

Discourse on Post- American Dream after World War II

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Abstract. The world saw two horrific and devastating World Wars which traumatized people since then. Their needs and ambitions took a different track and their lives became increasingly exhaustive and full of desolation. Specifically giving light to the American society, their American Dream took a different path and changed its notion throughout the ages. In this paper, four different narratives are taken- ‘Revolutionary Road’ (1961) written by Richard Yates, ‘The Pursuit of Happiness’ (2006) directed by Gabriele Muccino, ‘Catcher in the Rye’ (1951) written by J.D. Salinger, and ‘Into the Wild’ (2007) directed by Sean Penn. These four narratives are compared with one another to establish the idea of changing the American Dream with time. The ‘Revolutionary Road’ is compared with the film ‘The Pursuit of Happiness’ because in both narratives American Dream is achieved but some characters are driven away by the disillusion of the American Dream which proves fatal (Revolutionary Road) and the other character achieves by protecting and sustaining it (The Pursuit of Happiness). On the other hand, the new American Dream is shown through the eyes of the younger generation (The Catcher in the Rye, Into the Wild). The discourse establishes an idea that there is a need to change the perspective of the American Dream that the ancestors built ages ago.

Keywords : American dream; ancestor; discourse; new generation; World War- II.

American Dream- that James Truslow Adams believed, “life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” regardless of the circumstances and social status. Poe accurately described the underside of the American dream of the self-made man and showed the price of materialism and excessive competition — loneliness, alienation, and images of death in life. The very idea of the American Dream started with the advent of the Puritans from the Old World to the New World in the late 1400s and with this, there was the emergence of new American culture and literature. This Puritan saw himself as an Adam- the American Adam. A new personality, an individual standing alone, self-reliant who is ready to conquer American soil and establish a new civilization that is unique and

ideal for him. With long struggles for power and independence, the young Americans declared themselves as all men are created equal and are given the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in the *Declaration of Independence* (1776). Men sacrificed themselves to achieve a life that is fulfilled by materials. The rise of capitalism during the 18th and 19th centuries in America took a toll on individuals. The socio-familial values deteriorated due to social forces and unprecedented economic pressure. Writers throughout the ages tried to show the fatality of the American Dream, among them, are F. Scott Fitzgerald, Theodore Dreiser, John Steinbeck, Arthur Miller, and many more. With time, the American Dream started changing and evolved slowly. The world is changing and there is a need to change the perception towards life. We can derive the idea of a new American Dream in various fields such as cinema and literature where artists are trying to portray a different vision that the world needs giving priority to the true concept of happiness in the present world.

American Dream before World War-II

The land of America has always been a centre of attraction for ages because of its abundant natural resources. It was a mysterious land far west of Europe that remained virgin soil till the migration of Puritans in the 1400s. The aboriginals of the land- the Red Indians kept the vast land sacred from the intruders but with the advancement of the modern world, the ruthless assaults against them made them inferior among the intruders.

The rise of the Puritans in New England, a brief historical background

Before the Puritans, the American land was discovered by an Italian sailor Cristoforo Colombo (better known as Christopher Columbus) in 1491. The English attempted to explore only in the 1580s with Sir Walter Raleigh's ship, a crew full of Englishmen to investigate the possibility to colonise other lands. After this, there had been another attempt in 1606 to establish a settlement in Jamestown, Virginia, named after the English Virgin Queen who suffered from great disasters. With the new settlement, exploitation and mass massacre of the Aborigines demonstrated their superiority over the Indians. The Puritans regarded themselves to be God's special emissaries on a mission into the wilderness, with the responsibility of establishing a Jerusalem renewed. America is their land; a land that they wished it to become which they couldn't build in England. Over the centuries the Puritan view became the hegemonic American ideology in American history.

The earliest white immigrants to America didn't consider themselves Americans in an absolute manner but did so with the Europeans that they were separated from. Later they started the other black immigrants and the Indians of the continent. Thus, the concept of Americanness is immediately connected with the political dynamics of cultural exclusion and inclusion.

