LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press
Vol 48, No 2 (2024)
E-ISSN 2450-4580

Brygida Gasztold, Koszalin University of Technology, Poland

DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2024.48.2.49-61

How to Attain and Maintain the American Dream in Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*

ABSTRACT
My article examines Imbolo Mbue's novel *Behold the Dreamers* (2016), as a literary representation of the American Dream myth from two opposite sides: the old-stock, white Americans and the recent African immigrants. Through the lens of the protagonist's legal status, social class, race, and gender, I explore the factors that obstruct the attainment of the American Dream, revealing its gaps and elisions. I argue that Mbue's novel is both a representation of and a critical response to the Dream's appeal premised upon the notion that it is as difficult to attain as to maintain the American Dream. By discussing those aspects that still support the Dream in the 21st century's socio-economic environment, and illuminating those that debunk its myth, I assess its vitality and aspirational power.

KEYWORDS
the American Dream; African immigrants; white privilege

In *The Epic of America* (1931) James Truslow Adams penned the iconic definition of the American Dream as "the dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with an opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement" (p. 317)[1]. Adams believed that Liberal opportunities in America are open to every individual, regardless of his or her circumstances of birth or origins, as only hard work can lead someone to success. The American Dream has become a resilient and unified national ethos coded into the language and embedded in the minds of the American generations. Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016) follows personal and professional tribulations of two NYC families: undocumented, Cameroonian immigrants Neni and Jende Jondas, and their wealthy employers Cindy and Clark Edwards, both families caught in the slipstream of the 2008 financial crisis. The narrative revisits a discussion about the plausibility of the American Dream myth, challenging its broadest claims, i.e., when the Clarks struggle to maintain their privileged position, the systemic

[1] For further discussion see Cal Jillson's (2016).

Brygida Gasztold, Wydział Humanistyczny, Politechnika Koszalińska, ul. Śniadeckich 2, 75-453 Koszalin, bgasztold@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1985-1713

The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

barriers and inequalities that the Jondas face prompt their decision to return to Cameroon. By presenting the problem from the perspective of African immigrants, and white, affluent Americans, the author emphasizes its continuing persistence to all segments of the society. The employment of the intersectional paradigm of race-class-gender in the critical exploration allows to demonstrate how deeply seated it is in collective American consciousness.

1. Hard Work and Material Success

J. T. Adams insists that the American Dream is the product of "the American mind", which considers "business and money-making and material improvements as good in themselves" (pp. 405–406). Merton in "Social Structure and Anomie" (1938) also highlights the pecuniary form of the American Dream: "the accumulation of wealth as a symbol of success" (p. 675) is commonly the most appealing but also most disappointing. Attributed to the capitalist economy of the US, consumer culture is a system in which the pervasive circulation and consumption of commercial products is driven by the purposeful actions of firms in their marketing activities. The continuous consumption and acquisition of consumer goods communicates prestige and perceived well-being, while reflecting and reproducing particular values and forms of status. The ways in which an individual's position in a social group is structured by class, gender, and race, affects the nature of his or her participation in consumer culture. In Mbue's novel the world of great power and privilege, as an archetype of (material) success and consumerism, is represented by the family of a senior executive at Lehman Brothers, Clark Edwards, his wife Cindy, and their children Vince and Mighty–wealthy upper-class New Yorkers. The Edwards are shown to socialize with the characters that enjoy a similar socio-economic status: their "friends were all over Manhattan, shopping at Saks and Barneys, lunching and drinking fine wine, planning dinner parties and galas, attending meetings for charities, looking forward to their next vacation to an exotic locale" (M., p. 286)[2]. With access to social networks, the protagonists have the knowledge, connections, and opportunities, whereas economic freedom allows them to enhance personal lives by buying access to luxuries.

