

The Injustice Facing Latino Immigrants in Achieving The American Dream in Cristina Henriquez's Novel The Book of Unknown

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Abstract

United States of America is known as a country that promises its people or immigrants who come to America to become successful by providing 'American Dream' as the country's national ethos. These people are given equal chances to bring out their dreams and aspirations. However, American Dream is not always the dream for everyone as experienced by the characters in Christina Henriques' novel *The Book of Unknown Americans*. Issue of injustice shadows immigrants who are in search of this dream. Facing problems of injustice such as racism, different treatment of immigrants, and sexual harassment are inevitable for these Latino people when they first come to the United States. This study is aimed at discussing the failures and injustices that Latino immigrants' characters of the novel must face when they attempt of achieving the American Dream. The method used in this study is qualitative method. The data of this research are in the forms of language and its discourse. Stuart Hall's Theory of Representation is used to analyze the research data. The results of this study show that not all-American dreams can be fulfilled easily, in particular for Latino immigrant characters in the novel. What have been faced by these characters are significant experiences to learn for anyone who wants to pursue their dream in United States of America.

Keywords: American Dream, Latino Immigrants, National Ethos, Representation

I. INTRODUCTION

America is considered a country where people are free to dream and make those dreams come true. Millions of immigrants have moved to America as they want to live out their own version of American Dream. The American Dream is a great national suggestion for everyone to have reasonable opportunities and prospects of succeeding in life by working hard to develop their full potential.¹ Latino immigrant is one of the most populous immigrants in the United States, whether they are documented (legal) or undocumented (illegal). In America about 69% of the immigrants came from Japan, Indonesia, China, Korea, and partly is dominated by China.² Latino immigrants (hence Latinos) are among the most populous immigrants in America. Be it legal or illegal, Latinos have more than doubled their presence in America in the last two

¹ Lawrence R. Samuel, *The American dream: A cultural history*. (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2012) at 68; Michael Schudson, "In American Literary History" (2004) 16:3 At 566-573.

² Yo Jackson, *Encyclopedia of Multicultural Psychology*, (London, Sage Publications, inc., 2006).

decades because according to the US Census Bureau, the total population of Latino origin in America in July 2018 reached 59.9 million (18%) ranked second of the immigrant numbers.³

This novel describes the struggles that immigrants in America have to go through, whether it is getting used to learning a new cultural habit, new language, and making an adjustment to new weather, etc. This novel includes some of these immigrant stories. One of the narrations of the struggle of Latino immigrants in America is depicted in a novel written by Cristina Henriquez, a writer whose father is from Panama, entitled *The Book of Unknown Americans*. This novel was published in 2014 but the setting of the story narrated the life of America in 2008. America has been known as the “land of opportunity”, i.e., America is a place where it is possible for us to achieve anything such as having a better life, a better job, etc. This is known as American dream, a dream that gives a sense of hope and confidence to fulfill human desires.⁴ The experience of fulfilling this dream is the one that the characters of the novels have experienced. They are immigrants from Mexico who come to America and have dreams and aspirations they want to achieve. The characters in the novel include: Arturo Rivera, Alma Rivera, Maribel Rivera, Rafael Toro, Major Toro, Gustavo Milhojas, Nelia Zafon, and Quisqueya Solis. These characters come to America to pursue their dreams. Instead of obtaining their dream, in the end, they prove that American Dreams are not easy to achieve. None of these characters lived the successful and meaningful lives in America suggested by the pointlessness of American Dream. This article is aimed to analyze how these characters pursue American Dream and how each character is affected by this United States' national ethos. They have to face problems of injustice such as racism, differential treatment of immigrants, and sexual harassment, they fight for it and have to accept their destiny.

Based on the explanation, the representation theory of Stuart Hall⁵ is applied in this research. This theory is suitable to be applied to reveal the ideology of the American Dream which will be revealed through the discourses contained in the narratives, events, and dialogue characters in the novel *The Book of Unknown Americans*. Critical position of Cristina Henriquez is searched by linking up her biography to the discourse of American Dream and finding her critical idea which basically discloses the author's stance on whether American Dream is actually for all people no matter race, skin color, religion, gender, or political-educational background of the characters in the novel.