Puritans, the Originator of the American Dream

The seed of the American Dream was sown by one of the early immigrants from England- the Puritans. These Puritans fled from their native land on grounds of religious persecution and migrated to American land in pursuit of the utopian goal. Their re-defined spiritual belief is to do God's work on earth, to redefinethe world. There is a constant battle between Good and Evil forces on earth so hard work with persistence, ambition, and 'to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield' was their motto. Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) embodied the new spirit of America, emerging in part out of Puritanism and in part out of the Enlightenment, that was coming to dominate the culture. His aphorisms were encouraged in the 18th and 19th century Americans, which influenced their cultural attitudes, "Early to bed and early to rise to make a man healthy, wealthy and wise". Slavery and immigration of the eastern part of the world created a multicultural existence and the religious Puritans' ideological beliefs inspired the first wave of American settlers and created the idea of the American Dream. Thomas E. Porter writes:

Virgin land, undeveloped resources... all allowed scope for enterprise and imagination. The successful man became the idol of the public; the road to success was pointed out from the pulpit, in the marketplace, by the family fireside... It is possible...to trace the uniquely American attitude toward "success" to roots in our Puritan past, to see this ideology as a secularization of the Protestant ethic. (45)

The Declaration of Independence (1776) lays the foundation ground of the American Dream, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." With this the definition of "happiness" changed

with time. In the Roaring 20s, people started seeing the consequences of this Dream. F. Scott Fitzgerald in his famous novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925) revealed the American Dream with despair amid great wealth. Other novels like *Martin Eden* (1909), *The American Tragedy* (1925) along with *The Great Gatsby* portrayed a powerful warning against the overwhelming success myth that has plagued the American land in the modern world.

World War II: A Force that made American Dream Mainstream

The Crash and the Depression in America during the 1920s devastated people and left them baffled. Their fantasies of power shattered but their determinism didn't. Their reinventing nature of self-improvement never faded away as Franz Kafka- the novelist said when he was asked about America, "I like the Americans because they are healthy and optimistic. I always admired Walt Whitman." During World War II the demand for restoring the economy was raised and focussed on individual wealth, which was not exactly what the American Dream was before World War II. The two wars made people self-centered and now it was not only a matter of 'equality, 'justice' and 'democracy' only but also a quantum leap in individuals. In 1945, America became a centre of world power with strong optimism as there was a hike in employment in industrial productivity and corporate sectors. There was a birth of a new ideology in industrial America- consumerism.

Rise of the American Consumerism

With improvements in economic conditions, people started settling down in cities and building suburbs. The new importance of purchasing material belongings to cheer up their lifestyle became the definition of the new good life. Slowly people started having small family units in the cities and so the material needs also increased. A sense of competition emerged among the Americans and a struggle to retain the American Dream that they achieved in the first place.

Around the 1950s, the dynamics of the American Dream started shifting into American tragedy with the new generation. Arthur Miller considers human tragedy in the modern world as :

The tragedy right is a condition of life, a condition in which the human personality is able to flower and realise itself. The wrong is the condition that suppresses man, perverts the flowing out of his love and creative instinct.

Tragedy enlightens and it must, in that it points the heroic finger at the enemy of man's freedom. The thrust for freedom is the quality in tragedy which exalts. The revolutionary questioning of the stable environment is what terrifies.(67)

People started realising the ill effects of American fantasy. The youths wanted a new life with new ideologies. The generation before them created a world where corruption, indecency, alienation, and a loss of belonging and identity engulfed the Americans. The new generation is seen to embark on a pristine journey, away from the paths that created their previous generations, and make a different and healthy life for them.

Revolutionary Road and Pursuit of Happiness: A Dream Lost and Regained

Revolutionary Road by Richard Yates is his debut novel about suburban life on East Coast. This novel manifests how the 1950s Americans are living and how there has been a new American tragedy that emerged that revolves around marriage. The story revolves around a young ambitious couple Frank and April Wheeler – self-assured, Connecticut suburbanites. At the beginning of the novel, April is shown starring in an am-dram production of *The Petrified Forest* which was so embarrassing ending her aspirations of an acting career, also leading to the bitter fight later that night with Frank. This created a false hope in April which she longs throughout the novel that they will start a new life in Paris which their neighbours took with a sense of doubt that this vague ambition is against the order of the world.

