The Myth of the American Dream in Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*

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Abstract: This article analyzes Imbolo Mbue's debut novel, *Behold the Dreamers* (2017), in the context of the myth of the American Dream, i.e. the belief that in the United States of America success is possible for anyone regardless of their heritage or social class. The article analyzes the myth of the American Dream through a hybrid methodology of close reading and narrative analysis, sociological and economic data interpretation, and selected frameworks in cultural studies**.** The novel in tandem with the presented data suggest that although many believe they "will grow to fullest development" (Adams 1931, 333) in the US, the American Dream is "symbolic rather than substantive" (Wolak and Peterson 2020, 969). Faced with insurmountable difficulties, the protagonists of *Behold the Dreamers* find that this Dream is indeed a myth that can only be realized by mirroring the exploitation they themselves have endured and by leaving the US. At the end of the novel, the Jongas leave America, but America, with its Dream, has certainly not left them.

Keywords: Imbolo Mbue, *Behold the Dreamers*, the American Dream, immigrant fiction

In an interview with *Book Riot*, Cameroonian-American author Imbolo Mbue states that the inspiration for the title of her debut novel *Behold the Dreamers* comes from the 1936 poem "Let America Be America Again" by Langston Hughes, specifically from the line "let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed". Thus, the author reveals that dreams are the central theme of her novel (Cheesman 2017). In the poem, Hughes emotively speaks in the voices of all underprivileged Americans, outraged by the exploitive reality of what was to be their promised land:

> I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
> I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
> I am the red man driven from the land,
> I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
> And finding only the same old stupid plan
> Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

In her own work, Mbue echoes some of these voices, particularly that of the "immigrant clutching […] hope", one of the many dreamers.

Currently, the word "dream" and its derivatives are an essential part of immigrant discourse (and have been for some time, as Hughes' poem exemplifies), the word "dreamers" being synonymous to immigrants, particularly those who are "illegal" or fighting to gain legal status. Wacker notes that former President Barack Obama refers to immigrants as "dreamers" in a speech covered by the CNN (2022, 234), and the new legislative act meant to supplement and provide a more permanent alternative to DACA[1] is named the "Dream Act" (FWD.us. 2023). Mbue (2017) heavily employs the dream trope; her characters are preoccupied with daydreams of a more promising future, while others are hounded by nightmares when that future becomes increasingly unattainable. With time, it becomes obvious to the reader that instead of being synonymous with hopes of a prosperous future, these aspirations are in reality far-fetched fantasies. Still, some characters naively cling to their dreams, willing to make great sacrifices in exchange for a miniscule chance of success.

This approach is unsurprising, as it is the American Dream, a dream of a land of equal opportunities for all, that entices individuals to migrate to the United States. James Truslow Adams, American historian and the "founding father of the American Dream" coined and defined the term in his monumental 1931 work *The Epic of America* (Wills 2015), describing it as

> not a dream of merely material plenty, though that has doubtless counted heavily. It has been much more than that. It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been

1 DACA is an abbreviation of "Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals", a program which aims to delay and prevent the deportation of children and those who immigrated to the United States in their youth (FWD.us 2023).

> erected in older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class. (Adams 1931, 333–34)

However, the reality of this myth, so integral to the political, historical, and economic discourse of the US, differs substantially from that which Adams suggests. The United States has a centuries-long history of enslaving Africans and exterminating indigenous Americans; the remnants of this history are present to this day (Human Rights Watch). In modern times, approximately 400,000 individuals living in the US are involved in "forced and state-imposed labor, sexual servitude [or] forced marriage" (Helmore 2018)[2], and the rights of women, migrants, LGBTQ groups, and people of color are regularly violated (Human Rights Watch). The concept of agency, inseparable from "being able to grow to fullest development", is also questionable, although Americans feel "a sense of […] control over events" (Vega 2003, 99). To succeed, individuals do not solely require liberty and agency, but also "steady employment, salary, security, and a rising age-wage curve" (Gullette 2001, 101). Research by the French scholar Thomas Piketty suggests that even those criteria are not enough and that wealth will create even more wealth (2013, 571) and those in possession of capital will accumulate even more, leaving most of society in a perpetually disadvantaged position. This is especially true since the wage gap has been increasing for the past five decades (Wolak and Peterson 2020, 970; Piketty 2013, 15), leaving many with little means to better their life situation. In such conditions, the American Dream is clearly "symbolic rather than substantive" (Wolak and Peterson 2020, 969).