II. THE UNDERPINNING THEORY

To analyze this subject matter in the novel, Representation theory by Hall⁶ will be used. Representation is a process of creation and exchange of meaning between people or cultures, and language is the media that is most frequently used to do such processes. Language as a

³ US Census Bureau, *Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex, Age, Race, and Hispanic Origin for America*, (June 2020), online: <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-kits/2020/population-estimates-detailed.html>.

⁴ Stephen McNamee & Miller Jr, *The Meritocracy Myth*, (Lanham: Sociation Today, 2004)

⁵ Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, (London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997).

⁶ *Ibid.*

media of constructing meaning has an essential function in this process, before it becomes a representation, to create concrete meaning. According to Hall, there are two processes of representation. First, mental representation, namely the concept of something that is in our heads (conceptual map), mental representation is still something abstract. Second, language plays an important role in the process of meaning construction. This research uses constructionist approach which emphasizes more on the process of meaning construction through the language used. Language and language users cannot determine meaning in language by themselves but must be faced with something else to come up with what is called interpretation. Social structure is built through people who use the conceptual system of language culture.⁷

III. METHODOLOGY

The study is by nature qualitative research. The data of this study is in the form of words, sentences, and narrations from the novel *The Book of Unknown Americans*. Qualitative research is used to find phenomena in the novel that are relevant to the injustice and failure of achieving American Dream which is the main topic of this research. The facts about American Dream in the actual life in United States are taken from books, journals, and articles. All of these are used to complement the data on injustice and failure in fulfilling the American Dream. The primary data are all narrations, dialogues, and statements in the novel, which contain some important information about the injustice while achieving American Dream and which end up a failure. The secondary data is a data reference that gives information about the context where American Dream is built.

IV. DISCUSSION

A. *The Effort of Achieving The American Dream*

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the American dream as the idea that every citizen of the United States, whether they are native Americans or immigrants, should have equal opportunities to achieve success and prosperity through determination, hard work, and initiatives. Some of the efforts, injustices, and failures are represented by the characters of the novel. In a literary work, characters have their roles to shape and expand the plot, to accept the responsibility to carry messages and knowledge being articulated by an author. Thus, from what characters undergo and how they react are as follows:

a. Rafael Toro to Find a Safe Place

Rafael Toro is the head of the Toro family, residents of Redwood Apartments, an immigrant from war-torn Panama, whose survival instincts and drive to succeed not for himself but also for his sons Major Toro and Enrique Toro. Toro family moved to America from Panama because of the Invasion of Panama. Rafa thought his country was not strong enough to fight what had happened in his city, they felt insecure if they continued to live in Panama so decided to leave. As experienced by Rafael, he migrated to America because he was treated badly in his hometown of Panama, for example his house was taken over by the invasion there and they felt unsafe if they continued to live

⁷ *Ibid.*

there. In the end Rafael's family decided to move and live in America to find a safe place and have sufficient income while living in America.

b. Arturo Rivera & Alma Rivera: a Place for Healing

Rivera family is an immigrant from Mexico, In Pátzcuaro, leaving everything behind, the Riveras come to America with a single hope: that Maribel can improve and get better life in this land of immense potential and riches, that is America. Alma and Arturo move to America to heal Maribel from an incident that caused her to suffer a severe brain injury due to an accident, Maribel's parents send their daughter to a special school for children with special needs wanted to heal his daughter's illness, and whatever he did it was for the daughter and her family. He never gave up on the dream.

c. Gustavo Milhojas: to Have a Better Job

Gustavo Milhojas is an illegal immigrant hiding behind a van carrying construction equipment in El Paso. Much like the Toro family, he suffers from many crimes, social injustice, and human rights violations. In México, he was discriminated against because of his Guatemalan ancestry. In México, Gustavo discovers that Mexicans despise Guatemalans, he cannot find a job and decides to come to America to earn more money for his children in México who are preparing to enter college. Gustavo found a job while he lived in America for pay schooling for his children.

d. Nelia Zafon: Wants to be a Famous Dancer

Nelia Zafon an immigrant who came from Puerto Rico has big dreams of becoming a dancer in New York; because she wants to prove to her mother, herself, and to everyone in her community that she can. She believed in the promise of American Dream, no matter where one is from, no matter what class one belongs to, there is supposed a dream to achieve. But when she arrived in America frustrated by her inability to get any roles because of her ethnicity, Nelia eventually left New York for Delaware where living costs were cheaper.