Both leading a mundane hopeless life, April tried to spark up the spirit in Frank to move to France where she saw an opportunity to fulfil their American Dream which resulted in a nightmare. Frank knew it was a meaningless venture. The following conversation between the two makes clear the delusion that April has throughout the novel:

April Wheeler

Don't you see? That's the whole idea! You'll be able to do what you should have been allowed to do seven years ago; you'll have the time. For the first time in your life, you'll have the time to find out what it is you want to do. And when you figure it out, you'll have the time and the freedom, to start doing.

Frank Wheeler

This doesn't seem very realistic.

April Wheeler

No, Frank. This is what's unrealistic. It's unrealistic for a man with a fine mind to go on working year after year at a job he can't stand. Coming home to a place he can't stand, to a wife who's equally unable to stand the same things. And you know what the worst part of it is? Our whole existence here is based on this great premise that we're special. They were superior to the whole thing. But we're not. We're just like everyone else! We bought into the same, ridiculous delusion. That we have to resign from life and settle down the moment we have children. And we've been punishing each other for it.

The only person who sympathizes with April's condition is the insane son of Mr. and Mrs. Givings', John. However, later in the novel, we see that the relationship between the Wheelers started crumbling down leaving April with a sense of disenchantment and taking a fatal step to fulfill her dreams.

Revolutionary Road can be seen as a failed love story of a married couple in modern times but there is the underlying treatment of the American Dream which was the main cause of their disaster. Both the Wheelers were in their struggling period- one accepts the bland suburban life (Frank) and the other was not ready to live a colourless life (April). April's dream took her to such an extent that engulfed her and lose a chord with the real world. Had she been persistent enough with her existing endeavor she wouldn't have faced such a tragic end.

The Wheelers appear to be a modern American couple, smart and beautiful, self-assured and raising two kids; believe that they are different from their neighbours in the Revolutionary Hill Estates. The Wheelers had already attained their American Dream but their over-ambitious nature kept their hunger for more, alive. With a failed acting career, April's urge for a new life became stronger and her dream to move to France revives the love between Frank and her. The moment they started building up their dream, a disillusionment is created between them and their surroundings.

On the other hand, Frank Wheeler who is a salesman at Knox Machines lives a dull life with a faded dream in his heart that one day he'll go to Paris and become something else there. His father worked in

the same company whose life was spent like Willy Loman. Frank feels trapped in his career and so he was reluctant to accept the proposal made by his wife, April in the beginning but is then convinced later. Frank was more practical than April and accepted the tedious life and that is why he returned to life in the real world when he saw that his lost passion cannot be achieved at this point in life, after getting the news that April is pregnant with their third baby. His promotion succumbed him into the eternal struggle of everyday life which resulted in the breakdown of their marriage and the once attainable American Dream was responsible for their degraded state. Hence, the couple who tried to take a revolutionary step to go beyond their American Dream became an irony and their life falls apart leading to April's failure, both in her career and life and also leaving Frank lonely and devastated. The cheerful estate of Revolutionary Road seems to mock Frank as he is never going to have a happy family life, after April's death, "The Revolutionary Hill Estates had not been designed to accommodate a tragedy" (37)

The *Pursuit of Happyness*, which is an autobiographical drama of Chris Gardner tells the story of a homeless salesman. It is a story of an African American man who struggles for one year to get a stable life in San Francisco and prepares himself to fulfill his American Dream. The narrative is simple but what is interesting to note that, how the protagonist remained persistent enough to get through the hardships of life and attained his ultimate goal. Chris dreamt of something big but he also took care of it and nurtured it within him. He did hard work despite all the difficulties that he faced during that period and also took care of his five-year-old son.