In consumer culture, "[s]tatus groups simply establish their own esoteric standards and measure exclusion and inclusion according to their own idiosyncratic rating scales" (Sardoĉ & Prebiliĉ, 2022, p. 3). Therefore, for Clark Edwards, it is "the sports car and private jets" (M., p. 147), and an aura of wealth accomplished in the detailed descriptions of his office space: "black leather chairs, glass coffee table" (M. p. 5). The extravagant details connected with materials and colors serve as the markers of status that enhance the sensory aspect of the space, coding it

[2] Imbolo Mbue (2016). *Behold the Dreamers*. Fourth Estate. All references are to this edition and are cited by page within the text (M.)

as more desirable to its users. The narrative employment of sensory imagery is especially vital in the sophisticated descriptions of the food served in the Edwards's kitchen: "California caviar and chives on melba toast" (M., p. 152). The expensive nature of such dishes bestows an aura of indulgence and exceptionality on its consumers, especially that it is the hired chefs that prepare the food. Consuming such luxuries is a marker of class, as it enhances self-esteem and garners higher appreciation for the hosts. In the novel, conspicuous consumption functions not only as an indicator of social affiliation and distinction but also as an incentive that encourages the rest to aspire to this level of social superiority. Clothes, lifestyle, interior design, and eating habits identify the Edwards with wealth and privilege, signaling what is valued as acceptable and desirable. In this way, these emblems of success provide the rules of consumption for those on the path to success, such as the Cameroonian immigrant Jende Jonda. The narrative focus on possession and consumption of material goods also communicates a character's favorable self-identity, which generates a positive social appraisal. Since consumer culture promotes desire and pleasure, for the motivated immigrant characters, such as the Jondas, the prospect of ownership brings prestige and affirmative self-perception, as it is a signal that they have finally succeeded.

At the individual level, the Dream demands hard work, frugality and persistence, which is represented by ways in which both the Edwards and the Jondas have internalized and utilized this conviction, working long hours and setting an example for their kids. "We try really hard, we can save five thousand a year. Ten years, we could have enough money for down payment for a two-bedroom in Mount Vernon or Yonkers" (M., p. 30), hopes Jende. A political scientist Christina M. Greer (2013) supports the protagonist's claim, saying that, compared to native-born black Americans and Afro-Caribbeans, "African respondents express the greatest levels of trust in the American system in fulfilling its promises, so long as groups work hard and strive for success" (p. 87). Even if Mbue's protagonists believe that hard work drives success and is correlated with the feeling of happiness, African immigrants quickly learn that the prospects for advancement are not based on the merits of hard work alone. The Jondas are undocumented, and therefore lack the basic rights, which leaves them unprotected. From the beginning, they do not have the same opportunities as American citizens or green card holders. Their naiveté is characteristic for early 20th century immigrant literature whose protagonists unquestioningly internalized the American tale about immigrant metamorphosis from outsider to mainstream success. What the Jondas fail to realize is that the American Dream represents an imagined relationship to reality that more often than not elides its obverse. If losing an accent and embracing American ways was enough for Mary Antin's, Anzia Yezierska's and Abraham Cahan's protagonists, the promise of a better future becomes much more problematic for Mbue's.

The only member of the Edwards family who defies the lure of the American Dream's materialism is Vince–a young and liberal-minded law student at Columbia–who criticizes American mass consumerism: "People sit on their couches and watch garbage interrupted by messages to buy garbage which will create a desire for more garbage" (M., p. 341), the US involvement in global affairs: "Let's just carry on with our lives while our country continues to commit atrocities all over the world" (M., p. 341), and a system of education that supports such practices: "spending all those precious hours of their lives being indoctrinated with lies so they can go into the world and perpetuate the lies" (M., p. 105). Even though a bit ironic, Vince's portrayal challenges the established pattern of normative social influence, castigating his parents' conformism: "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're trapped. And they don't get it! (M., pp. 103–104). Through Vince's character, the author communicates a bitter critique of a society that upholds the vicious circle of persistent social challenge: "[o]ne can simply never have enough of the right ones, and the "right ones" are always subject to being redefined at any time" (Sardoĉ & Prebiliĉ, 2022, p. 3).