B. *The Injustice of Achieving American Dream*

I. *Mocked by American People*

At the station, Alma was introduced to a Spanish-speaking officer and began to tell him the situation. The officer mocked Alma, implying that Alma just wanted to keep Maribel away from boys she was interested in. Since there was no crime, the police thought that Alma did not witness Garrett lift Maribel's shirt or otherwise beat her, there was nothing the officer could do or would help her.

“Officer Mora rubbed the back of his neck, rolled his head around once, and took a deep breath. “Señora,” he said through the glass, “this is a police station. We don’t deal with teenage relationships here. Unless he assaulted her in some way, or unless he made some kind of verbal threat, there’s nothing we can do.” I stared at him in disbelief. “I thought you would help her.” Officer Mora sighed, as if it were a great exertion to have to deal with me any longer. He said, “We can’t protect her from a boy who, honestly, probably just has a crush on her. That’s your job.” In English, he said something to the woman officer, who shook her head before flipping another page

of her magazine. I was a fool, I realized, to believe that they would care about any of this. I tightened my lips and straightened my purse strap on my shoulder with all the righteousness that I could muster. Neither Officer Mora nor the woman seemed to notice. "Gracias," I said sarcastically. "De nada," Officer Mora said in earnest, as if he believed he had done his job.⁸

From the quote above, it can be seen that Alma tried to explain to the police Mora what Garret had done to his daughter Maribel. Officer Mora only assumes that Garret and Maribel are just a teenage couple who are dating and she thinks that Alma's response is overreacting so officer Mora refuses to help Alma because officers consider this a trivial matter. This condition shows that American officers often underestimate the problems faced by immigrants so that immigrants do not get any help when they need it.

2. Sexual Objectification

Sexual objectification means that women are widely seen as sex objects for men's sexual pleasure, for example of sexual objectification is doing catcalls, staring at women's bodies, making sexual comments, and committing sexual harassment.⁹ We can see in the dialogue below:

"And then, as I turned the corner, I saw her. Her back was against the cinder-block wall, and her hands were up over her head. A boy—the boy from the gas station, I recognized him instantly—was holding her wrists in place, staring at her. Her shirt was bunched under her armpits, exposing her white cotton bra, and her head was turned to the side, her eyes squeezed shut."¹⁰

From the quotation above this character Garret Miller white American reveals the fact that female immigrants in America are not guaranteed safe.

3. Racial Discrimination

Immigrants in America have been frustrated by widespread social discrimination, racism, and inequality. Major, who has lived in America since childhood, does not know much about the culture of his family origin and is used to life as a legal citizen in America. However, the behavior of his schoolmates, Garret Miller was oppressive and stereotyped. Major was unable to identify himself as an American we can see in this quotation below:

"How do you say 'chicken' in Spanish?" Garrett asked. "Pollo," someone answered. "Major Pollo," Garrett said. The kids at my school loved changing my first name to English and then tacking insults onto it. Major Pan (short for Panamanian). Major Pan in the Ass. Major Cocksucker."¹¹

⁸ Cristina Henríquez, *How I Knew I Wanted To Be A Writer* | Author Cristina Henríquez, (April 2016), online: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q5YD0iLchk&t=26s>>.

⁹ Rachel M Calogero, Stacey Tantleff-Dunn & Joel Kevin Thompson, *Self-objectification in Women; Causes, Consequences and Counteractions*, (Washington DC, American Psychological Association, 2011) at 217-231.

