the dream’s reality and illusion, and thus provide a better understanding of what the Dream entails in contemporary United States. Other African characters in the novel like Winston, Bubakar, Betty, Fatou and Olu are representations of realities that fall within ‘hope’ and ‘nightmare’ groupings of Bloom. American representatives in the novel such as Vince Edwards and Leah, Clark’s secretary, embody shades of realities of the ideals of the Dream.

In defining the tangible and the intangible elements of the American Dream, some of its symbols need to be highlighted. The tangible of the dream mainly focuses on material well-being, consisting of, but not limited to the following: ownership of a home, possession of cars, abundance of material goods and the ability to pay for college education of the children or the next generation. All of these are concomitants of a middle-class lifestyle. The

intangible is “embodied in the Bill of Rights (freedom from religious or political persecution)” (Clark, p. 2), and of course, the equality of men and the pursuit of happiness enshrined in paragraph 3 of the United States Declaration of Independence. The intangible of the Dream entails a life that is more internally satisfying based on individuals’ aspirations.

The hope of attaining the tangible of the American Dream makes Jende celebrate the offer of a chauffeur job by Wall Street bank executive, Clark Edwards. With the princely salary of 35 thousand dollars per annum comes the optimism and modest ambition of saving for a home, financing Neni’s pharmacy training and a bright future for their children. Meanwhile, the Edwardses, who represent the upper-middle class citizens, take the attainment of the tangible for granted. Clark works as a bank executive, which guarantees his family some level of material comfort and well-being. His family besides an apartment in Manhattan, owns a summer home in the New York State suburb, the Hamptons. Financing the education of the sons poses no problem, and the family generally exudes material well-being.

If the asylum failure dims the attainment of the Jongas’ American Dream, the financial meltdown of an institution like Lehman Brothers, where his boss is an executive, sounds the death knell of his living the Dream and exposes the real American society. Clark Edwards switches to Barclays Bank following the takeover of Lehman Brothers with subsequent bailout funds provided by the government. To the chagrin of the whole populace, newspapers and blogs blow the lid that bank executives like Clark have been using the bailout funds to engage the services of prostitutes in brothels. Meanwhile, Jende in keeping strictly to his employment terms, fails to do Cindy’s bidding, a situation which ultimately puts him in jeopardy. For not following through with the directive that he records Clark’s meetings and dalliances in a journal, Cindy pressures her husband to fire Jende. Coming from an African background, where polygyny is accepted, and a man can choose to be with

multiple women, Jende is surprised at Cindy's move to monitor her husband. By not squealing to Cindy about his boss, Jende displays integrity, which Clark himself lacks in his dealings as a bank executive and as a husband. If there is ever any hope of attaining the symbols associated with the tangible of the dream, Jende's loss of the chauffeur job ends his prospects and can be considered as a nail in the coffin of his personal and family's hope.

With the loss of the fairly well-paying chauffeur job, Jende returns to the life of doing dishes in restaurants, jobs whose remunerations cannot pay the bills. This depiction by Mbue places the text in the league of Bloom's party of 'nightmare'; this is because, in this instance, there is no self-fulfillment. The tangible and intangible of the American Dream appear to gradually slip out of the Jongas' reach. Jende and Neni's hope of rags to riches narrative in America has a major inhibitor – lack of legal documentation that confers the right to live and work in America. However, rather than succumb to the defeat and the farce that their quest is turning out to be, the family maintains a unified front in the face of challenges. The Jongas represent the essence of family in many African societies. By the end of the novel, the Jongas embark on a return journey to their native Cameroon with the determination to improve their condition there.

