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Review / Научный обзор

“The American Dream” – concept, myth, or trope?

Alwan Hassan Albulanee 

RUDN University, Moscow, Russian Federation

✉ alwan64@gmail.com

Abstract. It has been almost a century since James Truslow Adams’ formulation of the concept “American dream” in “The Epic of America” (1931). The review aims to follow the concept of the American dream and its evolution over centuries, encompassing the attainment of such core values as freedom, equal opportunity, and the search for happiness. It has been established that at the heart of this notion lies the belief that the United States offers boundless possibilities to those with determination, courage, and audacity to pursue their dreams, relying on hard work and risk-taking rather than mere luck or chance. An integral facet of American “mythology” is highlighted – each individual’s capacity to achieve their dreams and secure a comfortable lifestyle through diligent effort and self-sacrifice, propagating the idea that everyone can be successful. It is concluded that an expression dedicated to this social accomplishment is “to go from rags to riches,” encapsulating this journey.

Keywords: America, disillusionment, freedom, independence, prosperity

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«Американская мечта» – концепция, миф или образ?

А.Х. Альбулани 

Российский университет дружбы народов, Москва, Российская Федерация

✉ alwan64@gmail.com

Аннотация. Прошло почти столетие с тех пор, как Джеймс Труслоу Адамс сформулировал концепцию «американской мечты» в «Эпосе об Америке» (1931). Задача научного обзора – проследить эволюцию концепции в трудах разных авторов на протяжении



десятилетий. Установлено, что в основе понятия «американская мечта» лежит вера в то, что Соединенные Штаты предлагают безграничные возможности тем, кто обладает решимостью, мужеством и смелостью преследовать свои мечты, полагаясь на упорный труд и риск, а не на просто удачу или случай. Отмечен неотъемлемый аспект американской «мифологии» – способность каждого человека осуществить свои мечты и обеспечить комфортный образ жизни посредством усердных усилий и самопожертвования, пропагандирует идею о том, что каждый может добиться успеха. Сделан вывод, что выражение, посвященное этому социальному достижению, – «перейти из грязи в князи», олицетворяющее данное путешествие.

Ключевые слова: Америка, разочарование, свобода, независимость, процветание

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Defining the concept

The trope of the American Dream is deeply woven into the fabric of American society. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it as “an American social ideal that stresses egalitarianism and especially material prosperity,” to which it adds: “a happy way of living that is thought of by many Americans as something that can be achieved by anyone in the U.S. especially by working hard and becoming successful”¹, while the definition given by the Oxford English Dictionary almost rephrases the idea: the American Dream is “the ideal that every citizen of the United States should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination, and initiative.”² Rooted in the foundational principles articulated by the Founding Fathers, the concept has evolved over centuries, encompassing core values like freedom, equal opportunity, and the search for happiness. It is a collective ideal in American culture, asserting that everyone, irrespective of their origins or social class, can realize their envisioned success in a society free of barriers between different strata. This notion of success incorporates concepts of individual rights, freedom, democracy, and equality, grounded in the belief that everyone has the right to aspire to success and happiness, irrespective of their background.

The origins of this concept coincide with the very establishment of the United States. The Declaration of Independence, underlining these ideals, laid the foundation for a national ethos centered on individual agency and the promise of an improved life. As the nation expanded and underwent transformations, so did the concept, adapting to evolving societal structures and economic landscapes. While pinpointing

¹ Merriam-Webster Dictionary: Online edition. Retrieved November 23, 2023, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/the%20American%20dream#dictionary-entry-1>

² Oxford English Dictionary: Online edition. Retrieved November 23, 2023, from <https://www.oed.com/search/advanced/Meanings?textTermText0=American+Dream&textTermOpt0=WordPhrase>

the exact origin proves challenging, it is believed to have surfaced during the English colonization of North America in the 17th century. By presenting it as a dream-land where possibilities were limitless, British authorities aimed to encourage the migration of British settlers to the United States, fortifying their presence on the continent.

