

## The Fragility of American Dream: Ideal and Reality



**Dr. Shaileshwar Kaushik**

Asstt. Professor, Department of English  
Pt. J.L.N. Govt. College, Faridabad

The triumph of the American ideal is greatly romanticized but reality demonstrates that the poor, racial minorities and women encounter numerous difficulties on their journey to prosperity. The American Dream is exclusively for the already affluent and white American males. Others are disadvantaged. In this chapter, the scholar shall try to explain why these three groups don't live up to their American aspirations. The research paper focuses on how the poor cannot compete with the wealthy and rise to the ranks of the social ladder. As a result of racial and socio-economic bias, immigrant and ethnic minority voices are conspicuously absent from the scheme of things. Though the current socio-political conditions may state otherwise, America has been a paradise for immigrants. The great country has become great by the very principle of inclusive growth. People of all religions, races, and ethnicities gradually shaped America as we know it today. For many immigrants, the Statue of Liberty was their first view of the United States, signifying new opportunities in life. Thus, the statue is an iconic symbol of the American Dream.

The meaning of the American Dream has changed throughout history and includes both personal components, such as home ownership, upward mobility, and a global vision. The Dream began in the mystique regarding frontier life. As the Royal Governor of Virginia noted in 1774, the Americans "forever imagine the Lands further off are still better than those upon which they are already settled." He further said, "If they attained Paradise, they would move on if they heard of a better place farther west."

For instance, many striking icons of the American ideal exist in *The Great Gatsby*. "To create compelling pictures of Americanism and achievement, these symbols combine with the emblems of the American national identity. The narrative vividly depicts what, where, and who are symbols of American achievement. However, there is also skepticism regarding the dream's veracity. Similarly, there is a regional definition of the American dream and characters who exemplify the achievement of the American male.

These self-definitions shed light on the oppressive and restrictive attitude of the American ideal. Throughout the book, the reader is often presented with a stark contrast between two very different American environments.

Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* is one of the most significant works from the era that symbolizes the promise of America. In his *Autobiography*, Franklin narrates the "rags-to-riches" narrative of a young guy who came from nothing and made something of his life through hard work and dedication. Franklin sought to position himself as a role model for all Americans by portraying himself as a person whose optimism and success could be emulated and attained by everybody in the country. Regarding American literature, Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* sets the stage for the American ideal by promoting individuality, self-actualization, and self-reliance, all of which are hallmarks of the American Dream.

Franklin finds in his *Autobiography* the methods that a person might use to make a life of their own, to mould it in any way they see fit, by establishing themselves as the ideal American. Young people in the United States may use Franklin's narrative as an example of how they might attain success and riches.

Franklin scholar Steven Forde focuses on Franklin's unusual but purposeful attempt not to emphasize his accomplishment but to position himself as a model for "all" American citizens to emulate. "The most thoroughgoing is Franklin's downplaying of the components of his life and activities that pushed him much beyond the normal man". It is clear from Franklin's depiction of his travel and arrival in Philadelphia that he wanted to portray himself as a regular man who suffered yet steadfast in pursuing his aspirations. The *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin focuses not on his role in moulding American history but on the development of Franklin's character and determination as an individual in a nascent American culture and society. "Franklin symbolized the prospect of personal accomplishment to ambitious ordinary people who were as enthusiastic about an individual

(political) freedom and personal (material) prosperity as Franklin was," write Nian-Sheng Huang and Carla Mulford in their discussion of Franklin's Autobiography.

Franklin's life story is a powerful example of how anybody may rise to the top in a constantly shifting cultural landscape. "We are now aware that American ideal image of honest, thrifty, and hard-working Franklin was a creation that originated with Franklin himself; an invention that at most fundamental level nurtured individual dignity". It was only after Franklin died in 1790, when he outlined the American dream, that Franklin's principles that everyone may better their condition in life through hard effort, simplicity, and persistence were widely accepted. Franklin's Autobiography was a great source of pride for many printers, so they published several excerpts. Autobiography had an influence on many people and especially young Americans, who were able to read it.