The Edwardses, whose lives are intertwined with the Jongas, are white Americans who have achieved the tangible of the Dream. However, the attainment of the tangible, which is reflected in the wealth and luxurious living of the family, does not translate to happiness for them. Clark Edwards becomes so engrossed in his work that he hardly spends time with his family. There is the perception by his wife and sons that his job is given priority over them. Cindy, in spite of the financial success of her husband, feels unloved by him, and laments the circumstances of her birth and her mother's love for her younger sister. Her first son's decision, to drop out of law school and to travel to India in search of 'the Truth' proves to be Cindy's greatest let-down. She spirals into a life of alcohol and drug abuse, which

eventually leads to her untimely death. Vince, her first son, sums up his parents' condition as follows: "they continue to go down a path of achievements and accomplishments and material success and shit that means nothing because that's what America's all about, and now they are trapped" (pp. 103-4). Unfortunately, the Edwardses are true representatives of many successful American families, who contend with issues of drug abuse, alcoholism and infidelity with the attainment of financial success. Cindy's drug and alcohol abuse is witnessed and captured on camera by Neni while working at the family's summer home in the Hamptons. It appears that Cindy never recovers from all of her hurts, most especially for being caught by Neni at her lowest ebb following excessive drug and alcohol consumption. As a punishment for orchestrating the firing of her husband, Neni blackmails and extorts Cindy of ten thousand dollars with the photograph of the stupor situation in the Hamptons.

Exploring the attainment of the tangible of the dream through Winston, Bubakar, Betty, Fatou and Olu reveals mixed results. Winston and Bubakar are migrants who experience the realization of the tangible of the Dream. They are both career lawyers, whose education plays a part in their realization of the tangible of the Dream. Winston has come so far from being a grocery cashier in Chicago to life as a lawyer on Wall Street. He has tapped into all opportunities presented by joining the US Army on his arrival in the United States after winning the country's visa lottery. He embodies all of the defining symbols of the American Dream. He is educated, has a dream job, owns an apartment in Manhattan and his remuneration at the law firm where he works guarantees a middle-class lifestyle. The financial support Winston readily offers to his cousin, Jende, attests to his material well-being. Bubakar, Jende's lawyer, also an African migrant, personifies the tangible of the Dream, as he boasts of a home in Canarsie, among other material possessions. He revels in the educational attainments of his three children, an evocation of securing the future of the next generation, which also symbolises the success of his sojourn in America. The tangibility

of the American Dream for Winston and Bubakar is premised on their acquisition of a college education. Conversely, the path to achieving the tangible of the Dream may have become complicated for those without college education like Betty, Fatou and Olu, who are also African migrants in Mbue's novel.

Betty's long stay in America has not in any way translated to a middle-class status. Although she is a legal migrant, she remains on the threshold of achieving the tangible of the Dream. Her efforts to become a nurse still fail to yield the expected result after seven years in nursing school. Fatou, the hair braider, on the other hand, even ranks below Betty in attainment of the tangible of the Dream. She remains poor and an undocumented alien after 26 years in America. Her obvious achievement largely remains her seven American-born children, who may likely improve her lot in the future. It is important here to also mention that Clark's American secretary, Leah, still struggles with what living the American Dream epitomizes. She is said to be clinging to a job that makes her miserable, which increases her blood pressure and keeps her awake at night. After the loss of her job as Clark's secretary, a job to which she has devoted 15 years of her, she begins the journey of job hunting again without much success.

In his book, Clark asserts that "Dreams are intangible, and the American Dream is no less intangible than so many other dreams of our futures" (p. 2). Achieving the intangible of the American Dream which is premised on freedom from religious and political persecutions appears realizable for everyone. The dream of equality for all remains a mirage and the pursuit of happiness is illusory for many - migrants and Americans. It may thus appear that achieving some elements of the intangible of the American Dream may be a fantasy.

The breakdown of the Edwards family and Cindy's drug and alcohol problem serve as an eye-opener for Neni. The attainment of financial success, the tangible of the American Dream, has not translated to the intangible (happiness) for the Edwardses. Although Clark

tries to patch things up with his sons following his wife's death, the reality is the permanent nature of the family's loss of a dear wife and a devoted mother. The delusory nature of the American Dream manifests in the complexities of experiences of the American characters in the novel. Cindy chokes to death from her vomit. The disintegration of her marriage, frustration from her beloved son, Vince, not picking up her calls and the apparent futility of wealth all become too much to bear. Where the American Dream has been a fantasy for the Jongas, the Edwardses in spite of the realization of the tangible of its ideals, find themselves struggling for happiness – a feature of the intangible of the Dream's ideals.