During his travels through the US in the 1980s, French postmodernist philosopher Jean Baudrillard notes that America appears to be a

> [u]topia made reality […] [that] is built on the idea that it is the realization of everything the others have dreamt of – justice, plenty, rule of law, wealth, freedom: it knows this, it believes in it, and in the end, the others have come to believe in it too. (Baudrillard 1986, 65)

One of the strong believers in this "utopia made reality" is the novel's protagonist Neni, who debates whether to divorce her husband and marry an American citizen to gain residency, fully aware that this will cause turmoil in her personal life and sever

2 As of 2018.

family bonds (Mbue 2017, 283, 319). She even goes so far as to consider offering her son, who is described by her as "a barely legal immigrant child, a mostly illegal one" (227), for adoption, so that he can remain in the US (Mbue 2017, 326). However, Neni represents the mindset of only some of the characters in the novel; others, particularly Jende (Neni's husband) and Vince Edwards (the son of Jende's employer), are greatly disillusioned with the US and the American Dream. Particularly the latter, despite his privileged social position and affluence is critical of the system (and, by extension, his parents) throughout the novel, which is exemplified in the following passage:

> [Vince's parents] are struggling under the weight of so many pointless pressures, but […] they continue to go down a path of achievements and accomplishments and material success and shit that means nothing, because that's what America is all about, and now they're trapped. (Mbue 2017, 103–04)

Vince is in some ways an embodiment of hope for the future of America. In spite of belonging to America's elite, he withdraws from his privileged lifestyle to realize his own dream of a humble life in India – though it is worth noting that it is exactly his wealthy background that provides him with the means to do so. Conversely, Jende grows into this realization as he becomes unemployed, the financial crisis of 2008 hits hard and he begins to face the risk of deportation. In both physical and emotional pain, worn down by meagerly rewarded, never-ending workdays, Jende states at one point: "This work, work, work, all the time. For what? For a little money? How much suffering can a man take in this world, eh?" (Mbue 2017, 306).

Initially, despite Neni and Jende's low salaries,[3] the economic situation of the Jonga family is stable. Thanks to family connections, they are able to rent an apartment in Harlem, a district of Manhattan, instead of one of the outlying boroughs, for a nominal fee, and although it requires hours of hard toil, Jende is able to support his family and even cover the $3000 tuition per semester for his wife to attend community college. When Jende is offered the position of Clark's chauffeur, the Jongas' quality of life significantly improves, and they live a relatively comfortable life on a combined income of $45,000 per annum, occasionally even eating at Red

3 According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, "In 2007, the median usual weekly earnings of foreign-born full-time wage and salary workers were $554,
compared with $722 for the native born".

Lobster (a popular sea-food chain restaurant), or doing their shopping at Target, a "fine white people store" (Mbue 2017, 32). The Jongas also have friends (besides Winston, who enjoys a corporate lawyer salary) who live in luxurious circumstances, i.e., they own large houses (thanks to zero-down payment mortgages) and drive SUVs, while working blue-collar jobs (81–82). However, upon closer inspection, this illusion of relative prosperity rapidly unravels. To bring his partner and son to the US in the first place, Jende had to work three different jobs and live in abysmal conditions (12). The apartment the Jongas live in is infested with cockroaches and has only one bedroom, which must accommodate Jende, Neni, and their two children. Even buying a suit for Jende's position as a driver absorbs a third of their savings (31). Admittedly, their financial situation fluctuates significantly, but even at the height of their prosperity they cannot afford health or dental care beyond what is provided by state aid programs, i.e., healthcare for their children and prenatal care during Neni's pregnancy (102, 303–04).

After Jende becomes unemployed, the family's situation deteriorates, and the couple struggle to buy basic necessities, such as diapers, clothes for their children, or proper nourishment (Mbue 2017, 258). Some of the Jongas' immigrant friends are also in dire straits, e.g., their acquaintance Arkamo loses his home in the 2008 housing crisis (308). Clark Edwards aptly sums up the economic situation depicted in the novel: "unless you make a certain kind of money in this country, life can be brutal" (148). Though many of these hardships are hardly a new experience for immigrants (and many Americans), there is one troubling element added to the equation: shame. Though Cindy Edwards ignorantly states that "being poor for you [Neni] in Africa is fine. Most of you [Africans] are poor over there[4]. The shame of it, it's not as bad for you." (123), the opposite is true in the case of Fatou, Neni's friend who has been struggling with for twenty-four years she has been in the US and is ashamed of this (11). This shame is unjustified, because, as Mbue herself states in an interview,

> The thing I want people to understand about the American Dream [is that] you need a lot of weapons to achieve it. […] To me, education is a big weapon. Education is a weapon. Your age is a weapon. If you're white, if you're Black, if you have a good education. The

4 According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development website (2021), the economic situation in Africa is generally improving.