The term appears to originate from a history book by the American writer and historian James Truslow Adams (1878–1949) entitled *The Epic of America* (1931). The author made the term even more popular in the early 20th century. In his best-seller, Adams explains how it has evolved and why it was challenging for the European aristocracy to understand its value, why it attracted so many immigrants to the United States, and why Americans were losing sight of the meaning of this concept that, “was beginning to take form in the hearts of men,” mixed with “hope of a better and freer life, a life in which a man might think as he would and develop as he willed” (Adams, 1931, p. 31).

The American historian also underscored that, despite the country’s robust economic growth, the surge in wealth and success, and the tendency for opportunities to favor those who are already successful, the conviction that anyone can attain success and happiness through hard work remains unshaken. He further pointed out that the “Dream” transcended mere economic prosperity. It encapsulated the dream of reaching one’s fullest potential as a man or woman, unhindered by barriers that had gradually emerged in ancient civilizations and unhampered by social orders that had evolved to favor the upper classes over the common people. This foundational idea became the bedrock upon which political movements, such as the women’s suffrage movement and the civil rights movement of the 1960s, relied to shape and fortify the scope of the ideal.

Evolution of the concept

During the Great Depression, America grappled with a sense of despair more profound than what is experienced today. In that context, Truslow Adams provided Americans with a reinterpretation of the United States’ history, illustrating that the belief in a better life, collective prosperity, and access to happiness for all had been deeply ingrained in the American psyche since its inception. Moreover, he asserted that this belief represented America’s most significant contribution to human history. According to Truslow Adams, Americans must, therefore, rally in each generation to confront new challenges and, in doing so, realize the dream. He portrayed it as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (Adams, 1931, p. 404).

Following the famous statement in the Declaration of Independence, that “All men are created equal, and each is endowed with the right to live freely and pursue happiness”, the American Constitution reiterated these principles in its preamble, emphasizing that its primary purpose was to ensure the freedom and prosperity of every individual living on American soil – the necessary context to live their life fully as they define it. These foundational principles quickly attracted millions of individuals worldwide, from South America to Europe (Ireland, Italy, etc.), Australia, and later Africa. All these individuals immigrated to America to give themselves a chance to achieve the success they hoped for and

live their dream. At the base of the Statue of Liberty, we can read an excerpt from Emma Lazarus's sonnet "The New Colossus"—an appeal, an invitation to the wretched of the world to follow the all-embracing myth of America, the land of all possibilities: "Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. / Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, / I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" (Lazarus, 1888, p. 202).

The concept is etched in collective memory through the stories of historical figures who, starting with nothing, achieved immense wealth. Often dubbed "self-made men," these individuals attained financial success without external assistance or inheritance. Abraham Lincoln, John D. Rockefeller, and more contemporarily, Steve Jobs, serve as perfect examples. It is essential to highlight that minorities played a crucial role in championing the myth as they fought for their rights. Martin Luther King's iconic 1963 speech, "I Have a Dream," resonates with the theme of success irrespective of social background.

However, some aspects of gender and race do not escape Amrita Singh's careful reading. The woman is just "a corollary", of the man; she does not partake in the "immediate processes and direct benefits of the American Dream" (Singh, 2018, pp. 283–83). Citing George Lipsitz, the researcher emphasizes the "possessive investment in whiteness" that defines "Americanness", and takes on "a non-political, non-ideological position." In fact, Lipsitz is of the opinion that "Whiteness is everywhere in American culture, but it is very hard to see. <...> As the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations" (Lipsitz, 1995, p. 369). Furthermore, in the early 20th century, Americans grew cautious about the impact of Socialist and Communist ideologies emanating from Europe. These ideas were linked to labor unions and radical immigrants, causing concern among Americans who perceived them as a potential threat to the foundational narrative of America as a capitalist haven of opportunity.

The question arises: has the myth been a reality for Americans seeking social recognition and economic emancipation? While the American system has indeed offered a genuine opportunity for a better life to some immigrants, statistics compel us to temper the notion of overall social ascent. For instance, in New York in 1859, more than half of all arrested individuals were of Irish origin, challenging the idea of universal success. Moreover, numerous economic crises in the United States, such as the Great Depression of the 1930s and the repercussions of oil shocks challenged the idea of success. The profound impact of the 2008 economic crisis cannot be overlooked. It directly affected the American middle class, which was living the "American Way of Life" through widespread consumer credit extended to insolvent populations by American banks. A new category of the population, the "working poor," has notably increased – individuals who work but have insufficient incomes to live decently, constituting about 7% of the active population in the United States.