Vince Edwards' quest for 'the Truth' in faraway India shows the hollowness that characterises the acquisition of wealth and upward social mobility - the reality of many Americans. He considers his dad, Clark Edwards, to be struggling to find his essence in life because he has gone "off pursuing illusions" (p. 341). The novelist's strategy may have been to use Vince, to 'unindoctrinate' Jende about the lies he has been fed about the United States and to highlight the paradoxical notion of the Dream. Vince leaving America for India in search of his soul's wellness is considered symbolic. While citizens of the global south are desperate to move to the United States, Vince, a young white and privileged American decides to get away from his country in search of 'the Truth'. Migrants are daily flocking to America from other places in search of financial success, but here is Vince, the representative of the privileged Americans, longing for the wellness of his soul and true happiness by embarking on a journey to India, a developing country.

Although the American Dream is one expressing the equality of all men, the experiences of the Black race in the United States over centuries have proven contrary to that. These are experiences that have stripped the Black race of their dignity since the period of slavery and that still place them at the lowest rung of the racial ladder in contemporary times. People of African descent cannot be said to have been given an equal footing as their white

counterparts and those of other races. Calvin Jillson's *Pursuing the American Dream: Opportunity and Exclusion over Four Centuries* (2004) examines America's complex and ever-evolving social landscape. The book discusses the contexts that have shaped the Dream and patterns that have excluded some, leaving their dreams unrealized and their hopes in tatters. In terms of power relations, the people of African descent are the subalterns in America, a situation based on the intervention of history whether in the guise of slavery or colonialism.

For the people of the old African diaspora, living the American Dream comes at a great cost, owing to racism and more importantly, the fallout of slavery, which still plagues them almost two centuries after it ended. Those of the new African diaspora, the new entrants and migrants, who have nothing to do with the slavery antecedent of the old are also not exempt from essentialization and discrimination experienced by people of their race. Robert Young in *Colonial Desire* (1994) notes the racial profiling of Africans based on the hierarchical scale of the Great Chain of Being. He says: "Predictably the African was placed at the bottom of the human family" (p. 6) and unfortunately, this view remains endemic in Western discourses. The promise of equality of men, enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, remains a myth for people of African descent, whether of old or new African diaspora.

Essentialization and discrimination continue to hamper the actualization of the dream by many contemporary African migrants. The socio-cultural American environment and power dynamics between the predominantly white population and the Black minority place the African migrants at a disadvantage. If the African migrant is an undocumented one, then the situation becomes even more bleak. While white migrants are able to quit their 'otherness' and morph into the white population in little time, the same is not the lot of African migrants as they remain perpetually the 'other'. In fact, the tendency to essentialize

people of African descent based on the color of their skin is one that is addressed by most African migrant writers. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Americanah* (2013) uses the blog section of her novel to highlight how ‘blackness’ of African migrants is a significant identity marker. She writes: “Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I’m Jamaican or I’m Ghanaian. America doesn’t care. So what if you weren’t ‘black’ in your country? You’re in America now” (p. 255).

The impression many whites hold about Africans is gleaned from the heart-to-heart discussion between Neni and Cindy Edwards in *Dreamers*. Cindy, a white woman narrates to Neni how she has navigated her way out of poverty and has moved up the social ladder. On being told by Neni that she also hails from a poor family, Cindy quips: “No, you don’t understand,” [..]. Being poor for you in Africa is fine. Most of you are poor over there. The shame of it, it’s not as bad for you” (p. 123). The misrepresentation of Africa in Western discourse as a poor continent, and one whose poverty defines her peoples, limits the potential of African migrants in the United States. On arriving in the United States, Neni realizes that the sitcoms she has been exposed to before migration do not portray reality. She gradually comes to the realization that her preconceived idea that “America gave everyone, Black or white, an equal opportunity to be whatever they wished to be” (p. 312) is illusory.

