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American Dream?

The election of the first African American president brought to light questions about how multicultural is the land that Obama considered as “always a land of immigrants” (Staff). While some vehemently claim that unity and homogenization are the basic components of a strong nation, others “emphasize the multicultural heritage of the United States” (Clark 151). Exploring America from the perspective of minorities, Milcha Sanchez-Scott’s play, “The Cuban Swimmer,” and Junot Diaz’s novel, *Drown*, exposes the arduous journey that illegal immigrants face. While *Drown*, echoing William A. V. Clark’s paper, “Multiculturalism and its Challenges- The Impact of Undocumented Immigration,” point that “without economic incorporation there can be no multicultural society” (Clark 151), has a pessimistic message uncovering the illusory nature of the American Dream, “The Cuban Swimmer” has a more optimistic message showing that even though there are many challenges to be overcome, the American Dream is achievable.

Exposing the falsity of the American Dream, *Drown* brings to light the underworld in which immigrants live. In the story “Drown,” Yunior states:

The water feels good. Starting at the deep end I glide over the slick-tiled bottom without kicking up a spume or making splash. … I can still go far without coming up. While everything above is loud and bright, everything below is whispers. (Diaz 93)

While swimming, Yunior compares his experience in the pool with the way American society is organized. Representing the American Dream, the line of water is the boundary between the mainstream society and the underworld that immigrants live in. Bringing to light the harsh reality of a Latino immigrant, Diaz points out that in America not everybody has the life described by the Dream. In fact, Diaz points that immigrants live in a sub-world invisible to the mainstream society.

Similarly invisible to the mainstream society, the symbolic character of Ysrael represents the inner feelings of fear and hope that immigrants have toward America and the American Dream. While Padre Lou asked Ysrael what he thought about the operation, Diaz states:

He nods but he doesn’t know what he should think. He’s scared of the operations and scared that nothing will change, that the Canadians doctors will fail like the santeras his mother hired, who called every spirit in the celestial directory for help. (Diaz 159)

Analogous to an immigrant coming to America, Ysrael was uncertain if he would achieve his dreams in this new land. He feared that maybe his new life in America would be similar to the one he lived in the Dominican Republic, but he also hoped for change.

Exposing the conflicting feelings of fear and hope, Ysrael also demonstrates the difficulties that immigrants have adapting to their new cultures. In the same manner the letters from familia worked for Papi as a reminder of his past, Ysrael’s dreams are a symbol of the difficulties that an immigrant experiences while trying to assimilate to another culture. Diaz states that while Ysrael was sleeping he dreams that he’s being attacked by a pig, “[w]hen he awakens he’s screaming blood braids down his neck; he’s bitten his tongue and it swells and he cannot sleep again until he tells himself to be a man” (Diaz 158). In other words, Diaz sends a clear message saying that there’s no way to break free from the past. Even though it has been years that Ysrael’s accident happened, he has difficulties overcoming it.

Further exposing the hardship that immigrants experience, the story “Negocios” narrates Papi’s struggles in between his old promises and his new American life. Diaz points that:

Each scenario his friend proposed ended with Papi’s familia living safely within his sight, showering him with love. Papi had difficulty separating the two threads of his friend’s beliefs, that of negocios and that of familia, and in the end the two became impossibly intertwined. With hum of his new life Papi should have found easy to bury the memory of us but neither his conscience, nor the letters from home that found him wherever he went, would allow it. (Diaz 191)

In other words, Papi was so fascinated with the American Dream and what it could provide him that he forgot his promises and abandoned his family. Even though Papi just experiences disgrace in America, he still fiercely pursued the American Dream. Similarly to a person drowning in a pool, Papi was so focused in achieving the Dream that he forgets his origins and ends up losing everything he had.

Similar to Papi’s experience in America, Eduardo, Margarita’s papi, is also drowned into the American Dream image. Representing the Dream, the “two thousand dollars and a gold cup” (Sanchez-Scott 1407) made Eduardo sightless to the risks that he was exposing his family. Sanchez-Scott narrates:

Eduardo: … Ay cono! It’s an oil slick! …

On the next stroke Margarita comes up all covered in black oil.

Margarita: Papi! Papi! …!

… Aida: Apurate, Eduardo, move … what’s wrong with you … no me oiste, get my daughter out of the water.