Vince's perspective is that of a white, privileged member of the power elite, who has also benefited from the system. Defying his parents' values, his voice may be seen as representing the younger generation, which tends to prioritize individual contentment rather than the quest for earthly benefits. That is why he decides to drop out of college and go to search for his mindfulness in India, the land of spiritual gainers and truth seekers. Since his parents secure his financial wellbeing, he is free to concentrate on the spiritual one. Being born into this family affords him the position of privilege, what Bourdieu (1986) calls "the domestic transmission of cultural capital" (pp. 244–245), a set of social skills that facilitates his easy entry into society. Thus, the author uses Vince's representation as sardonic fodder, castigating liberal privilege and white entitlement. What Vince overlooks is the fact that it is his parents, whom he criticizes so much, who are the ones to provide the cultural competence and economic resources, which allow him such freedom.

The discourse of consumer society of late capitalism is an important element of this analysis, as the narrative focus on material aspects of the Dream, such as home ownership and financial stability to live a comfortable life, aligns with the Edwards' definition of success. The characters appreciate acquisition and display of material goods, which signal their status and gesture towards their aspirations. The pressure for success understood largely in monetary terms is also presented as an enduring enticement for immigrant characters, who chase a glamorized vision of America fabricated by the mass media. Vince blames such thinking for later disappointment, when the Dream fails: "People don't want to open their eyes and

see the Truth because the illusion suits them" (M., p. 103). Sociological studies by Marindi and Hauhart (2022) support this narrative claim: "some African migrants' hopes are built up beyond any reasonable likelihood they can be fulfilled" (p. 214), while Vansteenkiste et al. (2007) warn that "[w]hen people place priority on financial success, popularity, appearance, and other extrinsic motivations, they are likely to ignore the inherent satisfaction of basic psychological needs, leading to a decrease in well-being and an increase in psychological problems" (p. 273). Depicting social reality through mediated representation, Mbue's story exposes the imagined exceptionalism of America by asserting that prioritizing materialistic goals as the channel to pursue well-being is deceptive. Embracing materialism is in the novel shown to stand in tension with experiencing happiness, as the protagonists tend to gauge their self-worth by factors they often have no control over, such as a global economic crisis, or dwindling health.

2. Gender and the Pursuit of Happiness

Even though men and their experiences are traditionally seen as normative, the challenges of female protagonists reflect the gendered aspects of the American Dream. As the relationships in the Edwards's family show, Mbue's America is not portrayed as a gender-neutral space, in which motivation and hard work are enough to succeed. Cindy Edwards is mostly shown as mother and wife–the family's primary caregiver: "nothing appeared to matter to the madam more than the happiness of her children, their nonstop possession of every good thing life had to offer" (M., p. 114). Even though she runs a small wellness business, the narrative offers no information on her professional career, belittling its importance and, instead, highlighting her roles within the family. She is portrayed as supportive, nurturing, and devoted to the needs of her husband and children, as it is her responsibility to make everyone happy. The wife and mother, however, is awarded inferior prestige and esteem because of her non-economic role, whereas her husband's priority is to provide for the family. The male breadwinner, however, is mostly absent from family life, he misses Mighty's recitals, and in Vince's eyes, he is not "much more than an absent provider" (M., pp. 106–107). Both representations reiterate the traditional family model, where for Cindy "family must always come first" (M. p. 133), and for Clark "careers must take priority" (M., p. 133). The Edwards demonstrate the distribution of conventional masculine and feminine roles not only within the family; Clark's work environment is predominantly masculine – they discuss raising capital, investors, and shareholders, while Cindy's is predominantly feminine: homemaking, entertaining, and dieting regimes. Their roles and duties are bifurcated in a way that enforces gender stereotypes and is congruent with traditional social and professional expectations.