The reaction of the security man at Lehman Brothers to Jende’s appearance when he shows up to be interviewed by Clark Edwards is epic. The Black security man is so surprised, at how a fellow black shows up well-dressed for an interview, that he “looked up at his face, looked down at his suit, smiled, and asked if he was trying to become a stockbroker or something” (p. 4). When Jende responds that he is there to interview for the position of a chauffeur, the guard then relaxes and says: “Good luck with that” (p. 4). Many citizens of the old African diaspora can be said to have become used to their otherness and the social

construction which has inferiorized them. The attempt by any member of their race to aspire to something greater is scorned. They are perpetually constrained and the opportunities available to them are tinged with obtrusive inequality.

The American Dream not only embodies the aspirations of both migrants and citizens, it also provides the avenues by which they can be realized. The pursuit of the Dream is one that comes at a great cost to migrants, especially those who do not have ‘paper’, the ‘green card’, which confers the right to stay and work in America. Migrant literature is generally rife with undocumented migrants assuming false identities in order to work and plotting untrue or exaggerated stories to convince the immigration system of host countries to grant their asylum applications. As an asylum seeker, Jende looks grotesque, lying about a father-in-law who may likely kill him on his return to Cameroon. His sin is that he impregnates his then-girlfriend, Neni, and thereby truncates her education. Meanwhile, the attainment of the tangible and the intangible of the American Dream by migrants is tied to the possession of the ‘green card’. Just like Jende, many undocumented migrants succeed in obtaining asylum by making up improbable stories of persecution in their home countries.

An obvious easy means of acquiring the ‘green card’ is through marriage to a citizen or someone with legal status. This route to securing a permanent residency is prevalent among migrants and narrated in most fictional works by new African diaspora writers. Neni, owing to her desperation to remain in America with her family, mulls the idea of divorcing Jende for a few years. This plan is to facilitate an ‘arranged marriage’ to a friend’s cousin to acquire legal status. The plot involves her remarrying Jende once her plan succeeds. She is discouraged by Pastor Natasha who poses the following questions: “Why would you want to divorce your husband and risk your marriage for papers, Neni? Why? Is America that important to you? Is it more important than your family?” (p. 284). Neni at this point realizes that her family is more important than living in America. Without securing a legal status,

migrants' hope of living the Dream becomes nightmarish, and returning without achieving material well-being attracts derision of those back home.

The journey to living the American Dream begins for the Jongas with Jende fabricating details to sway the consular officer to grant his visa in the first instance. And while leaving for the United States, he convinces himself that "he wouldn't see Cameroon again until he had claimed his share of the milk, honey, and liberty flowing in the paradise-for-strivers called America" (p. 19). However, reality dawns on him upon arriving at 'paradise'. Jende finds himself sharing a basement apartment with six Puerto Rican guys and working three jobs. Several jobs and little rest are his lot in order to pay for his wife's student visa and his son's visiting visa. When Neni and their son eventually join him, the battle to get a permanent residency becomes a great quest of its own. Mbue's novel's mimetic quality is hinged on the presentation of non-fiction details, as well as synchronic representations of the realities of contemporary African migrants. The path followed by the Jongas in order to live the American Dream is the reality of many African migrants. They often secure a non-immigrant visa to travel to countries of the global north, and with the intent not to return till material well-being is achieved. On arrival at their destination, they seek asylum by cooking up stories that will turn things in their favour. The 'green card', referred to as 'papier' throughout Mbue's novel, places migrants on the path of living the American Dream and attaining citizenship of the host country.

Much more than the representation of the experiences of the Jongas, Mbue's *Dreamers* is devoted to capturing the experiences of African migrants generally. There is the depiction of African migrants undertaking menial tasks and working several jobs in order to pay their bills. Jende, before the relatively well-paying chauffeur job, does three low-paying ones and after his sack as Clark's driver, takes up the readily available one of doing dishes. It is a grueling job that strains him physically but pays little. Winston initially works as a

cashier in a grocery store before joining the United States Army. Bubakar narrates how his first three years in America make him realize “America can be hell” (p. 321). Countless other African migrants go through the same routine of working many less-paying jobs before eventually achieving upward mobility and middle-class status. With lack of education, migrants like Jende, Neni, Fatou, Olu and countless others have their path to achieving the Dream complicated and are left disillusioned, broken and defeated. Winston knows very well the odds against Black male migrants, who lack college education. He puts it succinctly to Bubakar and Jende: “without a good education, and being a Black African immigrant male, he might never be able to make enough money to afford to live the way he’d like to live, never mind having enough money to own a home or pay for his wife and children to go to college” (p. 322).

