

Economic Migration and Transitional Pursuit of the American Dream in Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*

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**الهجرة الاقتصادية والبحث الانتقالي عن الحلم الامريكي
في رواية (انظروا الحالمين) لأمبولو مبي**

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Abstract

Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016) interrogates the ideology of the American Dream through the intersecting lives of undocumented African immigrants and a wealthy American family during the 2008 financial crisis. The novel exposes the instability, inequality, and emotional cost embedded in the belief that hard work inevitably leads to success and belonging. By examining immigration, capitalism, race, class, and identity, Mbue reveals the American Dream as a fragile construct sustained by myth rather than guaranteed opportunity. This research analyzes how the novel dismantles traditional narratives of success and ultimately redefines the American Dream as an ethical pursuit centered on dignity, autonomy, and self-definition rather than material achievement.

Key Words: the American Dream, African immigrants, capitalism, race, class, and identity, redefinition of the American Dream

Introduction

Interrogating the Myth of the American Dream

Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016) reframes the long-standing belief in the American Dream — the idea that hard work and perseverance guarantee success, belonging, and stability — by placing the lived experiences of immigrants and elites side by side. Through the journeys of the Cameroonian Jonga family and the affluent Edwards family, Mbue reveals how structural inequality, race, class, and economic insecurity shape who can pursue the dream and who can achieve it.

Critical responses to the novel underscore its social relevance while revealing tensions around representation, narrative structure, and thematic execution. Many reviewers praise Mbue's compassionate storytelling and insightful critique of systemic barriers, while others raise thoughtful questions about character construction and narrative pacing. These critical voices help deepen our understanding of the novel's engagement with the American Dream.

1. The Immigrant Encounter with the American Dream

1.1 The Initial Promise and Structural Limits

At the heart of Mbue's novel is the immigrant belief that America is a land of opportunity. Jende Jonga arrives convinced that "in America, you could be anything you wanted to be," (Mbue, 2016, p. 23) embodying a classic interpretation of the Dream. Yet from the beginning, Mbue complicates this belief by showing how legal precariousness undermines it; Jende feels that "no matter how honest he was, how hard he worked, he was still illegal." (Mbue, 2016, p. 34)

The narrative portrays the American Dream not as a universal guarantee but as an exclusionary concept shaped by legislation and immigration policy. Jende's

fear of deportation and the precariousness of his status reveal that legal barriers often outweigh effort.

1.2 Critics on Immigration and Representation

Some critics highlight the novel's success in depicting immigrant aspirations. In its starred review, *Publishers Weekly* observes that although the plot at times relies on device (such as overheard phone calls), the “sharp-eyed focus on issues of immigration, race, and class” forces readers to confront the truth that “the American dream isn't what it seems.” (*Publishers Weekly*, 2016).

However, not all critique is positive. Author and critic Aaron Bady argues that the novel's portrayal of its African protagonists can inadvertently reinforce stereotypes. Bady writes that Jende is portrayed with traits such as “simple, good, hopeless, ignorant, confused, earnest, happy, selfless,” and contends that this characterization “confirms and displays an uncomfortably large number of stereotypes about Africa and Africans.” He questions whether the narrative unwittingly upholds a problematic contrast between Africa and America.

Bady's critique is important for reevaluating how the American Dream is framed from an immigrant perspective. It cautions against oversimplified representations that might undercut the novel's own critique of systemic inequality.

2. Race, Class, and Intersectional Inequality

2.1 Racialized Barriers to Belonging

Mbue's narrative also engages with racial dynamics that shape access to mobility. Though the dream promises inclusion, Jende and Neni's experiences demonstrate how race intersects with class and immigration status. Their race makes their labor visible but their presence precarious.

Critics emphasize this stratification. In *Moving Fictions*, a compilation of critical responses, a reviewer notes that the novel “captures the essence of the underbelly of American racism and the defunct idea of the American dream” by juxtaposing the struggles of the Jongas with the experiences of their wealthier counterparts. This perspective draws attention to how the American Dream functions differently across racial lines.