The formulation of material success as part of the American Dream is perceived and acted upon differently by members of the Edwards's family. It is the wife

and mother, though, who bears the brunt of responsibility for communicating and maintaining the family's status. Socially imposed and internalized ways in which Cindy expresses her social status place utmost importance on her femininity, therefore there are multiple references to its attributes, such as body, hair, clothes, and conduct. She is portrayed as being tall, slim, with "glossy strawberry blond hair (M., p. 191), displaying a disciplined body, which is controlled by the regimes of femininity. In contacts with others, she is "enveloped in an air of superiority… slowly enunciating every word when she spoke, as if she had the right to take as much of the listener's time as she wished" (M., p. 115). The Park Avenue apartment, the house in the Hamptons, and an inclusion in the NYC high society is Cindy's own American Dream, as, unlike her husband, she was not born to wealth: "I worked my way through college, got a job, my own apartment, learned how to carry myself well and fit effortlessly in this new world so I would never be looked down on again" (M., p. 124).Through hard work and diligence, she has secured a seemingly permanent foothold in society's upper echelons; however, she realizes that in order to stay on top, she must "fight hard every day to remain here. To keep my family together. To have all this" (M., p. 124). She does so through accumulation and consumption of luxury goods, which confirm her fitting in and, in consequence, ensure her place among the privileged.

In line with the narrative importance of material success as part of the American Dream, a high social status is displayed and reinforced by the possession and consumption of material goods. As it is a woman who is expected to spend in order to make her family's status visible, there are multiple references to Cindy's "real designer goods," (M., p. 139), "spas and vacations and the opera" (M., p. 153), galas at the Waldorf Astoria, weekends with friends on Martha's Vineyard, and "going to St. Barths for Christmas" (M., p. 209). A luxury interior design of her homes affirms Cindy's social identity in her own eyes as well as in her guests': "the black marble table… the Wolf stove… the floor (glossy marble and gray); the plush carpet (snow white)" (M., p. 262). Ubiquitous whiteness signals purity and wealth, which is reinforced by an image of immaculately clean home: "Cindy hated dirt even more than she hated cheap things" (M., p. 113); the imagery reminiscent of the symbols of visual culture in F. S. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Multiple references to global, luxurious brand name products, such as Tommy Hilfiger, "the Coach bag" (M., p. 64), "authentic Gucci and Versace bags"(M., p. 158), put the story beyond a cultural context of the U.S., bringing a sense of verisimilitude and exclusivity but also global materialism.

When things at Lehman go bad, the tensions between the spouses aggravate. Even though the couple maintains appearances, stress has a detrimental effect on their relationship well-being. Unable to cope with the pressure, Clark declines to see the therapist but goes to see the prostitutes, and Cindy finds consolation in alcohol and pain-relief medication, which finally leads to her demise. In fact,

Clark's infidelity is coded as Cindy's worst nightmare: "I'll wake up one day and Clark will tell me he's found someone younger and prettier" (M., p. 87), because a divorce would mean a deterioration of her own material status and a social stigma since it is his job that generates their income and affords their public position. The imbalance of power is signaled as the reason for the female protagonist's precarious situation, as influence provided by her husband's executive position and the money he earns is used as coercive control.

The social aspect of a divorce is presented as resulting in another consequence, as the Edwards's feeling of happiness is intrinsically linked with the sense of belonging; hosting and attending parties serves as a litmus test of their popularity, and an indicator of how well they maintain their social position. The strong need for approval signals Cindy's own insecurities and shows how fragile the inclusion really is. Cindy and Clark seek happiness from external goals such as money, status, and appearance, however, psychological studies reveal that "pursuing goals based on extrinsic rewards, the contingent approval of other people, and "having" instead of "being" distract the individual from the meaningful aspects of life, hinder the individual from achieving his or her inherent potential as a human being, and lead to psychological distress" (Nickerson et al., 2003, p. 531). The achieved high levels of material comfort and leisure add to the characters' satisfaction but do not guarantee its permanence, as the couple struggle to maintain their status, Clark in the professional and Cindy in the public sphere. The promise of happiness, which results from financial and social success, is presented as corrupted since the price the Edwards pay is aligning their appearances to match what is expected and neglecting what they really desire.