Hence, merely working is no longer sufficient to lead a prosperous life. The September 11 attacks also dealt a blow to the concept, shattering the illusion of invulnerability that prevailed in the population. Inequalities further highlight the failure of the American model, with the country's Gini coefficient (an index

measuring inequalities within a country) exceptionally high compared to states with similar GDPs and economic models.

Throughout the history of the United States, even before becoming an independent nation, the concept has taken various forms and meanings while retaining the foundational principles of the right to freedom and happiness. In the early days, it was centered around the conquest of the West, a period extensively depicted in Western films featuring cowboys searching for new lands always further to the West, up to the borders of Indian territories.

In recent decades, the narratives surrounding the myth have evolved to encompass a more diverse array of voices, reflecting the richness of the American experience. Arab diasporic writers, in particular, have brought a valuable contribution to this discourse. As members of a community with a distinct cultural heritage, Arab American authors bring a nuanced understanding of identity, belonging, and success to the exploration of the concept. In their literary works, Arab diasporic writers navigate the complexities of cultural assimilation, the balancing act between heritage and the desire for upward mobility, and the challenges of confronting stereotypes and misconceptions. The dream, for these writers, becomes a lens through which they examine the intersections of cultural identity, resilience, and the universal human quest for a better life.

The writers and the evolution of a concept

Early American literature, rooted in Puritanism and the Protestant ethic, laid the foundation for the concept of the dream. Puritan writings, including sermons and diaries, emphasized the idea of a “city upon a hill,” envisioning a righteous and prosperous community based on Puritan values. As the country expanded, the American Enlightenment brought forth works like Benjamin Franklin’s “Autobiography,” emphasizing such goals as self-improvement, individualism, and happiness through hard work and virtue. The frontier spirit, portrayed by James Fenimore Cooper in the “The Leatherstocking Tales” cycle – *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Prairie* (1827), *The Pathfinder* (1840), and *The Deerslayer* (1841) – contributed to the notion of limitless opportunities and a better life on the frontier.

The 20th century witnessed the concept evolving through different periods. The Jazz Age and the Roaring Twenties – as captured in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925) – critiqued it by highlighting the emptiness of materialism and the elusive nature of success. The Great Depression era, represented by John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), explored the impact of economic hardship on the American society, portraying the struggle for survival and the resilience of the human spirit. Post-World War II prosperity brought about Arthur Miller’s play “Death of a Salesman” (1949), a critique of the concept in the context of consumerism and success at the expense of personal well-being.

Throughout its evolution, several key themes have been associated with the American Dream in literature. Upward mobility remains a central theme, embodying the belief in social and economic advancement through hard work. Individualism is another core theme, emphasizing personal agency and the pursuit of individual goals. Homeownership symbolizes success and stability in many works, while the ideals of equality and opportunity underscore the notion that everyone should

have an equal chance to succeed, irrespective of background. However, numerous works critique the concept, shedding light on its shortcomings, inherent inequalities, and the sometimes-unattainable nature of the dream. These themes collectively contribute to its complexity and depth as a literary motif, continually shaped by the socio-cultural and economic realities of each era.

Classical works of American literature, authored by luminaries such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Arthur Miller, John Steinbeck, Langston Hughes, Herman Melville, and Ralph Ellison, have played a pivotal role in shaping and defining the concept. Common themes and interpretations found in these classical works include a critique of materialism, exposing the emptiness of pursuing wealth for its own sake. The illusory nature of the concept, often symbolized by unfulfilled aspirations or unattainable goals, is a recurring motif. These narratives frequently engage in a societal critique, addressing systemic issues, socio-economic disparities, and the impact of societal expectations on individuals. Tragic consequences unfold in many of these works, revealing the personal and societal costs of unbridled ambition. These classical representations contribute to a complex, multifaceted understanding of the dream, challenging idealized notions and offering critical views that have shaped the discourse on this central motif in American literature.