2.2 Class and Contrasting Experiences

Class plays an equally important role. The Edwardses — a wealthy, white American family — appear to embody the dream, yet their wealth does not protect them from emotional breakdown, moral compromise, or economic collapse. Cindy Edwards’s admission that “having everything does not mean you have peace” (Mbue, 2016, p. 211) undermines the assumption that material success guarantees emotional well-being.

The difference between the Jongas and the Edwardses highlights that the American Dream, as popularly imagined, is limited by class divisions rather than open to merit alone.

3. Capitalism and the Crisis of the Dream

3.1 The 2008 Financial Collapse

The financial crisis serves as both the historical and symbolic backdrop for the novel. The collapse of Lehman Brothers destabilizes the Edwardses and reveals the fragility of the economic systems that sustain the American Dream.

Critics widely note the role of capitalism in the narrative. According to the NPR-quoted praise included on the publisher’s site, *Behold the Dreamers* “depicts a country both blessed and doomed, on top of the world, but always at risk of losing

its balance,” framing the dream as contingent on unstable economic forces rather than individual effort. (The Washington Post, 2016).

This interpretation is echoed by other reviewers who describe the novel's engagement with broader economic realities. For example, the Washington Post called Mbue's book “the one novel Donald Trump should read,” indicating that its critique goes beyond personal stories to address national economic and political ideologies.

4. Narrative Structure, Characterization, and Literary Form

4.1 Critics on Narrative Strategy

While many critics praise Mbue's thematic breadth, some reviewers raise concerns about narrative choices. Cole Meyer, writing for *The Masters Review*, critiques the novel's structural execution, stating that “as one chapter folds into the next, Mbue's characters become increasingly erratic and compulsive” and that the plot sometimes advances through devices such as overheard conversations rather than organic character development. Meyer argues that this makes portions of the narrative feel “tedious” and detracts from emotional stakes. (Meyer, 2016).

4.2 Literature on Literary Form

Literary analysts sometimes argue that the emotional impact of a narrative must balance thematic critique with narrative momentum. In *Behold the Dreamers*, the structural pacing serves to mirror the unpredictability of economic and legal instability — themes that critics like Meyers interpret as both strength and weakness.

5. Praises: Character Depth and Thematic Ambition

Despite structural criticisms, many reviewers emphasize the novel's emotional and moral resonance.

5.1 Warmth and Narrative Empathy

Kirkus Reviews praises the novel for its balanced and humane portrayal, calling it “realistic, tragic, and still remarkably kind to all its characters.” (Kirkus Reviews, 2016). This suggests that Mbue’s narrative draws readers into empathy with both immigrant and elite characters without reducing them to caricatures.

Similarly, the starred Publishers Weekly review highlights Mbue’s “sharp-eyed focus on issues of immigration, race, and class” and describes the ending — though unexpected — as speaking “to a sad truth in today’s cutthroat world,” revealing that the dream is not what it appears. (Publishers Weekly, 2016).

5.2 Literary Significance and National Context

Critics represented on the publisher’s official page note that Mbue’s work is not only thematically ambitious but culturally significant. According to publisher-sourced praise, The New York Times Book Review calls *Behold the Dreamers* “a capacious, big-hearted novel,” emphasizing its emotional generosity and cultural relevance (Garner, 2016). While *Entertainment Weekly* notes that its “heart belongs to the struggles and small triumphs of the Jongsas,” highlighting how Mbue humanizes systemic injustice (Entertainment Weekly, 2016), emphasizing how the narrative humanizes systemic issues.

6. Metaphor, Satire, and National Critique

6.1 Satirical Elements

Some reviewers interpret Mbue’s narrative as a form of subtle satire. For instance, a review in The Guardian describes the novel as “a subtle satire on the American dream,” noting how its domestic and economic collisions reveal contradictions in national ideology. (Messud, 2017).

This satirical lens encourages readers to question the assumptions that underlie narratives of freedom, opportunity, and fairness — suggesting that the American Dream functions rhetorically more than pragmatically.