On the flipside, "a jobless, unwed mother, sitting in her father's house" (M., p. 12) in Limbe, in America becomes a respectable wife, who earns her own money and pursues the dream of becoming a pharmacist. America gives Neni purpose and induces her with the belief that she can become anybody, she plans to "finish her education, own a home, raise a happy family" (M., p. 313). Educational opportunity supported by scholarships means a higher-paying job, something she would not be able to achieve in her native Cameroon. A better job means financial security, which will allow her to break from traditional social roles as wife and mother. Neni appreciates multiple benefits of living in the US; she becomes more self-assured and determined but also susceptible to the trappings of consumerism, for example when "she was talking about weight loss and calories and cholesterol and sugar-free this and fat-free that and stupid things no one in Limbe talked about" (M., p.198). This ironic commentary on American diet culture shows how eagerly and indiscriminately Neni accepts new dietary patterns of the dominant host culture.

The intersection of gender and race is critical to understanding a woman of color's experience of the American Dream. Neni has a regular job for which

she is paid, but she also has a second shift at home where she is the primary caregiver of the family: she does the shopping, cooks, cleans, helps her son with homework and performs all other household chores while her husband does not engage in domestic work. On top of the invisible and unacknowledged labor, she prepares for her classes at college, at the expense of rest and sleep. On the one hand, Neni is portrayed as totally ensconced in the woman's historical default mode, disproportionally and silently performing her housework and caretaking responsibilities, on the other, America allows her to grasp an opportunity to finally fulfill her own ambitions.

There is another aspect of Neni's experiences, which puts a strain on their marriage and prompts her to question the traditional family roles. Neni comes from a culture, in which the husband's dominance is unquestionable: "He had brought her to America. He paid her tuition. He was her protector and advocate. He made decisions for their family" (M., p. 172). Neni is cognizant of her dependence since spousal sponsorship puts her husband in positions of power and subjects her to increased patriarchal control, which only enhances her vulnerability. American society, however, provides Neni with alternative family models: "Women tell their men what they want and the men do it, because they say happy wife, happy life" (M., p. 198), or a gay couple, such as her college professor. Neni is conflicted between a drive for agency and obedience to tradition, represented by Fatou: "No matter what woman in this country do…we African woman musto stand behind the husband and be following them and say yes, yes" (M., p. 313). A sense of cultural confusion exacerbates negative effects of immigration and even leads to acts of domestic violence. Jende's losing of a job poses a threat to his sense of masculinity and self-esteem: "where a man lacks this sign of dominance, violence may be a means of reinstating his authority over his wife", argue sociologists Macmillan and Gartner (1999, p. 949). The female protagonist's experience of domestic violence is reflective not only of an individual's behavior but may be easily stereotyped as pertaining to the ethnic group's characteristic, adding to the stereotyped vision of African immigrants. Thus, immigration to America reveals for Neni opportunities that she would not have had back home, but also poses new challenges. The protagonist's struggle to juggle between the needs of the family and the benefits of the female empowerment promotes a gender-sensitized approach that recognizes the particularity of women's experiences of immigration.

3. Racial Bias as Impediment to Success

In congruence with the ideals of the American Dream, what attracts the Jondas most is the promise of equal opportunities, regardless of the individual's socio-economic position and race. Talking about the U.S. society, Christina M. Greer (2013) confirms that unlike black Americans and Afro-Caribbeans, "African respondents […] are relatively optimistic about the prospects of hard work equaling