> people that have made it and can say, "Oh this is an immigrant success" — they had those weapons. The idea that "Oh, American Dream for everyone," everyone that can get it, it's there for the taking — it's like a mountain, right? Can we all climb that mountain? No. Some of us can only get one mile up the mountain. It's a very difficult climb. Yes, you can get there. But do you have what it takes to get there? (Keifer 2016)

Mbue argues that one of the "weapons" (aptly named in a country with rampant gun violence) that can be used to achieve the American Dream is education. Neni is well aware of this, as she says at one point to her son: "school is everything for people like us. We don't do well in school, we don't have any chance in this world" (Mbue 2017, 68). However, even this weapon proves insufficient. When Jende loses his relatively high-paying job, settling college tuition costs becomes a pressing issue, leading her to seek a scholarship based on her high academic achievements. For this reason, she visits the dean, who harshly diabuses her dream of becoming a pharmacist – she cannot apply for an academic scholarship because of her lack of participation in extracurricular activities (which she has no time for), nor can she apply for financial aid because she is not a citizen or permanent resident (294–97). Neni's American Dream remains unattainable. She is not alone in this, as "foreign-born workers [in 2007] were less likely than native-born workers to be high school graduates (with no college) or to have some college" (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008).

In her novel, Mbue focuses both on the immigrant experience and the struggles of "non-immigrant" Americans, thus painting a broader picture of the problematic myth of the American Dream; as Toohey states in her review of *Behold the Dreamers*: "[Mbue shows that] there's lots of collateral damage to go around" (2016, 24). This widespread destruction, which renders inaccessible not only the American Dream but basic survival for many, is also showcased by Mbue via the character of Leah. Although she has been a loyal employee to Lehman Brothers and is near retirement age, she faces unemployment, with little hope of re-employment, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis (Mbue 2017, 182–83, 216). Similarly, in both Ramin Bahrani's *99 Homes* (2014) and Sean Baker's *The Florida Project* (2017), non-immigrant Americans struggle with poverty and are made to commit crimes to survive (fraud in the former work, multiple forms of soliciting in the latter). Matthew Desmond's Pulitzer-Prize-winning non-fiction work *Evicted* (2016) also relates

the stories of destitute American-born individuals who, largely due to systemic inequalities, face homelessness. In her review of *Evicted* for *The New York Times*, author of *Nickel and Dimed* Barbara Ehrenreich comments that "that the world [the characters of *Evicted*] inhabi[t] is indeed hell, or as close an approximation as you are likely to find in a 21st-century American city". Though set in a fictional world, Todd Phillips's *Joker* (2019) also portrays a mentally-ill, but initially harmless individual growing into a violent predator as a direct reaction to an economic crisis (in this case, the economic crash in the early 1980s). *Behold the Dreamer*'s features a similar occurrence, when Jende, previously a caring partner, physically attacking his wife Neni after the family suffers hardship[5] (Mbue 2017, 333–34).

Behold the Dreamers appears to suggest that this situation is unlikely to change, as those in the upper social classes are either relatively unconcerned by the mayhem taking place in the lower-middle class (e.g., the antagonists, Clark and Cindy Edwards), not in the US (like Vince Edwards), or are powerless and unwilling to change the system, like Winston, who states that "[he] cannot do anything. And even if [he] could, [he] probably wouldn't, because [he] like[s] the money, even though [he] hate[s] how [he] make[s] it" (Mbue 2017, 323). Ultimately, those who have the education and money to make a difference do nothing, partly because it would require the desire to help, which they do not have, but mostly because the system suits them.

While Mbue draws attention to a multitude of troubling occurrences, she does not neglect to mention some positive changes occurring in American society, particularly in the area of social and racial integration, by marking the presence of several interracial and intersocial relationships. Despite being vastly different in age, race, class, and lifestyle, Jende and Vince are able to learn from each other and establish a close bond – so much so that Vince maintains contact with the former after moving to another continent. Neni also forms a long-term connection with Mighty, Vince's younger brother, adopting a maternal attitude towards him. Finally, when faced with the fiasco of her American Dream, Neni wanders into a local church and establishes an unlikely friendship with the white female pastor who offers sympathy and whatever guidance she can provide for Neni's precarious situation. Pastor Natasha and her (mostly white) congregation,

5 Interestingly, the idea that the inaccessibility of the American Dream can trigger violent behaviors is also present in real-life; some specialists claim that this could have been one of the driving factors of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, as mentioned in a recent documentary on the subject (Russ 2023).

though naïve in some of their beliefs (e.g., that America was previously more open to immigrants [Mbue 2017, 364]), appear to be sincere in their indignation at the contemporary treatment of new Americans. Though these relationships and changes are perhaps just beginning to graze the surface of profoundness, Mbue leaves the reader with the hope that true integration may be possible.