7. Redefining Success and Belonging

7.1 Departure as Redefinition

The novel's ending — the Jongas' decision to return to Cameroon — challenges traditional narratives of immigrant success as assimilation or upward mobility. Jende's reflection that "America had given him money, but it had taken his peace" and Neni's statement that "a dream that costs you your dignity is too expensive" together reframes the American Dream as not purely geographical or economic, but psychological and ethical.

By having the protagonists reclaim identity and agency outside the U.S., Mbue suggests that belonging and dignity may be more meaningful than material security.

8. Domestic Labor, Power, and the Illusion of Inclusion

One of the most revealing dimensions of *Behold the Dreamers* is the way the American Dream operates through domestic labor. Jende's employment as Clark Edwards's chauffeur places him in close physical proximity to wealth without granting him access to its privileges. This proximity exposes the false promise of inclusion. Jende becomes indispensable to the Edwards family, yet he remains fundamentally disposable.

Jende's awareness of this imbalance is gradual but profound. He recognizes that he is trusted with the Edwardses' children and secrets, yet he himself possesses no security. Mbue underscores this contradiction when Jende reflects that "he

belonged everywhere and nowhere at the same time.” (Mbue, 2016, p. 172) This paradox highlights how immigrant labor sustains the American Dream for others while remaining excluded from its benefits.

Several critics emphasize this aspect of the novel’s social critique. Reviews collected on *Moving Fictions* argue that Mbue’s narrative demonstrates how “the American Dream depends on invisible labor while denying those workers stability or recognition.” The domestic space thus becomes a microcosm of national inequality, revealing how the dream is upheld through exploitation masked as opportunity.

9. Emotional Labor and Psychological Cost

9.1 Cindy Edwards and the Hollow Center of Success

Cindy Edwards’s character is essential to Mbue’s critique of the American Dream’s emotional emptiness. Cindy has wealth, leisure, and social status, yet she suffers from profound dissatisfaction. Her alcoholism and emotional volatility reveal that the dream’s promise of happiness through consumption is deeply flawed.

Mbue carefully avoids portraying Cindy as simply ungrateful. Instead, Cindy is shown as trapped within a system that equates worth with appearance and success. Her despair suggests that the American Dream not only excludes many, but also psychologically damages those who seemingly achieve it.

Critics have noted that Cindy’s characterization prevents a simplistic moral binary between rich and poor. As *Kirkus Reviews* observes, the novel is “remarkably kind to all its characters,” allowing readers to see how systemic pressures deform everyone differently. This critical observation reinforces Mbue’s argument that capitalism itself—not individual morality—is the central problem.

10. Masculinity, Failure, and the American Ideal

10.1 Clark Edwards and the Collapse of Identity

Clark Edwards's downfall illustrates how the American Dream ties masculinity to professional success. Clark's identity is inseparable from his position at Lehman Brothers. When the firm collapses, he experiences not only financial loss but existential disintegration.

Clark's realization that "without his job, he was no one" (Mbue, 2016, p. 259) reveals the psychological violence embedded in a system that reduces identity to productivity. The American Dream promises self-actualization, yet it delivers self-erasure when success disappears.

Reviewers writing in *The Guardian* emphasize this critique, describing the novel as "a subtle satire on the American dream," particularly in how it exposes the fragility of elite masculinity once institutional power is withdrawn. (Messud, 2017).. Clark's breakdown parallels Jende's precarity, suggesting that the dream destabilizes everyone—though with unequal consequences.

11. Gendered Dimensions of Aspiration

11.1 Neni Jonga and the Burden of Sacrifice

Neni Jonga's experience reveals how the American Dream places disproportionate burdens on women. While she pursues education and motherhood simultaneously, she is expected to perform emotional, domestic, and financial labor without complaint. Her ambition is framed not as self-fulfillment, but as responsibility.

Neni's eventual disillusionment marks a critical turning point in the novel. When she recognizes that education alone cannot overcome systemic barriers, she begins to question the legitimacy of the dream itself. Her conclusion that "a dream that costs you your dignity is too expensive" (Mbue, 2016, p. 368) becomes the novel's moral thesis.