Many literary voices developed in the nineteenth century to form the American Literary Renaissance from the new spirit of American autonomy and identity that arose during the Revolutionary Period. Literary works by authors such as Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman helped establish a unique literary legacy in the United States based on individuality and self-reliance throughout the country's development. During the nineteenth century, American Renaissance authors developed a narrative of the American character and experience based on what would come to be known as the "American dream." Many of the founding values of the United States were originally articulated in the Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, which Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote. By emphasizing the idea that inspiration and knowledge are derived from personal experiences rather than from long-established national conventions and traditions, Emerson's writings helped American literature reject the European literary ideal.

Throughout Emerson's transcendental philosophy and literary works, he emphasizes the individual's obligation to create their destiny. Emerson's literary works, particularly his essay "Self-Reliance," serve as a prism to see the American dream's lasting values in American literature. As Franklin's Autobiography demonstrated the close connection between the American dream and literature in what he called a "rising nation," Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" goes further to define the American dream by

defining a self-reliant individual who believes in the unfailing sanctity of the individual and seeks to manifest his or her destiny in a free society.

Emerson encourages individuals to believe in themselves and realize their path in life since no one else can live or define their existence for them. Emerson says that individuals are oppressed and broken when they follow a route established by someone else or emulate someone else's life; consequently, they must rely on the goodness and justice of their unique experience. To better understand Emerson, David Lyttle delves into his theory of "Emerson's Transcendental Individualism," which asserts that everyone can realize their unique genius. According to Lyttle's explanation:

The individual's true uniqueness is what Emerson called his "genius" his calling in life is to realize his genius...genius does not originate in biology or the environment. It is, for Emerson, given at birth; it is spiritual or transcendental. Since genius is innate, and since each individual, in his genius, is different from any other individual, only the individual can discover what his genius is; society cannot inform him.

Emerson shows how individualism and the pursuit of personal freedom shaped American consciousness and, as a result, American literature by articulating the Transcendentalist movement's rallying cry that personal enlightenment and genius lie in the individual's soul.

Mobility is most often quantitatively measured in terms of economic mobility changes, such as income or wealth. Occupation is another measure used in researching mobility, which usually involves quantitative and qualitative data analysis, but other studies may concentrate on social class. Mobility may be intergenerational, within the same generation, or intergenerational, between one or more generations. Intergenerational mobility is less frequent, representing "rags to riches" cases regarding upward mobility. Intergenerational upward mobility is more common, where children or grandchildren are better in economic circumstances than their parents or grandparents. In the U.S., this type of mobility is described as a fundamental feature of the "American Dream," even though there is less such mobility than in almost all other O.E.C.D. countries. Blanden et al. report, "The idea of the U.S. as 'the land of opportunity' persists; and seems misplaced."

According to these studies, it becomes amply clear that by international standards, the United

States has an unusually low level of intergenerational mobility: our parents' income is highly predictive of our incomes as adults. Intergenerational mobility in the United States is lower than in France, Germany, Sweden, Canada, Finland, Norway, and Denmark.

It would be naïve and rather foolish to think that the theory of the American Dream has only had failures recently. One success that may be taken into account is its success in improving the education system in America and elsewhere, where it has been replicated to a lesser or larger extent. The point was well illustrated in *The Fallen American Dream*, a documentary film that details the concept of the American Dream from its historical origins to its current perception. *The Fallen American Dream* is a documentary on America's challenges with college affordability and the declining job market during a national crisis and global change.

The 1949 play by eminent writer Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, echoes the same sentiments. It is about a person in a fruitless pursuit of a dream which, deep down in his heart, even he knows shall only remain a dream. In 1971, Hunter Thompson depicted in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey into the Heart of the American Dream*, a dark psychedelic reflection of the fuzzy concept of the American Dream—successfully illustrated only in wasted pop-culture excess.

The novel *Requiem for a Dream* by Hubert Selby Jr. is another attempt to showcase the defectiveness of the concept of the American Dream, which is quite similar to *Death of a Salesman* in the treatment of its subject.

As Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Chris Hedges aptly reverberates the sentiment in his 2012 book *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*:

"The vaunted American Dream, the idea that life will get better, that progress is inevitable if we obey the rules and work hard enough, that material prosperity is assured, has been replaced by a hard and bitter truth. The American Dream, we now know, is a lie. We will be sacrificed. The virus of corporate abuse – the perverted belief that only corporate profit matters – has spread to outsource our jobs, cut the budgets of our schools, close our libraries, and plague our communities with foreclosures and unemployment".

As a sobering New York Times article published in June 2017 clarifies, America could have a lot to learn by looking to Europe. The American middle class- the lynchpin of the country's

phenomenal postwar economic growth- can no longer call itself the richest and the happiest in the world.

"While the wealthiest Americans are outpacing many of their global peers, "says the NYT, "across the lower and middle-income tiers, citizens of other advanced countries have received considerably larger raises over the last three decades." America's poorest lag behind their European counterparts; some four decades back, the opposite was true.

The conclusion is fairly simple; wealth and contentment are not trickling down to the majority of people that exist lower down the ladder of social mobility. We can see a similar condition brewing in India where figures like National Income, G.D.P., and Per Capita Income are astounding...while the ground reality for the layman, a middle-class man, is far from worst.

This is yet another wake-up call about America's continuing economic malaise. Ask Americans if the country is on the right track – 60% say no. Satisfied with how things are going in America- only 25% say yes. Still think you are a member of the middle class- only 44% feel so confident. Forty percent identify themselves as lower-class, a fifteen-point jump since 2008. Among young people, the numbers are even more depressing. Those in the lowest tier have doubled in just the past six years.

## References

1. Avram, Landy. "Marxism and the Woman question", cited in Sundquist, Eric J., *Cultural contexts for Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* (Los Angeles: Bedford/St.Martin's, 1995). Print.
2. Campbell, Neil. *American Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge, 2012. Print.
3. Carpenter, Fredric I. *American Literature and the Dream*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1955. Print.
4. Dunbar, Erica. *A Fragile Freedom: African American Women and Emancipation in the Antebellum City*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. Print.
5. Eisinger, Chester. "The wrong dreams". *Critical Insights: Death of a Salesman*. Ed.: Brenda Murphy. Pasadena: Salem Press, 2010. (95-106). Print. 92
6. Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. The Penguin Essential Edition, 2014. Print.

7. Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature and Selected Essays*. Ed.: Lazer Ziff. New York: Penguin, 2003. Print.
8. Enriquez, Lauren. "The American Dream was Often Just a Fantasy". Bakersfield: Roughneck Review (2013). <http://www2.bakersfieldcollege.edu/roughneck/2-2/LaurenEnriquez.html>. Web.
9. Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Penguin, 2013. Print.
10. Lawson, Russel M. *Poverty in America: An Encyclopedia*. London: Greenwood Press, 2008. Print.
11. Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*. Berlin: Verlag Moritz Diesterweg, 1974. Print.
12. Murphy, Brenda. *American Realism and American Drama, 1880-1940*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Print.
13. Newlin, Keith. *Critical Insights. The American Dream*. Massachusetts: Salem Press, 2013. Print.
14. Packer-Kinlaw, Donna. "The Rise and Fall of the American Dream". *Critical Insights. The American Dream*. Ed.: Keith Newlin. Massachusetts: Salem Press, 2013. Print.
15. Parkinson, Kathleen. *Critical Studies; The Great Gatsby*. London: Penguin, 1987. Print.
16. Stanton, Kay. "Women and the American Dream of Death of a Salesman". *Critical Insights: Death of a Salesman*. Ed.: Brenda Murphy. Pasadena: Salem Press, (2010) 120-161. Print.
17. Sylvander, Carolyn W. "Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man and Female Stereotypes". *Negro American Literature Forum* 9 (1975), 77-79. Web.
18. Tate, Claudia. "Notes on the Invisible Women in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man." *Speaking For You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison*. Ed. Kimberly W. Benston. Washington, DC.: Howard University Press, 1987. 163-172. Print.
19. Twain, Mark. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Berkley: University of California