However, the Jongas will not be in the US to further this integration, as *Behold the Dreamers* ends with them being effectively forced to leave the US, thus completely dashing Neni's dreams of becoming a pharmacist and the family's prospects of living in America. Nevertheless, it seems as though their life of prosperity is not ending but beginning, because:

> [the money Neni and Jende acquired in the US] would make them millionaires many times over. Even after buying their airline tickets and making all the necessary purchases, they would have enough money for Jende to become one of the richest men in New Town. (Mbue 2017, 352)

Upon closer scrutiny, however, this occurrence is far from simply felicitous, as most of the Jongas' funds were extorted from Cindy by Neni, who threatened to publicize the former's photo taken when being intoxicated (Mbue 2017, 265–69). Neni feels justified in this blackmail because she believes Cindy was responsible Jende's loss of his job as Clark's chauffeur and rationalizes her actions as a means of protecting her family, stating, "I knew what I had to do" (Mbue 2017, 274). The fact remains, however, that she indeed did not have to do this as her family, though not wealthy, was not destitute. What Neni did was use a frail, deeply unhappy, possibly mentally ill woman (shortly after being blackmailed, Cindy overdoses and dies) for her own personal gain. Jende is complicit in this crime, as he ultimately agrees to appropriate the extorted funds. Thus, Mbue subverts not only the American Dream, but also the identity of the immigrant, who is not always benevolent but at times succumbs to the deleterious "dog eat dog" reality of America to survive.

In an article in *The New York Times*, Cristina Henríquez states that "[the situation depicted in *Behold the Dreamers*] struck [her] as a fresh take on the immigrant experience – providing not simply the jolt of being in a new place but also the jolt of taking on a new identity because of that place". This assumption of a new identity certainly occurs in *Behold the Dreamers*, though is hardly a change for the better. For instance, Jende transforms from a loving partner and father, who

works for years to be able to marry Neni and support his family, to a controlling, aggressive man who batters his wife during an argument (Mbue 2017, 334). One could take Henríquez's line of thinking a step further and say that it is the deteriorating situation in America that forces many to adapt to the difficulties they must face irrespective of whether they are immigrants. Even the now rich Cindy Edwards originates from an impoverished background, in which she suffered malnourishment and humiliation (123−24), and from which she escaped not only through hard work, but also via learning to "fit effortlessly in this new [affluent] world so [she] would never be looked down on again" (124).

Equipped with a new identity and a small fortune (saved from their many jobs, donated by Pastor Natasha congregation, but mostly stolen from Cindy) and all their "necessary" purchases, i.e., numerous boxes containing a mixture of fake and real "luxury" garments meant to exhibit their superiority (Mbue 2017, 381), the family return to Cameroon. Upon their arrival, they will move into an opulent rental house, with a garage for their imported car and a maid at the family's service. Additionally, Jende plans to establish a company whose catchphrase is to be "Jonga Enterprises: Bringing the Wisdom of Wall Street to Limbe" (353) – but what exactly this wisdom is supposed to be is left to the reader's imagination. Somewhat ironically, their American Dream is realized outside of US borders, but in a truly capitalist fashion. As Chibundu Onozu notes,[T]he Jongas are not simple Africans who eschew materialism and can teach the Edwards' how to live a contented life. Both Jende and Neni rejoice in the consumerism of America and grasp at all that capitalism has to offer.

This is apparent from the first pages of *Behold the Dreamers*; during Neni's first appearance in the novel, she and her friend Fatou wander around Chinatown looking for "make believe Gucci and Versace bags" (11), presumably made by underpaid workers in or outside the US (Perry 2022). The way the Jongas gain and spend their wealth, namely, through the exploitation of others, is akin to the practices of Cindy and Clark Edwards to the extent that Neni and Jende could be interpreted as their Cameroonian versions. At the end of the novel, the Jongas leave America, but America, with its Dream, has certainly not left them.

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