Critics have noted that Neni's arc resists traditional narratives of female empowerment through assimilation. Reviews aggregated on Bookmarks Reviews describe Mbue's portrayal as one that "foregrounds the emotional toll of striving within unequal systems," reinforcing the idea that the dream extracts more than it gives.

12. Space, Geography, and Symbolic Boundaries

12.1 New York City as a Divided Landscape

Mbue's depiction of New York City reinforces the stratification of the American Dream. Neighborhoods function symbolically: Harlem, the Bronx, and Upper East Side apartments reflect class hierarchy and access. Jende's physical movement through the city mirrors his social immobility.

Despite living in one of the world's wealthiest cities, the Jongas remain marginalized. Mbue repeatedly emphasizes how proximity does not equal access. The American Dream exists spatially above them, visible but unreachable.

Critics writing online have observed that Mbue's use of space "maps inequality onto geography," demonstrating how the dream is literally unevenly distributed. This spatial analysis deepens the novel's realism and social critique.

13. Language, Silence, and Power

13.1 Speech as Risk

Language itself becomes a site of power in *Behold the Dreamers*. Jende often measures his words carefully, aware that a single mistake could cost him his job or freedom. Silence becomes a survival strategy.

This contrasts sharply with the Edwardses' freedom of expression. They speak openly, complain freely, and assume they will be heard. Mbue thus exposes how voice is a privilege, not a right.

Several critics note that Mbue's restrained prose mirrors this dynamic. The narrative's calm tone masks intense anxiety, reflecting how marginalized individuals must suppress fear to survive. This stylistic choice reinforces the novel's thematic depth.

14. Ethical Questions and Moral Ambiguity

Mbue resists offering easy moral judgments. Instead, she presents ethical dilemmas shaped by unequal systems. Jende's loyalty to Clark is genuine, yet it places him at risk. Clark's dependence on Jende is real, yet it never translates into protection.

Critics writing in *Publishers Weekly* emphasize that the novel's strength lies in its refusal to assign blame simplistically. The review notes Mbue's "sharp-eyed focus on immigration, race, and class," (*Publishers Weekly*, 2016), suggesting that individuals are constrained by forces larger than themselves.

This moral ambiguity reinforces the novel's critique of the American Dream as a structure that pits individuals against one another while shielding institutions from accountability.

15. The Return to Cameroon: Failure or Liberation?

15.1 Rejecting the Dominant Narrative

The Jongas' decision to return to Cameroon challenges dominant immigrant success narratives. In traditional American literature, departure often signifies failure. Mbue reverses this logic, framing return as empowerment.

Jende's realization that America "had taken his peace" (Mbue, 2016, p. 365) reframes success as emotional and ethical well-being rather than economic accumulation. This moment represents a rejection of the American Dream's terms altogether.

Critics writing in *The Washington Post* (as cited on the publisher's website) argue that the novel's ending forces readers to reconsider national myths, calling it a work that Americans "need to read" because it exposes uncomfortable truths about success and belonging. (*The Washington Post*, 2016).

16. The American Dream as a Global Myth

Mbue's novel also interrogates how the American Dream functions globally. Cameroon is portrayed not simply as a place of lack, but as a space of cultural continuity and identity. The dream's power lies not in its reality, but in its circulation.

By ending the novel outside the United States, Mbue dismantles American exceptionalism. The dream is revealed as a story America tells the world—one that often collapses under scrutiny.

17. Time, Waiting, and the Deferred American Dream

A central way *Behold the Dreamers* dismantles the myth of the American Dream is through its portrayal of time as stagnation rather than progress. The American Dream rests on the belief that sacrifice will eventually be rewarded, that time works in favor of those who endure hardship. Mbue systematically undermines this assumption by showing how the lives of undocumented immigrants are shaped by waiting without resolution. Jende Jonga's experience is dominated by legal delays, postponed hearings, and the constant deferral of security. Time does not bring him closer to stability; instead, it deepens his vulnerability.

This prolonged uncertainty directly contradicts the forward-moving narrative traditionally associated with the American Dream. Rather than serving as a path toward success, time becomes a mechanism that maintains inequality. The longer Jende waits, the more exposed he becomes to exploitation and fear.