success…[and] are likely to view the United States as a land of opportunity (p. 81). Mbue's narrative aligns with this claim through Jende's characterization, where his experience as a citizen of a lower-income, corrupted African republic, where "visions of a better life were the birthright of a blessed few" (M., p. 60), is juxtaposed with the ideals of equal opportunities and individual merit, where he "can become something…even become a respectable man" (M., p. 46). Jende reiterates the fundamental premise of the American Dream: "I believe I work hard, and one day I will have a good life here" (M., p. 46). Put more broadly, it is not only about improving his own life but also about the help he can provide for his aging parents, and, "stressing the importance of intergenerational aspect of material success" (Hochschild, 1995, pp. 44–45), a better future of his children. Indeed, Jende's job as Edwards' chauffeur enables "him to take care of his family, send his wife to school, send his father-in-law a cash gift every few months, replace the roof and crumbling wooden walls of his parents' house, and save for the future" (M., p. 204). Thus, the narrative demonstrates how America delivers on its promise and provides the Cameroonian immigrant with opportunity and success, in ways he would not be able to achieve back home. As much as its feasibility is provisional due to his undocumented status, this initial achievement asserts the protagonist's conviction that anything is possible in America.

The American reality, however, turns out to be far less inclusive for African newcomers, when racial bias trumps the individual ability and achievement, becoming the main lens through which they are perceived[3]. American ignorance of the world is presented as a breeding ground for derogatory ethnic stereotypes; Cindy is portrayed as "one of those American women whose knowledge of Africa was based largely on movies and National Geographic" (M., p. 48). The Jondas' accented speech – "a blend of Cameroonian and Nigerian pidgin English" (M., p. 22) is a strong cue for ethnic group membership that sets immigrant protagonists apart, impacting their perception, credibility, and communication. Such speech can easily trigger group-specific assumptions since it is a popular indicator of education and intelligence. As foreign-accented speech communicates a recent immigration status and becomes a barrier for professional and social aspirations, Neni tries to speak "in the slow, delicate manner in which she had been training herself to speak whenever she spoke to non-Africans" (M., p. 122), what Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden (2004) call shifting: the "pressure for Black women to compromise their true selves as they navigate America's

[3] In *Americanah* (2014) Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explains that African immigrants to the U.S. are imposed a new identity of Black Americans: "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. 222).

racial and gender bigotry … they modify their speech…or they alter their outer appearance". Thus, Neni adopts a strategy which allows her to evade ridicule and condescension, but which also fuels her own insecurities at the chances of assimilation and mainstream acceptance.

Race complicates the attainment of the Dream, as the examples of thinly veiled racial bias are visible in social interactions, for example, when Clark advises Jende to buy a better suit "[a]nd a real tie" (M., p. 9), and when he condescendingly "smiled and patted him on the arm" (M., p. 10). Likewise, Cindy's affluent friends remind Neni that "it was okay for her to call them by their first names …wondering how long it took her to get her braids done" (M. p. 153). These polite, albeit trivial remarks indicate how shallow their interest really is, and how little they understand Neni's situation. It might seem that Neni's college education would allow more multiethnic contact, but her experience is mostly exclusive: "She didn't have a single non-African friend and hadn't even come close to being friends with a white person" (M., p. 90). Thus, Neni's experience of America is mainly one of exclusion, putting her in a position of disadvantage, as compared to the rest of the society. A sociologist, Tsedale M. Melaku (2022, p. 10) confirms that "[t]he bootstrap mentality focusing on an individual agency that is part of the ideological push of the American Dream neglects the real strictures driven by systemic racism within American institutions". Social, cultural, and economic exclusionary practices are presented in the novel as drivers of inequalities, which maintain the divisive "us vs. them" mentality, instead of fostering mutual understanding.

Racial bias and economic inequity, which stem from a confluence of institutional and economic racism, are further communicated through the presentation of segregated housing. The Edwards' Park Avenue apartment and the vacation home in the Hamptons are juxtaposed with the district of Harlem, which is where the Jondas find an affordable apartment: "The white people were nearly all gone. Mostly black people remained … That was how he knew it was Harlem, 125th Street" (M., p. 71). They suffer here not only from poor housing conditions but also face crime in the neighborhood. Residential segregation is shown in the story to be closely linked to the protagonists' socioeconomic status. Harlem, which becomes a home for the Jondas, is a no-go zone for the Edwards. In fact, little Mighty "[has] never been on the subway" (M., p. 162) since they employ a chauffeur. NYC, which is famous for its ethnic enclaves, is portrayed as a site of distinctive settlements, which reinforce racial prejudice and hinder the African immigrants' assimilation.