The above narratives belong from a different time but grab our attention to the fact that over-ambitious and rigid nature can take you away from reality and the evil side of the American Dream can annihilate people's lives. April's unrealistic approach towards life in *Revolutionary Road* created an illusion that resulted in the slow decaying of her familial relationship. Whereas in *Pursuit of Happyness*, Chris remained in the real world, understood his reality, and worked hard to improve his social position in society. A dream can be fulfilled only if you keep them safe and have believed in it to the extent that it doesn't become an obsession. A dialogue from the film supports this idea:

Christopher Gardner: You got a dream...
You gotta protect it. People can't do
somethin' themselves, they wanna tell

you you can't do it. If you want
somethin', go get it. Period.

American Dream: Through the eyes of the rising generation

The film by Sean Penn- *Into the Wild* is set against the backdrop of contemporary American society, based on true events. The film has a young protagonist – Christopher McCandless, who has graduated with flying colours but when he is encountered with the corrupt modern world and the superficial nature of society, he decided to embrace nature and understand life outside the material world. He understood how shallow people have become in the modern world and considered "money, power is an illusion". He took a road "less travelled by"; different from what his parents wanted him to trail. His parents had everything that they dreamt of- a house, a car, a stable job, and money. But what they lost in the process of achieving these materialistic possessions is- the purity of soul and peace of mind. The new generation wants a world free of immorality which was contributed by the evil side of the American Dream.

The film focuses on the theme of transcendentalism and recognizes the present problems in society. Through the protagonist, the film urges us to believe in the fact that we still have time to change ourselves and make a better world for future generations. We can divert our dream into the spiritual and adventurous spirit of humankind like the ancestors of America and improve our way of life. Going back to the raw beauty of nature will help us to restore humanity, seek true knowledge, and will help people to perceive the true nature of life. McCandless's journey shows us how the young mind is looking out for a different world where their 'dreams' will not just have a material aspect.

A somewhat similar stance is taken by Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*. A modern, coming-of-age fiction written by J.D. Salinger was published in 1951. The protagonist is a 16-year-old boy who is depressed and disgusted by the superficiality of society. His cynical perspective about life gives him existential angst and suffers from alienation. He dreams of "an innocent world where he will be the catcher in the rye field, saving the children from losing their innocence before they fall" (31). Holden is rebellious around phonies because he doesn't want to walk on the stepping stones laid by the shallow elders. He has a well-established family; his father is a wealthy, successful corporate lawyer. Holden also mentions that his father wishes one day he would attend Yale or Princeton later in life.

Holden doesn't want to live an urban life, like his parents. He wants to break free from the values and moralities that his parents hold. As his name suggests- Holden Caulfield, wants to hold the innocent children falling from the rye 'field' so that the world remains as pure, innocent, and humble as children:

I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff—I mean if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye and all. (47)

This dream remains impossible in the real world, where everybody dreams of the American Dream, which sometimes becomes unachievable as well. This narrative is a critique of modern society after World War -2 which was preoccupied with the American Dream that Salinger considered meaningless. This contempt is shown through Holden, who is a non-conformist in the novel. The famous American novelist commented, "When Holden attempted to enter the human race, there was no human race there."

Conclusion

The elusiveness of the American Dream has made it more appealing to people. The American ethos-American Dream plays a psychic role in people and influences them to search for a better life. This can make an individual successful or it can be responsible for their failures. This dream has an undeniable power to compel people to such an extent that they lose hold of reality and gets succumbed to its pernicious nature. This force has destructive nature and if not controlled judiciously, the results can be detrimental. This can be your wish fulfilment but one has to know how to ride a horse. It has brought tragedy in most of the common people's lives over the past few years. Eugene O'Neill anticipated that the price of undefeated materialism would be an absolute American tragedy, "most appalling yet written or unwritten". But the contemporary modern world wants something sustainable which can bring peace and restore morality. The new generation needs a world with real people having real emotions. Thus, the older generation needs to make way for them so that their life gets a meaning which was lost to the older ones.

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