¹⁰ Cristina Henríquez, *The Book of Unknown Americans*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Racism is a belief that the idea with their racial group is based on biological, social, and moral innate. They think their group is superior to other groups or that racial discrimination is unequal treatment based on a person's race.¹² Discrimination between whites and blacks has gone against the equal treatment for all people in America. The equality that exists in American Dream is shattered and unreliable when Latin American families face racial discrimination in society. The discrimination can be seen in the dialogue below:

"The police. If you're white, or maybe Oriental, they let you drive however you want. But if you're black or if you're brown, they automatically think you've done something wrong".¹³

From the quote above we can see that Rafael is telling serious things, and those who are black people have problems with the police who are mostly white people. They as a minority must maintain their attitude and not make the police suspicious of them. From there we can see that black people still get racist treatment from the police.

4. *Unfairly treatment From the Government*

All immigrants who have lived and worked in America have contributed to America's development but what they get in return is discrimination their contributions are always underestimated. We can be seen in the dialogue below:

"Fired?"

"Yes. Because I changed my shift. The morning when I stayed home for Maribel's first day of school."

"Why would they do that and then turn around and fire you?"

"The only reason they sponsored our visas was because the government was pressuring them to hire workers with papers."

"But why does that mean they have to fire you? What are they going to do? Get rid of everyone they already have and hire people without papers now?"

"Probably. It saves them money that way"

What kind of place required a man to work all day without being allowed to eat or drink? There had to be rules, didn't there?".¹⁴

Arturo just wants to be treated fairly because the government only puts pressure work on him for worked hard and people work on there without remuneration that is commensurate with the work they do and there is also no result or no assistance from the government. Most immigrants depend on their own visa service provider. This is the reason they accept any job that is offered even if it is not what they want. On the other hand, employers in employment can arbitrarily and at any time they fire the documented immigrants

¹² Bowling, Ben and Coretta Philips, *Racism, Crime and Justice*, (London: Pearson Education, 2002).

¹³ Henriquez, *supra note 8*

¹⁴ Henriquez, *supra note 10*

and decide to work with the undocumented immigrants because their wages are higher than the documented immigrants.

5. *Racism Based on Ethnicity*

Zafón, in 1964, at the age of seventeen, she came to America from Puerto Rico with the dream of living in New York City to become a famous dancer and actress. She works hard and sacrifices to try to fulfill her dream by collecting the money she earns from her waitress job to dance and acting classes and she gets food from the leftover plates in the restaurant where she works. but all his struggles all this time was in vain. We can see in quotation below:

“I went to auditions when I heard about them. I remember there was an open call for Man of La Mancha at a small theater in Greenwich Village. I tried out for the role of the housekeeper. When I got there, a man was lining up all the girls. I remember I asked him whether it was okay that I wasn’t Spanish. Because of course it was a Spanish play. He said, “What are you?” I told him, “Puertorriquena,” and he said, “What’s the difference?” I didn’t get that role or any role after that. Not a single one.”¹⁵

In the novel, Zafon's chances of being selected for a job interview are highly dependent on the nationality she is from, regardless of her abilities or talents. Zafon was turned down to play the role of a housemaid in a Spanish drama because of her ethnicity and nationality. She was not accepted to appear in the play because she is a Puertorriquena, an immigrant. This proves that the idea of equal opportunity is just a myth for immigrants.

6. *Unconsidered immigrants*

Micho Alvarez, an immigrant from Mexico who lives in the Redwood Apartments the reason he moved was because he was frustrated with the injustice of immigration progress and the stigma of Americans against immigrants and Latinos. Micho is angry with America's attitude towards immigrants and wants to change it all for the better. We can see in dialogue below:

“We’re the unknown Americans, the ones no one even wants to know, because they’ve been told they’re supposed to be scared of us and because maybe if they did take the time to get to know us, they might realize that we’re not that bad, maybe even that we’re a lot like them. And who would they hate then?”¹⁶

Almost every news outlet refers to Hispanics in dehumanizing terms, such as illegal immigrants and illegal aliens. Most news articles about immigration contain racist terms that are derogatory and misleading when referring to immigration. This stereotype of Hispanics is more likely to be stereotyped as unintelligent, aggressive, unprofessional, comedic, and criminal as drug-related violations.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