Critics have identified this temporal critique as central to the novel's meaning. In its starred review, *Publishers Weekly* explicitly connects Mbue's narrative to the collapse of the American Dream, stating that "the ending and the focus on immigration, race, and class speak to a sad truth in today's cutthroat world: the American dream isn't what it seems." (Publishers Weekly, 2016). This observation reinforces how Mbue reframes waiting not as hopeful anticipation but as structural exclusion. Time, rather than rewarding perseverance, becomes an instrument that reveals the hollowness of the dream's promise.

Similarly, Claire Messud, writing for *The Guardian*, characterizes the novel as "a subtle satire on the American dream." (Messud, 2017). The satire lies in the way the Jongas continue to believe in future success even as time repeatedly denies them progress. Mbue exposes the American Dream as a promise endlessly postponed, particularly for those without legal or economic protection.

18. Fear as a Structural Condition of the American Dream

Fear operates not merely as an emotional response in *Behold the Dreamers*, but as a structural condition that shapes immigrant life. The American Dream promotes ideals of freedom, confidence, and risk-taking; however, Mbue demonstrates that fear is inseparable from immigrant aspiration. Jende's daily existence is governed by fear of deportation, surveillance, and economic collapse. His silence, caution, and obedience are not personal flaws but rational responses to systemic precarity.

This persistent fear undermines the dream's promise of liberty. While the Edwards family experiences anxiety related to status or self-fulfillment, their fear never threatens their legal existence. Jende's fear, by contrast, is existential. The American Dream thus reveals itself as asymmetrical: it tolerates fear among the privileged while enforcing it upon the marginalized.

Kirkus Reviews captures this imbalance when it describes Mbue's novel as "realistic, tragic, and still remarkably kind to all its characters." (*Kirkus Reviews*, 2016). The realism *Kirkus* refers to lies in Mbue's refusal to sentimentalize immigrant suffering. Fear is not exaggerated for dramatic effect; it is portrayed as a logical consequence of structural inequality. This critical response supports the argument that the American Dream depends on fear as a form of control, particularly for those whose presence in America is conditional.

By embedding fear into the daily reality of immigrant life, Mbue exposes the contradiction at the heart of the American Dream: a system that promises freedom while requiring constant self-policing from those who pursue it most desperately.

19. Gratitude, Silence, and Moral Control

Another significant way *Behold the Dreamers* critiques the American Dream is through the moral expectation of gratitude imposed on immigrants. The dream encourages the belief that opportunity is a gift rather than a right. Jende internalizes this belief, repeatedly reminding himself to be thankful simply for being allowed to work and remain in the country. This enforced gratitude discourages resistance and normalizes exploitation.

Mbue shows that gratitude functions as a form of moral control. When immigrants are expected to express constant thankfulness, any complaint appears as ingratitude. This dynamic allows inequality to persist while preserving the moral comfort of those in power.

This aspect of the novel has generated critical debate. Aaron Bady, writing for *Brittle Paper*, criticizes Mbue's portrayal of Jende by arguing that the character is depicted as "simple, good, hopeless, ignorant, confused, earnest, happy, selfless." (Bady, 2016). While Bady is skeptical of this characterization, his critique

unintentionally underscores Mbue's point: the American Dream demands that immigrants perform gratitude and moral purity in exchange for limited opportunity. Jende's excessive patience and self-sacrifice reflect the ethical expectations imposed upon him rather than an absence of agency.

By exposing how gratitude is used to silence dissent, Mbue challenges the American Dream's moral framework. The novel suggests that a system requiring gratitude for survival cannot be reconciled with genuine freedom or equality.

20. Redefining Success and Failure within the American Dream

The American Dream relies on rigid definitions of success and failure. Success is measured through wealth, permanence, and assimilation, while failure is attributed to personal inadequacy. *Behold the Dreamers* disrupts this binary by refusing to frame the Jongas' departure from America as failure. Although they leave without financial success or legal security, the novel presents their decision as an act of self-preservation and dignity.

