

### Abstract

American dream as an ideology has blinded most Americans from being aware of the inequities done towards them. Such an issue can be found in a novel entitled “*Behold the Dreamers*” by Imbolo Mbue (2016), the winner of PEN/Faulkner Award in 2017, as the object of this study. Seeing American dream which promises a better life, as this novel portrays, African Immigrant couple, as the protagonists, who come to America for chasing a dream of a better life but in the end leave back to Cameroon, their homeland, because of the unfound dream. This study aims to show how American Dream is perceived as a false ideal by the main characters in Imbolo Mbue’s “*Behold the Dreamers*”. In identifying the underlying values and ideology in this novel, the writer of this paper employs Greimas’ narrative structure as the main theory. Further, the discovered ideology is examined by using Gramsci’s ideas about hegemony as the secondary theory. In the conclusion, it is discovered that the whole story of this novel shows how the *actants* of protagonists take the quest departing from the illusion to the reality in pursuing their dream. The illusion that is referred to the promises of American dream blinds them from being aware of the exploitation and inequities. However, in the end, American dream is realized as a false consciousness or a lie that they have been fed to be controlled and put them to stay in the subordinate position by the ruling class.

Keywords: *american dream, false ideal, hegemony, ideology, narratology*

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background of the Study

America is a nation that honors so greatly the idea of liberty and equality. As liberal-democratic societies, America prizes highly the equality which they refer to justice (Messmore, 2012). The idea of liberty is proven by the birth of American dream which develops in American society (Roshadi 2012, 1). American dream is rooted deeply in the Declaration of Independence of American that states that: “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain rights that among these are life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness”. American dream is the idea or belief in which people are promised equality, freedom and opportunity (Barone and Barnier, 2020). This promise has attracted many people, Americans or non Americans to believe in America as a land of opportunity.

In the reality, there are some inequities as the facts that happen in American from its socioeconomic conditions. We can strongly refer to economic crisis in America as the influential phenomenon. The economic crisis that happened in 2008 gave the effects to socioeconomic situation in society. One of the effects is the income inequality and rates of poverty increase (Dufour & Orhangazi, 2014). This situation implicates the gaps among classes, between the poor and the rich will be more distant. The capitalists are still safe with government policies from what Defour and Orhangazi (2014) said in *Capitalism, Crisis and Class: The U.S.*

*Economy after the 2007-2008 Financial Crisis*, so the capitalist can get recovery quickly.

The other inequities also come from Tyson (2015, 55) who reveals the fact of socioeconomic realities in America about how taxing is done so unfairly towards middle class who pays the most taxes by the wealthy who possesses the power. Most of the taxes run into the pocket of the wealthy. These inequities are related to the ideology that blinds the middle class in America. They are blinded by American Dream as their ideology which tells them that being poor is the consequence of laziness and shiftlessness and the financial success can only be achieved by having initiatives and hard works. This ideology is designed as the tool to control the other classes, the majority, by the capitalist as the dominant class in order to encourage more people to engage in American industries. In other words, it is the capitalist who obtains more benefit from this situation, while working class suffers from it (Roshadi 2012, 4).

American dream is one of the issues that often appear in many artworks such literary works and films. Some literary works are found to depict the existence of American dream in America. In his research, Izaguirre (2014) examines the developed meanings of American Dream in American literature from one generation to another. The chosen literary works are *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin (1792)*, *Ralph Waldo Emerson's Self-Reliance*, *Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*. Mostly those literary works capture the values of American dream from individual's hard work, self-determination for upward mobility personal freedom and personal

fulfillment with different embassies in each work. In 1906, *The Jungle*, a novel written by Upton Sinclair portrays African immigrants in America who are influenced by American dream to pursue a promised better life only by working hard. However, that promise hardly comes to be true (Roshadi, 2012).

In 2016, a novel entitled “*Behold the Dreamers*” written by Imbolo Mbue brings a story about African immigrants as the protagonists who come to America during the 2008 economic crisis (Evans, 2017). In 2017, this novel won Faulkner award for fiction. It is composed of some complex issues such as marriage, immigration, class, race and American dreams (Cantor, 2017). As the subject of this study, this novel is about a couple, Jende and Neni, who is desperate with their difficult circumstance as lower class in his hometown, Cameroon, and finally decides to migrate to America since they are told that it is a promised land with its better opportunities to pursue their dream, a new better life. Ironically, the dreams stay dreams. In reality during 2008 economic crisis, they find no better life after the hard work they have done in America.