C. *The Failure of Achieving American Dream*

Arturo and Alma Rivera legally migrated to America from Mexico in an attempt to heal their daughter Maribel. Unexpectedly, not all the dreams they achieve easily come true. While they live in America. They cannot achieve their own version of their dream; they cannot find a better job or live a meaningful life and Maribel cannot fully recover from her brain injury, “Seven days of knocking on doors and making calls and begging with store owners and anyone who would listen. But at the end of it, Arturo came up empty-handed”.¹⁷ The quotation explains that no matter how hard Arturo tries to get a job but the results are useless. This family proves that Immigrants like them in America cannot find guarantees of life, freedom, and happiness. They do not become rich and it is also hard to find good jobs in America.

Hispanics believe they need English to succeed in America. Migrating to another country means we have to learn a new culture that exists in that country. This makes it difficult for the Rivera family to communicate and adapt to the conditions in their new place. We usually can see this in immigrants who move to America because they are not prepared to deal with different cultures and systems. Therefore, immigrants always experience social inequality in a language in America, this language barrier is also their weakness in getting their dreams. Arturo works hard for economic prosperity and a better life. Despite his hard work he lost his life while trying to achieve his goal of finding and meeting Maribel. Arturo goes to see the Millers because he believes they are hurting Maribel and upon arriving at the Millers' home, Arturo is suddenly shot dead by Garrett's father. This is an example of how difficult it is as immigrants to describe the problem they face is the difficulty in understanding and speaking English language. We can see in the quotation below:

“Sr. Rivera stepped back, raising his hands in the air to show he meant no harm. “I’m looking for my daughter,” he said in Spanish. Garrett’s dad didn’t understand. “We speak English here,” he said. He came closer, holding the barrel of the gun in line with the tip of Sr. Rivera’s nose. “Where is she?” Sr. Rivera managed to say. What could Garrett’s dad have said in return? “Get off my property.” “Shut up.” “You fuckhead.” “This is what you get.” What could he have been thinking? “Please,” Sr. Rivera said, in English this time, one of the few words he knew. And then Garrett’s dad pulled the trigger.”¹⁸

When Arturo died, Arturo's wife Alma was confused because she wanted to bury Arturo in Mexico but she could not because it was expensive to fly him home. Crossing the Mexican-American border was a problem to bring home her husband's body, “For a week, his body had been in the morgue, waiting to be taken someplace. The burial felt wrong, but what could I do? I didn’t have the money

¹⁷ *Ibid.* at para 150

¹⁸ *Ibid.* at para 207

to fly him back”.¹⁹ The way the hospital responded to Alma's negotiations was to avoid the problems faced by Alma, the hospital did not try to help Alma bring Arturo's body to Mexico. The hospital offered no financial assistance to Alma and offered no solution other than burying Arturo in America. This explains that Latino immigrants can do nothing about the system in America.

They also failed to negotiate with the existing cultural values, the difference between the existence of American culture and the place where they came from was felt by the Toro family. They negotiate different cultural values; they try to change their own cultural practices that are incompatible with America. We can see in this quotation:

“Those phone calls cost a lot of money,” he said. To which my mom, the receiver still in her hand, the coiled cord stretched across the room, said,”

“We could afford them if you would let me get a job.” To which my dad thundered, “Ya. ¡Basta, Celia! I don’t want to hear about it anymore!” Which sent my mom wailing, and him bellowing in return.²⁰

This happened to Celia Toro because she really wanted to work to help her family, but her husband Rafa still forced her not to work because she had been taught in her culture that work was only the duty and responsibility of a husband, Celia's intention to work was to help the family economy because Rafa was fired from his job. Although Celia often tries to persuade Rafa to be allowed to work, Rafa still doesn't care about Celia's opinion, which Rafa always avoids talking about.