Relativity in the perception of wealth and poverty between white Americans and African immigrants draws attention to the persistence of social bias. For Fatou, Neni's friend, success is doing shopping "from better store. Fine white people store lika Target" (M., p. 32). Compared to the luxury brands favored by the Edwards, the brand name of this popular discount retailer sounds truly ironic

as a mark of achievement. When Cindy repeats reductive generalizations about African poverty: "Being poor for you in Africa is fine. Most of you are poor over there" (M., p. 123), she situates Neni in an ethnic sub-group, stereotyping poverty as part of its culture. By pointing out differences, Cindy creates a hierarchy and assigns to it negative value. For an ambitious American woman, poverty is not only measured along the metrics of money but also social judgement: "The shame of it, it's not as bad for you … Over here, it's embarrassing, humiliating, very painful" (M., p. 123). Poverty-induced shame and ensuing social exclusion are for Cindy synonyms of failure. Given the differences in material well-being and cultural background between the two women, Cindy denies Neni the emotional experience of poverty and highlights an essential role of American society in constantly evaluating its members against the dominant norms and expectations. Only following these norms and fulfilling those expectations will result in opportunities of climbing the social ladder and staying on top, which for people like Cindy is the true measure of success.

Mbue's narrative posits racial bias, which creates enduring social stratification, as the main impediment to the immigrant social inclusion. Knowing American reality, Jende's cousin Winston warns him that "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" (M., p. 322). In other words, Winston claims that the attainment of the American Dream for people like Jende and Neni is more illusory than attainable, enumerating legal status, education, and ethnicity as its main impediments. Marindi and Hauhart (2022) observe that "African and Caribbean blacks often arrive without a full appreciation of what blackness connotes in the context of historical American racism" (p. 218), adding that "these immigrants are unprepared for enacting and accepting a devalued status solely based on skin color" (p. 218). Through the experiences of racialized interactions, Mbue's protagonists realize this truth. The claim that "an individual is solely responsible for the outcome of the process of competing for an advantaged social position and the associated transformation of an opportunity into an advantage" (Sardoĉ & Prebiliĉ, 2022, p. 126) is demonstrated as flawed since the narrative reveals the factors that lie beyond the individual control, positing the ways in which the admission to the American Dream is conditional.

4. Is the American Dream still Relevant? Conclusion

The events of the financial crisis of 2008 demonstrate that the poor bear its brunt, whereas the rich recuperate quickly because their extended social networks allow them access to diverse opportunities and resources. Uneven distribution of wealth results in social inequality, as is evident when the characters from different segments of American society deal with the crisis. While Cindy worries about losing a maid, the less fortunate face rise in unemployment rates,

evictions, and homelessness. "At the national level, the dream demanded that society provide an open, fair, competitive, entrepreneurial environment in which individual merit could find its place" (Jillson, 2016, p. 260), however the privileged situation of white, affluent Americans defies a vision of a just social order that provides equal opportunities to all its members, demonstrating how a culture of entitlement compromises the American Dream, while racial and gender disparities exacerbate attempts at economic stability. What the Jondas learn in America is that the idealized, rhetorical version of the Dream does not harmonize with the distinctively particularistic experiences of everyday immigrant life, showing a disjunction between the myth and American reality. For the Jondas, the rungs of the ladder of social mobility have been moved further apart. Mbue's narrative critique of the existing socio-economic system calls for the need for the fundamental institutional changes that will foster a more just distribution of wealth and privilege, as only in a society that is "rooted in values of justice, community, and truth that emanates from those most vulnerable" (Bush, 2022, p.148) such a Dream may become reality.

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