

An Analysis of American Dream in Chang-Rae Lee's Dystopian Novel *on Such A Full Sea*

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the idea of American Dream in Chang-Rae Lee's dystopian novel entitled *On Such A Full Sea*. It examines how American Dream manifests in the text. To meet the purpose, Cullen's (2009) theory and indicators of American Dream are used for this research. This research uses qualitative approach in form of textual analysis. The findings reveal that American Dream is not static, as it is always changing. American Dream in the text manifests through the formations of negotiations. These negotiations are in forms of alternatives for their American Dream that appears through the characters' process of self-learning as they go through their life journey. It is found that there are three out of four indicators of American Dream that appear in the text: freedom, equality, and upward mobility. This study also finds that according to the text, happiness can be attained, even though the American Dreams mentioned are not achieved. Through the characters' process of self-learning, it is found that being useful for people around, being thankful for what is already owned, and being with loved ones in tough times can result in happiness.

Keywords: *American Dream, freedom, equality, happiness, upward mobility, dystopian literature*

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, dystopian novel is one of people's most wanted fictions. Basically, the term "dystopia" refers to the Greek words "dys" and "topos" that are translated as "bad place" (Gerhard, 2012). Dystopian literature commonly pictures a negative and desolated society which suffers unfortunate living and an entity has main control over it (Wackfelt, 2012). It can be said that this genre of fiction focuses on a society's danger which is effected severely by flawed ruling of an organization. There are many novels that bring this theme in their story; such as *Uglies* (2005) written by Scott Westerfield, *Hunger Games* (2008) by Suzanne Collins, and *Divergent* (2011) by Veronica Roth. These books have the characteristics that a dystopian novel must possess. For instance, as mentioned in *Readwritethink* (2006), the story must involve propaganda to control the society, uniqueness and individuality are restricted, the citizens are under official's inspection, natural world is reformed, and the citizens are treated as if they are not human being.

Discussing the era of dystopia might not be complete without utopia (Gopal, 2015). Utopia is an opposite idea from dystopia, a land where everything is perfect (Ferris, 2014). He further mentions that in this case, the desire of living in a perfect world is possessed by every human being. Therefore, a utopic idea emerges, the American Dream. American Dream requires people to work hard in order to have a fulfilled life, both financially and psychologically. Many people come to America with this ideal purpose. While in fact, Murphy (2010) states that, "Though the idea of the "American Dream" is typically seen as a glimmer of hope and happiness, is it really just a false pretense for disappointment" (p. 1). The American Dream is considered as a false promise—the wish of having a better life in a better place is offered— as if it can come into realization; while it is not as easy as it is expected. In Addition, American Dream notion appears in many dystopian novels. For instance, in the novel *Divergent* (2011) by Veronica Roth, the idea of a perfect world is offered in a post-apocalyptic and

reformed society by dividing it into five fractions. Gerald F. Fitzgeralds' *The Great Gatsby* put the American Dream as the main theme in the novel and Harris (2014) categorizes this novel as a dystopian, "for its treatment of a society dominated by wealth and material pleasure and its disillusioned portrayal of the American Dream" (p. 19). In his view, a dystopic situation might appear although the fantasy of living a wealthy life is possible, since there is always hardship that comes along the way. This shows that the idea of American Dream might come along in a dystopic story.

Another novel that contains the theme of American Dream in a dystopian situation is a novel written by Chang-Rae Lee in 2014 entitled *On Such A Full Sea*. Lee is one of New York Times version best selling authors for his novels (New York Times, 2014). This novel is written by Lee based on his own experience going to the factory towns outside of Shenzhen and passing by the neglected area in Baltimore. This experience led him to keep remembering about the condition in

both towns (Leyslon, 2014). To this date, one of the analyses about this novel found is 'On Such a Full Sea and the Logic of Redevelopment' by Strombeck (2015). He discusses Lee's idea about how urban redevelopment by China immigrants in Baltimore (it is called B-Mor in the novel) is built in the novel and how it takes effect on economic development and immigration in the region. Different from this previous study about the book, this research tries to look at this novel in a different point of view regarding on society's American Dream achievement in a reestablished world.

In addition, Lee's choice on using first person plural 'we' as the narrator in the novel can be considered unusual for novels published in 2000s. This choice of narrator presents a notion that the dystopic story is experienced by many numbers of society in the novel. These are the reasons why this novel is chosen for this research to further study the theme of American Dream in a dystopian novel.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study attempted to analyze the idea of American Dream that appears in Lee's novel *On Such A Full Sea* by using qualitative approach in a form of textual analysis. This research also employed Cullen's (2009) theory of American Dream, specifically the indicators of American Dream. Cullen (2009) stated that the dream of a good life involves freedom, equality, upward mobility, and home ownership. Thus, the research focused on how the characters in the novel dealt with the American Dream they had, and whether or not in the end they accomplished their dreams based on Cullen's indicators of American Dream.