The undocumented status of Jende and his family and many others of their ilk, their cultural distinctness in a place other than home, leave them occupying the in-between spaces in America. The occupation of liminal state, by many African migrants, depicts a frantic state of waiting and transformation; a state of waiting for what their fate will be at the immigration department and transformation due to culture-mix with the possibility of them becoming hybridized. Jende finds himself in a liminal space of becoming a legal migrant, a situation that almost drives him to the precipice, with negative impacts on his health and his relationship with his wife and son. Husband and wife soon realize the illusion that the American Dream is turning out to be for them and other characters in the novel - Africans and Americans alike. Through the sublime portrayal of the experiences of the Jongas, the American Dream turns from hope and idealism to disillusionment, and for the Edwards family, their attainment of the tangible makes a feature of the intangible (happiness) elusive.

Jende’s failure with his asylum application sends him on a downward spiral and signals an end to his American Dream. Once his application for a permanent stay is refused,

and the story of his father-in-law planning to kill him on his return to Cameroon falls flat, he begins to feel despondent with signs of violence and intolerance. He becomes so fearful of his imminent return to Cameroon without achieving his dream; a situation, he knows will present him as a failure on arrival at home. The news of his father's passing, and his unfortunate immigrant status preventing his attendance of his funeral rites being the first son, bear heavily on his health. He begins to experience excruciating back pain. No medication he takes assuages the pain and on consultation with a doctor, he is told the reason for his pain is stress. Right there and then, he makes his decision: "I want to return to Limbe" (p. 305). And as noted by Aaron Bady (2016), if the novel opens with Jende's American Dream being premised on the opportunities and economic strength of America, the point where he consults a doctor who adduces his back pain to stress becomes antithetical to his optimism at the beginning of his American sojourn. Jende realizes the futility of his quest without legal status and the drudgery characterizing the life of an uneducated immigrant in America. His American Dream turns to a nightmare as he opens up to Neni: "I don't like what my life has become in this country" (p. 306).

Neni's redemption through education, which her American pursuit promises, becomes threatened because of Jende's decision that they return home. The hope of a pharmacy education in America becomes unrealizable owing to Jende's failure to secure asylum and his induced sack as the Edwardses' chauffeur. Neni also fails to persuade her College Dean to recommend her for scholarship. The Jongas' young son, Liomi, begins to exhibit signs of insecurity once he overhears his mum's conversation with someone on the phone about Jende's failure to secure an asylum. All of the avenues through which Neni hopes to circumvent the unfavourable asylum application in order for her family to remain in America come with complexities. She jettisons the idea of divorcing her husband and getting into an arranged marriage for the purpose of the 'green card'. She is equally talked out of giving her

son up for adoption to a gay couple so he could remain in America.

Winston, Betty and Bubakar may have legal status, but they still face the trapdoors of essentialization, and discrimination experienced by people of their race. Winston and Bubakar are the closest to the realization of the tangible of the American Dream by African migrants. They become integrated into their new society with an upwardly mobile lifestyle. Betty cannot be credited with achieving the tangible of the American Dream. Her 30-year plus stay in America has not yielded a middle-class status. Fatou has been in the United States for 26 years without ‘paper’ and probably has been able to stay on because she does not require a residency document for her work as a hair braider. She expresses her regrets at not being able to visit her aged parents in Africa and laments the fact that her seven children born in America do not identify as Africans. Tunde and Olu, whose family Neni strives to model hers after are presented as just getting by. Jende makes his wife realize that Tunde and his family do not have such a good life in New York: “he didn’t think Tunde was so happy with his life. How could he possibly be, spending all those days of the week around seafood, coming home at the end of the day smelling of fish” (p. 307).