Eduardo: (softly) We can’t touch her. If we touch her, she’s disqualified. (Sanchez-Scoot 1409)

This quote shows Eduardo’s greediness. Even though his daughter was swimming in an ocean similar to the “La Brea tar pits” (Sanchez-Scott 1410), Eduardo didn’t consider taking her out of the water. Blinded by the Dream, Eduardo jeopardized Margarita’s life and the family’s well-being.

Despite Eduardo’s fixation with the American Dream, the Suarez family exposes a multicultural facet of America. The constant change between English and Spanish in the dialogues of “The Cuban Swimmer” makes evident the coexistence of both cultures:

Eduardo: Uh… uh… uh, un momentico … mi hija … Your papi’s got everything under control, understand? …

Simon: Wow, Papi! We’re on TV, man! …

Abuela: Alo America! Viva mi Margarita, viva todo los Cubanos en los Estados Unidos! … (Sanchez-Scott 1407-8)

While Simon and Margarita speak most of time in English, Abuela, the grandmother and the one who probably spent most time in Cuba, speaks almost all the time in Spanish. Eduardo is in between the two cultures. By depicting the Suarez family in this way, Sanchez-Scott emphasizes the multicultural side of America.

Exemplifying multiculturalism in the United States, “the crew of La Havana” (Sanchez-Scott 1407) is an example that the American Dream is achievable. Despite the many challenges that the Suarez family encounters during the competition- including the near death of Margarita- they achieve their objectives; they win the Wrigley Invitational Women’s Swim. When Margarita reaches Santa Catalina, Mel announces, “[t]his is indeed a miracle! It’s a resurrection! Margarita Suarez, with flotilla of boats to meet her, is now walking on the waters, through the breakers” (Sanchez-Scott 1415). Through its magical realist genre, “The Cuban Swimmer” sends a clear message that the American Dream is accessible for all.

Contrasting with Sanchez-Scott’s view toward the American Dream, Clark believes that the Dream is a fallacy. Clark notes:

Their [illegal immigrants] status is marginal within the society at large even though they may be fulfilling important roles in local labor markets. They are often residentially isolated, especially those with limited skills and poor language acquisition. And, it is the latter [illegal immigrants] who are even less likely (than legal immigrants) to be able to acquire the economic and cultural gains that will led to assimilation, or enable them to participate in a multi-cultural society. (Clark 150)

In other words, the system, in addition to racism, makes difficult for unauthorized immigrants to be assimilated and, in certain way, achieve the American Dream.

Further emphasizing the falsity of the American Dream, Clark makes clear that America is not multicultural, but cultural pluralist. Clark notes:

The question which naturally emerges … is whether the US and … some European nations … are developing ‘quasi-slave’ societies. Clearly, they are not slave societies in the sense that that these populations are coerced, but at the same time, these populations are clearly paid much less than others in the labor market. (Clark 153)

Clark’s point is that the system “emphasize[s] mutual corporation rather than mutual difference” (Clark 152). In other words, America wants immigrants not because it will benefit from “the interrelationships between the various cultural groups and their potential for shared common experiences” (Clark 152), but because it will enjoy cheap labor.

Contrasting with Clark’s and Diaz’s views toward immigration, Sanchez-Scott’s magical realist play, “The Cuban Swimmer,” exposes how the genre of a text can influence the portrayal of a situation. While “The Cuban Swimmer” has an optimistic end with Margarita “walking on the waters” (1415), *Drown* and “Multiculturalism and its Challenges- The Impact of Undocumented Immigration” have pessimistic, and maybe more realistic, endings. Since magical realism enables the characters to overcome any barrier, it doesn’t depict the reality. Echoing its name, magical realism is magical. Therefore, an academic paper or a novel are a better portrayal of the reality.

Depicting reality accurately, Diaz and Clark make clear that the American Dream is an illusion. Although “The Cuban Swimmer” argues against this point, its magical realist genre makes its arguments weaker. Moreover, my experience as a Latino immigrant has shown me that America is full of Yuniors. Despite the fact that I came to America legally, which in Clark’s eyes increase my chances of being assimilated, I can say with confidence that the Dream is pretty much an illusion for most immigrants. Maybe due to the fact that I consider myself a victim of what James J. Rawls categorized as the paradox of expectations, I believe that, currently, the only factor that makes America competitive in relation to other countries is the mix of desperation and hard work that immigrants put toward building the America that they once dreamed of.

Works Cited

# Staff. “Obama said America was always a land of immigrants” Online posting. 8 July 2008. 19 March 2009. <<http://talkradionews.com/2008/07/obama-said-america-was-always-a-land-of-immigrants/>>.