Subjects: The data for this research were in forms of textual evidence collected from Chang-Rae Lee's dystopian novel *On Such A Full Sea* as taken from words, phrases, sentences of the novel. The characters' experience about the American Dream were selected as the basis of this research. Other intrinsic elements of the novel such as settings or plot was put into the analysis to support the research.

Procedures: This research is guided by these following steps:

1. Understanding the idea of American Dream and the indicators of American Dream by Cullen (2009)

The theory and the indicators of American Dream were used in order to support the research regarding to the American Dream appears in the novel.

2. Identifying the characters who have American Dream

The characters that were identified for this research were Quig, Oliver, and the narrator 'We' from the novel *On Such A Full Sea*. These characters' American Dream was the focus for the research.

3. Classifying the American Dream had by the characters in the novel;

The characters' American Dream were juxtaposed analyzed by using Cullen's (2009) indicators of American Dream: Upward mobility, equality, freedom, and home ownership.

4. Identifying how the characters struggle for their American Dream.

Each character has different ways of handling and struggling for their American Dream. Their ways of achieving their American Dream were described and interpreted.

5. Making conclusion on how does American Dream manifest in Chang-Rae Lee's dystopian novel *On Such A Full Sea*.

The interpretation then were used to draw conclusion on how American Dream appears in the novel and whether the characters achieved their American Dream.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study finds that American Dream manifests in *On Such A Full Sea* through the formation of negotiations. The American Dreams in the text are constructed as entities which change according to contexts. The text indicates that American Dream is not static as it is always in progress and changing as the characters go through their life journey and find alternatives to their American Dreams. This analysis is conducted based on the characters in the novel: Quig, Oliver, and the narrator 'We'. They live in a

society divided into three classes: upper-class, working-class, and lower-class. These classes are placed into different districts: Charter Village for upper class, B-Mor for working class, and the open counties for lower-class. The characters in this novel have at least one American Dream. Some of the characters' American Dream is achieved and some are not. This novel shows that American Dream is negotiable and the negotiations happen through characters' process of self-learning. At the end, these negotiations cause the characters to change or to give up on their dreams. From this research, it can be said that American Dream is a utopic concept. This research is conducted with reference to Cullen's (2009) indicators of American Dream.

The data indicate that there are three characters, Quig, Oliver, and the narrator 'We', who negotiate their dreams through self-learning. Self-learning refers to the learning done by oneself which happens as the characters go through their life experiences. Through self-learning, the characters realize that their

American Dream The first character is Quig. Quig is a Charter veterinarian who wants to be successful in his veterinary business and to lead a luxurious life in Charter village. His self-learning process occurs through the troubles he encounters while he is living his American Dream. Finally, Quig negotiates and changes his American Dream turns into a person who only seeks for life security with no wealth which is lower in standard than his previous American Dream. The second character is Oliver. Oliver is a skillful swimmer and a violin player of B-Mor who wants to be a doctor in Charter village. Oliver discovers his true dreams when he is taken as a Charter citizen. Instead of being an athlete and a musician, Oliver negotiates what he has trained (to be a swimmer and violin player) and turns into a wealthy successful doctor and a medical businessman who lives in Charter Village. The third character, 'We', is a group of B-Mor citizens who wants to be free from working-class rules and climbs to the upper-class village and becomes Charter citizens. 'We' negotiates their American Dream

through their struggles living in B-Mor that instead of chasing their dreams, it is better for them to stay at where they are as workers of B-Mor. The findings about the characters' negotiated dreams through self-learning will be explained below. To find out how American Dream manifests in *On Such A Full Sea* has become the main purpose of this research. Based on this research's findings, it can be said that American Dream is not static and it appears as an entity that changes depending on the context. In this research's case, American Dream changes through formations of negotiations that appear from characters' self-learning process as they go through their life journey. The negotiations are in form of alternatives that this text provides for each characters' American Dream.

According to Cullen (2009), in order to reach American Dream, one must fulfill at least one of the indicators of American Dream such as freedom, quality, upward mobility, and home ownership. It appears that three of the indicators of American Dream found in this novel: freedom, equality, and upward mobility. This

study shows that each characters basically chase the same dreams: being able to live happily in the upper-class society and being able to decide for their own lives. While at some point American Dream according to Cullen (2009) means having wealth and social status, this text shows that American Dream means happiness. On the other hand, this text invites young adults to realize that happiness can be achieved from simple things rather than wealth and social status. Since this text shows that social status and money are the things that can lead people to have greed, there are alternatives offered in order to reach happiness such as: being with loved ones in tough times, being helpful for others, and being thankful for what is already owned.