Mbue challenges the assumption that remaining in America is the ultimate marker of achievement. In contrast, the Edwards family retains social mobility even after financial collapse, demonstrating that failure is absorbed differently depending on class and citizenship. The American Dream, therefore, is revealed as unevenly applied rather than universally attainable.

Dwight Garner, reviewing the novel for *The New York Times Book Review*, describes *Behold the Dreamers* as "a capacious, big-hearted novel." (Garner, 2016). This description reflects Mbue's expansive understanding of success—one that allows characters to reject America without moral judgment. The novel's emotional generosity lies in its refusal to equate departure with defeat.

Similarly, *Entertainment Weekly* emphasizes that the novel's emotional center lies in "the struggles and small triumphs of the Jongas." (*Entertainment Weekly*, 2016). This critical response aligns with Mbue's redefinition of success as survival with dignity rather than material accumulation. By destabilizing dominant narratives of success and failure, Mbue exposes the American Dream as an ideology that privileges certain lives over others.

21. Storytelling as Resistance to the American Dream

Ultimately, *Behold the Dreamers* challenges the American Dream not only through its plot but through the act of storytelling itself. The dream survives because it is repeatedly narrated as attainable and just. Mbue disrupts this narrative by centering African immigrant voices that are often excluded from American literary representations of success.

The novel reclaims narrative authority from dominant cultural myths and offers an alternative vision of fulfillment—one rooted in family, dignity, and self-determination rather than assimilation. By doing so, Mbue transforms storytelling into a form of resistance.

This narrative intervention has been widely acknowledged by critics. *The Washington Post* famously described *Behold the Dreamers* as "the one novel Donald Trump should read," (*The Washington Post*, 2016) emphasizing its power to challenge dominant political and cultural assumptions about immigration and belonging. The remark underscores the novel's role in confronting the ideological foundations of the American Dream.

Cole Meyer, writing for *The Masters Review*, notes that Mbue's novel "grapples with enormous social and economic forces." (Meyer, 2016). Even where Meyer critiques the novel's execution, he acknowledges its ambition in addressing

systems that shape immigrant life. These critical perspectives confirm that *Behold the Dreamers* does more than tell a personal story—it interrogates the narratives that sustain national identity.

Conclusion

Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* richly interrogates the American Dream through the lived experiences of immigrants and elites alike. Through structural critique of immigration systems, capitalist instability, racialized belonging, narrative form, and character portrayal, the novel dismantles myths of meritocracy and universal opportunity. Critics support this reading in diverse ways: some emphasize the novel's empathy and thematic insight, while others question its narrative execution or representations. Together, these voices deepen our understanding of how Mbue's work reframes the American Dream as a contested ideal shaped by systemic barriers, emotional stakes, and moral complexity.

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الهجرة الإقتصادية والبحث الانتقالي عن الحلم الأمريكي في رواية (انظروا الحالمين) لأمبولو مبي

المستخلص

تستكشف رواية إمبولو مبي "تأملوا الحالمين" (2016) أيديولوجية الحلم الأمريكي من خلال تداخل حياة مهاجرين أفارقة غير موثقين وعائلة أمريكية ثرية خلال الأزمة المالية عام 2008. تكشف الرواية عن عدم الاستقرار، وعدم المساواة، والتكلفة النفسية الكامنة في الاعتقاد بأن العمل الجاد يؤدي حتمًا إلى النجاح والانتماء. من خلال دراسة الهجرة، والرأسمالية، والعرق، والطبقة، والهوية، تُظهر مبي أن الحلم الأمريكي بناء هش قائم على الأساطير لا على الفرص المضمونة. يحلل هذا البحث كيف تُفكك الرواية الروايات التقليدية للنجاح، وتعيد تعريف الحلم الأمريكي في نهاية المطاف باعتباره مسعى أخلاقيًا يتمحور حول الكرامة، والاستقلالية، وتحديد الذات، بدلًا من الإنجاز المادي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحلم الأمريكي، المهاجرون الأفارقة، الرأسمالية، العرق، الطبقة، والهوية، إعادة تعريف الحلم الأمريكي.