Mbue’s treatment of the perennial motif, the American Dream, is in continuation of that of American literary icons across generations, races and genres. However, her deployment offers contemporary African migrants’ perspectives and experiences. Some of the American literary texts where the motif is engaged present different outcomes for the characters portrayed. Benjamin Franklin’s iconic book, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1793), Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Gertrude Stein’s *Three Lives* (1909), F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), Richard Yates’s *Revolutionary Road* (1961) and Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977) are efforts at profiling the paradoxical outcomes of the Dream’s realization espoused in their different narratives. The treatments of the Dream in some of the literary

texts credit the egalitarian American society for helping hard working and driven people achieve their potentials. Some consider the Dream a myth, owing to racial and class inequalities, while some are seen to be pushing the opinion that the Dream is not realizable by everyone. The racial coloration to the trope is very glaring in works by African American writers. Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) both present how racial inequalities and discrimination against Blacks preclude them from living the Dream. And just as writers of old African diaspora, Mbue's *Dreamers* also presents racial inequality and 'otherness' of new African diasporans as impediments to the realization of both the tangible and the intangible aspects of the American Dream.

Conclusion

Clark asserts that those who have sought to interpret the American Dream have suggested that it is more than the search for material wellbeing. According to High (2015), it implies a better and fuller life, which should not be measured only in economic and material terms. The intangible of its ideals, such as the pursuit of happiness, freedom from religious and political persecutions, are indices to measuring a fuller life as well. There is no denying that all races, to a great extent, enjoy freedom from religious and political persecutions in America. As the Jongas wind down their stay in New York, the narrator laments that the Jonga children, although Liomi and Timba will gain a lot by the Cameroonian move, will also be losing more. They are presumed to likely going to "be deprived of freedoms, rights, and privileges that Cameroon could not give its children" (p. 362). The most contentious of the intangible is the pursuit of happiness and the equality of all. On whether happiness is realizable by all, the novelist through Jende rhetorically asks: "Is there anybody who is happy all the time?" (p. 105); and this may well be the reality of all human beings irrespective of material comfort, position, race or clime. It is the novelist's spin on the motif that if the

tangible of the American Dream is realizable, the intangible, such as a happy state, may not be dependent on material well-being. Happiness is considered an impermanent experience for all humans. A life of material comfort, where the rich are plagued by infidelity, drug use, and various forms of addiction, and where they constantly battle depression does not qualify as an idyllic or a happy state. The following lines by Jende are a good epilogue for the illusion that the American Dream is for many Americans and African migrants. It supports Mbue's argument:

In America today, having documents is not enough. Look at how many with papers are struggling. Look at how even some Americans are suffering. They were born in this country. They have American passports, and yet they are sleeping on the street, going to bed hungry, losing their jobs and houses every day (p. 307).

The attainment of the tangible of the American Dream for African migrants, based on Mbue's novel, is largely premised on the acquisition of college education. Winston and Bubakar are successful with the tangible of the Dream, owing to their college education. Jende and Neni would have fared better but for lack of college education. The odds are just too many against Jende and those of his class. Without the 'green card', a college education, and compounded by the race factor, the attainment of the tangible of the Dream is arduous. The concurrence of illusion and reality, in the exemplification of the tangible and the intangible of the dream puts some of Mbue's characters in the 'party of hope' and others in that of 'American nightmare'. In retrospect, Jende realizes that the quest to live the American Dream may be fleeting and concludes that "Good times must come to an end, just like bad times, whether we want it or not" (p. 371). The novel ends on a positive note as Jende and his family return to Cameroon upbeat. Before leaving America, Jende assures his wife "I will do everything I can to make you happy in Cameroon," [...]. "We will have a very good life there"

(p. 336). His optimism generates positive energy that will be needed to make the conditions at home work for him and his family. The return journey, also a trope of the new African diaspora fiction, is a forced one in this instance. Beyond the American Dream being a motif and an aesthetic in Mbue's novel are the provocative depictions, calling attention to the experiences of her characters, and indirectly cautioning other potential African migrants to take a look before they leap.

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