Portraying America through several issues, this novel has been examined by several studies. As one of dominant issues, immigration was ever conducted by a previous study entitled “*Acculturation and African Identity in Imbolo Mbue’s Behold the Dreamers*” by Mary Linda Vivian Onuoha. In her research, she examines acculturation and identity of some characters specially protagonists as immigrants in America. In her finding, the main characters never find it easy to fit within American culture, so they go back to their root by bonding with their African relatives (2019). The other previous study was conducted by Wyman in her short

article entitled “*Feeding on Truth; Living with Lies: The Role of Food in Imbolo Mbue’s Behold the Dreamers*” that identifies the structure of truth and lies from the food by tracing gustatory themes. Its finding is identified with the main characters comparing between America and Cameroon in term of food with its price. The food in America is more expensive than Cameroon but they cannot neglect America is more promising. (2019).

Talking about the same issue, American Dream, Jyothsna in her article, “*The Betrayal of the American Dream and Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby*” examines the existence and failure of American dream from the protagonist perspective. By using mediation approach, she discovered that the betrayal appears through some internal and external aspects, as the used variables, in the protagonist, Gatsby himself. From the internal aspect, Gatsby is not able to identify the distinction between his spiritual ideals and the reality around him. From the external aspect he is betrayed by his surroundings that stop him from his dreams (2017).

Those recent studies above are believed to provide some specific insights regarding the context of this novel from the previous studies and American dream from the related studies. However, with further identification, the study conducted here focuses on the American dream as an ideology with the different portrayals and patterns which are affected by unstable social condition in the *Behold the Dreamers*. The main characters have been attracted to America with its ideology American dream which later affects their consciousness and blinds them from being aware of the harsh reality in America that is full of iniquities and unfairness. In other word, this study aims to reveal American dream as failure and myth ironically

from the main characters' perspective since this ideology is designed by those in power, the capitalist, for their own benefits. Those aspects or issues will be explained by examining the internal and external aspects within this novel in chosen perspectives or approach.

The chosen approach of this study comes from A.J Greimas' narrative structure as the main theory to examine the issue. Through applying A.J Greimas' narrative structure, this novel is examined by identifying all the sequences in *actantial* model, the plot structure in functional model and the values and ideology in four-term homology. The application of narrative structure in literary analysis enables this research to identify the meaning of the text. The elaboration of the meaning, at the later stage requires another theory (Karnanta, 2015, 180). Therefore, this research further involves Gramsci's ideas as the secondary theory in order to reveal American dream as the false consciousness or ideal. In his reinterpretation of Marxist ideology theory, Antonio Gramsci (1971) represents his notion of hegemony that manifests a great deal of complexity to the concept of ideology. More detailed explanation about the tenets used from the theories for this study will be placed in the subchapter, theoretical framework.

## **1.2 Statements of the problems**

1. How is American dream perceived as a false consciousness by the main characters Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*?

### 1.3 Objectives of the Study

1. To show how American dream is perceived as a false consciousness by the main characters in Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*.

### 1.4 Significance

As general patterns and depictions in many literary works, American dream promises a better life for its believers who are eventually betrayed without realizing that truth. As the object of this study, *Behold the Dreamers* novel shows the other depictions of American dream as the hidden ideology inside the novel. Ironically American dream does not fulfill its promises for its believers and is seen and realized as a myth.

By using Narrative Structure as the main theory in identifying the hidden values and ideologies and Marxism as the secondary, the writer of this study expects that this study would be able to provide a new perspective in reading the novel and the result of this study can help the readers' perspectives develop their critical reading and thinking towards literary works from their structure and raise the awareness about false consciousness which still becomes normal ways of life in society. The fact is that people are actually blinded by the ideology that is perceived unconsciously. Since not many journal articles discuss this novel, the writer expects that this study would be able to fill the gap.

Furthermore, the writer also observes that not many researches who use to combine Narrative Structure and Marxism in order to bring this issue into literary works. Therefore it is expected that this conducted study a new contribution in reviewing social issues especially from Marxist perspectives in a matter of

developing knowledge. In the end this study could be helpful as the insights and references for other studies which talk about the same issues or object specially in the Faculty of Humanities Universitas Airlangga.

### 1.5 Definitions of Key Terms

**Hegemony:** a dominance of a class toward other classes with or without a violence threat, so the ideas dictated by dominant class can be accepted naturally by other classes (Stoddart, 2007).

**American Dream:** American dream is an ideology, a belief system and it is not a natural or innate ways of seeing the word (Tyson 2015, 55).

**False Ideal / Consciousness:** an ideology that functions to cover or mask its deficiency (Tyson 2015, 56).

**Ideology:** the ways in which the interests and ideas of dominant economic class are adopted by the society as a whole (Stoddart, 2007).

**Narratology:** structuralist approach that investigate the inner of “workings of literary texts in minute detail” (Tyson 2015, 212)