Any realm, any country, or any territory must have 'the ruling organization' called the government or the authorities. This study shows that American Dream is not easy to achieve when there are authorities controlling us. This is exactly how dystopic world looks like, where people's freedom and equality have

no meanings in front of the ruling organization. People's steps are limited as the authorities have rules for them to keep the society organized. They are limited from their dream of climbing the social ladder by giving irrational high standard to be qualified to move to the upper-class district, for instance. This limit results in an anxious society, where they are worried with what is going to happen to them if they cannot fulfill the standard. The findings show that limitation made by the authorities also lead the society to have less confidence on their dreams. This means that American Dream of equality and freedom owned by the society cannot be achieved. Thus, a negotiation towards freedom and equality appears in this text. The findings show that even though we are living in a world where achieving personal freedom is difficult, we can still be happy. Being with loved ones (family and friends) can help people to gain their happiness.

It can be said that the dream of climbing the social class (upward mobility) means reaching the top of social status and earn much money.

The findings show that: first, in order to reach the dream of upward mobility, in some case, it requires ‘a privilege as an upper-class citizen’. Second, this American Dream can potentially result in greed.

Firstly, the privilege as an upper-class citizen means that a person is already live at the top of the social class, he lives with high social status and have a good lifestyle. This privilege gives advantages where a person gets better and proper education and potentially having successful business right after finishing college which in other words, he is luckier than those who live in working-class and lower-class society. Unfortunately, this privilege does not introduce the process of ‘rags to riches’, or starting from zero as mentioned in Franklin’s story (Izaguirre, 2014). At the same time, it appears that this privilege also a disadvantage to those who are originally an upper-class born, because when he experiences failures, he will not feel familiar with the situation This can result in a possibility of failing over and over again. This privilege also does not

belong to those who were not born in upper-class family, then American Dream will be hard to be achieved this way. Hence, social status and money become literally a dream, which means ‘unrealistic or self-deluding fantasy’ (Oxford Dictionary, 2010). Therefore, another alternative is needed for someone to be happy, which becomes a negotiation towards the American Dream. Since not everybody can achieve happiness through American Dream this easily, there has to be something that can still give happiness for everyone, that can be followed by each individuals. This text provides an alternative to gain happiness beside from money and social status. For instance, this study finds that happiness can be attained when one is being useful for people around. It can be said that when a person is useful for his surrounding, his surrounding will also feel happy. With this condition, social status and money are no longer become necessary to attain happiness.

Secondly, this study also tells us that an achieved American Dream can lead someone to greed. Once one achieves an American Dream, he will

be triggered to reach higher and be bigger from time to time. The basic definition of American Dream is 'to have fulfilled life' and upward mobility means reaching the top of social status and earn much money. The problem is, when someone is at the highest position of social class, he will have power. By having power, the person can do anything, both legal or illegal however he wants. This is what happens to our society today, where people can do whatever they want, misused the power in their hands (e.g. corruption or human trafficking). Ideally, this is not what American Dream in intended to do. Once again, the American Dream is negotiated. By having power, money and social status, one can be greedy and always forcing things to advantage him more with whatever reason he has. This kind of action does may endanger his career, his successful life, and even his happy family. It appears that we must be wise dealing with money and power. Therefore, to avoid someone being greedy, the findings show that one can be thankful for what he has, especially

when he is able to climb to the top of social ladder.

It can be concluded that American Dream manifests in this novel as an entity that is not static, it changes depending on the context. In this novel, American Dream changes through formations of negotiations that appear from characters' self-learning process as they go through their life journey. The negotiations are in form of alternatives that this text provides for each characters' American Dream.

To sum, this text negotiates American Dream by providing alternatives to the happiness even though the American Dream of having social status and much money cannot be achieved. This text shows young adults that happiness can be attained in realistic ways, such as: being useful for people around, being thankful for what is already owned, or being with loved ones in tough times.

This chapter has presented the findings and discussion of the research. It explains how American Dream manifests in Chang-Rae Lee's dystopian novel *On Such A Full Sea*.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis, it is concluded that the findings of this study have answered the research questions. The findings of this research reveal that American Dream manifests in *On Such A Full Sea* through formation of negotiations. These negotiations are in forms of alternatives that are provided by the text through the characters' process of self-learning as they go through their life journey. It is also found that American Dream is not static since it is changeable and negotiable.

This text tries to convey that even simpler things than American Dream can give happiness. It appears that happiness can be attained in realistic ways when American Dream cannot be achieved, such as: being useful for people around, being thankful for what is already owned, and being with loved ones in tough times. It also tells that there are responsibilities to take once a person have power and money.

As this text provides alternative for the characters' American Dreams, this text also offers young adults to see that social

status, money, and wealth is not worth fighting for when they endanger our life security. Those items are not everything compared to what we can have once we believe in ourselves: happiness.

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