In the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st century, the theme continued to be explored. The Civil Rights Movement era produced works like African American playwright Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" (1959) examining racial and economic barriers to the American Dream and aspirations for equality. Norman Mailer's novel *An American Dream* (1965) is a satirical novel published in 1965 that critiques the concept through the eyes of the protagonist, Stephen Rojack. Rojack, a war hero turned politician, is disillusioned with his country and its values. The novel explores themes of wealth, power, and corruption, presenting a scathing critique of American society. Mailer's interpretation of the concept is one of emptiness and unrealistic expectations, suggesting that achieving success and material wealth does not guarantee happiness or fulfillment.

Postmodern critiques, as seen in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* (1985) deconstructed traditional values and expressed skepticism towards consumerism, addressing the impact of media on individual aspirations. Contemporary literature also embraced diversity and multiculturalism, with Chinese American Maxine Hong Kingston's novel *The Woman Warrior* (1976) exploring the dream from the viewpoint of immigrant communities and Dominican American writer Junot Díaz's novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) examining the search of identity and belonging in post-9/11 America.

Scholarly discussions and literary critiques have increasingly questioned the traditional narrative of the dream, exposing its flaws, limitations, and inherent inequalities. Authors and academics have offered alternative perspectives that challenge the universality and accessibility of the dream, reshaping the discourse on this iconic concept.

The racial dimension of the dream has also been scrutinized, particularly in the context of systemic racism. Ta-Nehisi Coates, in his article "The Case for Reparations" (2014), argues that historical injustices, such as slavery and discriminatory housing policies, have perpetuated disparities, making the dream an elusive goal for African Americans. James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963) and Toni Morri-

son's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) provide powerful narratives challenging the dream's universality by exposing racial injustices and the impact of structural inequalities.

Environmental and ecological critiques have emerged, questioning the sustainability of the dream in the face of environmental degradation. Authors like Bill McKibben challenge the consumerist ethos embedded in the dream, arguing that perpetual growth and resource exploitation are incompatible with a sustainable future.

Moreover, the feminist approach have illuminated gender disparities inherent in the traditional dream narrative. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) critiques the dream's narrow definition of success, emphasizing the limited roles prescribed for women. Feminist literature, including works by bell hooks and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, explores how gender norms can constrain women's personal and professional aspirations. Such positioning provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities and limitations that accompany the pursuit of the dream, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive and critical exploration of this enduring literary motif.

As the dream continues to be a central motif in literature, a consideration of cultural diversity reveals a rich diversity of approaches. Authors from diverse backgrounds contribute narratives that delve into how cultural identity shapes characters' interpretations and experiences of the dream. In this context, the discourse includes studies that specifically focus on Arab American literature and its significant contributions to the broader discussion.

Conclusion: the permanence of the Dream

Several notable critiques have emerged, questioning the universality and accessibility of the dream, and scholars have explored socioeconomic disparities, racial inequalities, environmental concerns, and gender limitations inherent in the pursuit of this iconic concept. Comparative studies have enriched the discourse by juxtaposing different works, offering nuanced analyses of how various authors engage with and contribute to the evolving narrative of the concept. One avenue of critique lies in the examination of socioeconomic disparities. Works such as Barbara Ehrenreich's book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (2001) delve into the struggles of low-wage workers, debunking the myth that hard work inevitably leads to prosperity. By exploring the day-to-day challenges faced by those on the economic margins, these critiques emphasize that systemic barriers can hinder the realization of the Dream for many:

“There are no secret economies that nourish the poor; on the contrary, there are a host of special costs. If you can't put up the two months' rent you need to secure an apartment, you end up paying through the nose for a room by the week. If you have only a room, with a hot plate at best, you can't save by cooking up huge lentil stews that can be frozen for the week ahead. You eat fast food or the hot dogs and Styrofoam cups of soup that can be microwaved in a convenience store. If you have no money for health insurance <...> you go without routine care or prescription drugs and end up paying the price.” (Ehrenreich, 2001, p. 21)

Analyzing the American Dream, Wallace C. Peterson builds up a seven-categories set of expectations in which he includes: (1) “a secure and steady job”;

(2) “home ownership”; (3) items “that may make life easier and more enjoyable” (such as a car, and different home appliances); (4) “fringe benefits” by which he means “paid vacations, generous pensions, and adequate health care”; (5) “travel and leisure”; (6) “college for the kids”; and (7) “upward mobility” (Peterson, 1994, pp. 20–21).