D. American Dream is not for All People to Gain

Cristina Henriquez is the author of the novel about immigration, bringing to life various character stories about immigration through the eyes of characters from all over Latin America.²¹ Other novels include *Come Together*, *Fall Apart*, *The World in Half*, and the last one is *The Book of Unknown Americans* which was chosen by the editors of the New York Times and made it onto many lists of the best books of 2014. Her life journey is not far from those experienced by the characters in the novel being an immigrant, half American, and half Panamanian. This novel was inspired by the story of her father who migrated from Panama to the US to pursue his education in Delaware.²² This novel *The Book of Unknown American* set in 2008 in Delaware. The setting in 2008 was the economic crisis which we can be called the Great Depression. In 2008 a study was conducted showing that more than 50 percent of Hispanic families do not make enough money to support their families, and 50 percent of Hispanic workers lack their English language skills, it was also shown that the majority of Hispanics in Delaware want job training and take English language classes.²³ We can see in the quotation below:

¹⁹ *Ibid.* at para 275

²⁰ *Ibid.* at para 37

²¹ Henriquez, *super note 8*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Nicole Ruggiano, *The Report to the Governor's Consortium on Hispanic Affairs: Delaware, Hispanic Needs Assessment*. (2008).

“The Community House was too out of the way and even though I had gone back to the English class there only a few times, now I stopped going altogether. I still wanted to learn English, though, so I asked Celia if she would come over to teach me a few things. She brought a workbook that she and Rafael had used when they first came to America. It had illustrations to show basic vocabulary— words for colors, foods, parts of the body, animals—like a child’s book of first words.”²⁴

Henriquez shows the existence of discrimination against minority groups and immigrants. Discrimination is one of the challenges and obstacles to achieving American dream. Through this novel, Henriquez shows the conditions in which American Dream is not easy to achieve. The struggles the characters go through to fulfill American dream are unfairly treated as there is someone who is racist towards differences in race, skin, or nationality, there is also the experience of sexual harassment. Through the years of 2008, America also went through the Great Depression. The 2008 financial crisis is one of the biggest economic disasters since the Great Depression of the 1930s.²⁵ During this time, house prices, which had continued to rise for a great many years, plunged by around 32%. Perverse incentives caused the situation to worsen. Soon after the September 11 attacks in 2001, the Federal Funds rate of America was brought down to 1%, under the authority of Alan Greenspan Chairman of America Federal Reserve, in order to boost the economy and keep it strong.²⁶ Arturo Rivera was unable to fulfill his wish because of his poor financial condition and Arturo as an Immigrant did not get proper job opportunities not because of their incompetence but because of their poor economic condition. It shows that the economic crisis played an important role in making American Dream fail.

V. CONCLUSION

American Dream is supposed to be the dream of all people as United States of America was found and built by different races including the white, the black, the colored, and the yellow skin colors. However, based on the analysis and discussion in previous chapters, there are several reasons why Latino immigrant (as the representation of the colored-skinned race) failed to make their American dream come true as they had to undergo racism which reflect the white attitude and view towards the differences in race, skin, or nationality. Some of the Latino immigrants even got sexual harassment that devastated their dream while entering United States. These reasons have a negative impact on the lives of immigrants because it can reduce the good chances of getting a better life. The prejudice that often occurs against migrants due to cultural differences regarding reporting the criminalization of Latino immigrants makes it difficult for them, especially in finding jobs where the whites underestimated the Latino immigrants’ skills. As it turns out, American Dream is nothing more

²⁴ Henriquez, *supra* note 21

²⁵ Sher Verick & Islam Inayatul, *The Great Recession of 2008-2009: Causes, Consequences and Policy Responses*. (Germany, 2010) IZA Discussion Paper No. 4934.

²⁶ Mausikar Khan, *Global Financial Crisis of 2008 and its Impacts*, (November 2018), online: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349502501_Global_Financial_Crisis_of_2008_and_its_Impacts>.

than a fantasy and a myth. It shows that it is not easy to achieve the American dream itself, Henriquez is interested in the myth of the American Dream, and she stated that this myth is useful as a real motivational factor for everyone to achieve American Dream. The purpose of writer Cristina Henriquez in writing this novel is to slightly challenge the bad stereotypes of immigrants then the author wants to explain from several points of view and prove to the Latin immigrant character that "we" are not as bad as they think.

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