John Kenneth White and Sandra L. Hanson, in *The American Dream in the 21st Century* (2011) stress the idea that “the American Dream is deeply embedded in American mythology and in the consciousness of its citizens. That is exactly what gives the American Dream its staying power, even in times when it seems as though it should surely die. After all, myths last because they are dreams fulfilled in our imaginations. So it is with the American Dream. And because it finds fulfillment either in one’s own life or in the lives of others, Americans are ever more devoted to it” (White, Hanson 2011, p. 6).

Jim Cullen in *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped the Nation* (2003) writes about different kinds of dreams: the dream of the good life, the dream of upward mobility, the dream of home ownership, the dream of equality. He argues that, when the “social cement” that holds Americans together as a nation starts to crack, the American Dream becomes the glue to keep them from collapsing. Moreover, “amid the greatest surge of immigration in our history <...> the American Dream becomes a kind of lingua franca, an idiom that everyone from corporate executives to hip-hop artists can presumably understand” (Cullen, 2003, p. 6).

In her book, *Yankees in Petrograd, Bolsheviks in New York* (2013), Milla Fedorova explains: “While in pre-revolutionary texts America-in-opposition-to-Russia could appear as either utopian or dystopian, in Soviet times, the paradigm officially shifted toward a binary opposition: the Soviet Union as socialist Paradise vs. America as Hell.” She concludes the book by citing Mayakovsky’s famous statement, “I am more American than any American,” and I.A. Brodsky: “My generation, <...> all of us were individualists. And our ideal in this respect was the United States: exactly because of the spirit of individualism. That is why, when some of us found ourselves here, we had the sensation that we had come home: we turned out to be more American than the locals” (Fedorova, 2013, p. 225).

Boris Pilnyak’s *O’kei: An American Novel*, though not a novel proper, is rather a travelogue, containing the writer’s first-hand impressions from his stay in the USA with the express approval of Stalin, when he was expected to demonstrate the superiority and freedom of expression of the Soviet writers. Thus, the writer came to know the country that finds itself “on the high road of the development of humankind,” a road that paves new routes which, of course, lead to socialism which, like the roads, is “constructed in the Union of Socialist Republics” (Pilnyak, 2020, p. 8). Even if the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A. “are playing the chess match of today’s humankind” (Pilnyak, 2020, p. 8), there is a major difference: “they respect the dollar much more than they do the worker, and it makes no difference how the dollar is obtained, even if it’s through gangsterism” (Pilnyak, 2020, p. 164).

One example from the writings of the Arab diasporic literature in America is Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Arabian Jazz* (1993). The novel explores the concept of the dream from the position of the Arab Americans in search for identity. Set in upstate New York, the novel follows the Nasr family, immigrants from Jordan, as they navigate the complexities of cultural assimilation and the personal achievement. Abu-Jaber weaves a narrative that delves into the challenges and aspirations

of Arab Americans in post-9/11 America, providing a rich exploration of cultural identity, family dynamics, and the multifaceted nature of the concept. By delving into the experiences of Arab American characters, Abu-Jaber provides a personal view on the American Dream, exploring how individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds engage with and shape the broader narrative of success and fulfillment in the American context.

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Bio note:

Alwan Hassan Albulanee, Doctor of Philology-English Literature, Faculty Member in Iraqi Police College, PhD student, Department of Russian and Foreign Literature, RUDN University, 6 Miklukho-Maklaya St, Moscow, 117198, Russian Federation. ORCID: 0000-0003-0997-5472. E-mail: alwan64@gmail.com

Сведения об авторе:

Альбулани Алван Хасан, доктор филологии (английская литература), преподаватель Иракского полицейского колледжа, аспирант, кафедра русской и зарубежной литературы, Российский университет дружбы народов, Российская Федерация, 117198, Москва, ул. Миклухо-Маклая, д. 6. ORCID: 0000-0003-0997-5472. E-mail: alwan64@gmail.com