



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

## THE WINDING ROAD TO THE DREAM

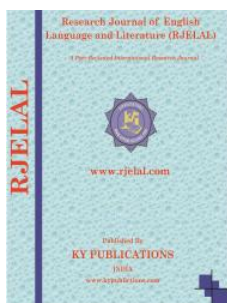
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<https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.7119.220>



### ABSTRACT

"The American Dream" is a phrase that has become an essential component of the American experience. It has not only become a part of the national lexicon but has come to define the nation's identity and its vision. Since the birth of the founding document of the nation, the Declaration of Independence, the idea of the American Dream has become a pervasive and frequently deconstructed theme within the canon of American literature. This paper traces the individual dreams of the major characters in Jeffrey Eugenide's *Middlsex* and their expression in varied contexts. It explores the various expressions of the American Dream across time, generation and ethnicity. It is seen that in most cases a gap exists between ideals and reality and that the American Dream remains a powerful yet elusive vision for a better life.

**Key words:** American Dream,ethnicity, ideals and reality

The American Dream has been deeply entwined with the history of the nation and the psyche of the American people right from the beginning. In its origins, America was conceived of as a New World, a new beginning, a second chance. The contrast was with Europe – the Old World – characterized by tyranny, corruption and social divisions. The earliest promises of America were based on the idea of an opportunity—to escape from the oppression of history to a virgin land where one could make oneself anew. The vision of the American Dream was clearly manifested in the Declaration of Independence which stated that equality, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" was the inalienable right of every American citizen. Over the centuries, the American Dream has been a constantly evolving national vision whose roots go deep into the national psyche. The components of the American Dream are endless and stand as a testimony to the strong individualism of the American people.

Caldwell identifies "two faces" of the American Dream –the idealistic dream and the materialistic dream (40). According to him, the idealistic dream aspires to liberty, justice, democracy, equality and self-realization while the materialistic dream aspires to wealth, success and prosperity. While the two aspects seem irreconcilable, at the meeting point of the two lies what Caldwell terms the "American Dream of Progress" (41). Hard work, endurance and self-discipline are intrinsic to the realization of the American Dream of Progress. The pathway of the dream was towards a better life and the achiever of the dream was recognized as a self-made man, a new American hero. Closely associated with this dream is also the "American Dream of Success" (Caldwell 43).This version of the Dream heavily stresses personal achievement. Success is not measured in terms of the degree of achievement but by the material wealth amassed.

The theme of the American Dream has been explored by many writers- Mark Twain, Edward Albee, Langston Hughes, Robert Frost, Walt Whitman and John Steinbeck who have sought to define it within the context of American experience and probed its desirability as a goal worth striving for. In *Middlesex*, Eugenides shows how the utopian impulse of the American Dream forms a continuous thread in the tapestry of the American experience and the evolving identity of its people. Eugenides' *Middlesex* examines some of the different stages of the American Dream that holds out the promise of a utopian world but seldom delivers it. Placed in the melting pot of America, the Stephanides invent and construct their Americanness and Greekness against the backdrop of an American society trying to grapple with the issues of assimilation and multiculturalism. Beginning with Lefty and Desdemona, Cal's grandparents, who flee from their homeland to Ellis Island and the United States, the novel depicts the family's pursuit of the American Dream across three generations.

After they immigrate to the United States, Lefty and Desdemona find themselves in a blissful America on the brink of economic collapse. They dream about a flawless America where effort and morals will lead to prosperity. *Middlesex* portrays the misfortunes of attaining an identity especially while dealing with the revelation that the American Dream is a misconception that has already disappeared. The first generation of the Stephanides family struggles with Americanization. While Lefty embraces his new country's customs, Desdemona is adamant that she will follow her old country's ways. Lefty tries to assimilate into American culture by zealously learning English but soon discovers that assimilation into the work force of the Ford Company is not a possibility for an immigrant. Lefty's American Dream of Progress fails. His ideals clash with the realities of an imperfect world where inequalities are rife and cannot be overcome. He finds out that the ideals enshrined in the American Dream do not apply to all. His different businesses, due to which he "worked seven days a week," come with a price. In order to provide for his family, "he had to be exiled from them" (Eugenides 136). Close to the end of his life Lefty is penniless and

speechless due to multiple strokes. Cultural hybridization therefore fails in the case of the immigrant generation of the Stephanides. Another individual seeking the American Dream is Sourmelina, Lefty and Desdemona's cousin. Unlike Lefty, she is the paragon of immigrant integration. "In the five years since leaving Turkey, Sourmelina had managed to erase just about everything identifiably Greek about her, from her hair...to her accent...to her reading material...to her favorite foods...and finally to her clothes" (Eugenides 84). Her American Dream is that of Americanization and she seems to achieve it at a superficial level.

Sourmelina's husband Jimmy Zizmo's American Dream is an even more superficial construct. The desire for fame is the driving force of his life. Though he has his own ideals, he is ready to sacrifice them for the sake of fame and status. He begins to bootleg alcohol and later metamorphoses into Minister Fard the "supreme being on earth", the founder of the Nation of Islam (Eugenides 162). His moment of fame is short lived. The downward spiral begins when it is discovered that Minister Fard propagates unfair practices. After charges of commanding human sacrifices are brought against him, Jimmy is forced to leave Detroit. Jimmy's American Dream is not a dream at all but an escape into consumerism, fads and celebrity. It is a shallow vision in which impressions overshadow achievements and the images and symbols of success are given more importance than actual achievement. His is a trajectory of downfall and ruin.

Characters that belong to the second generation strive to become more Americanized and "shed" most of their immigrant past to pursue the American Dream. Milton Stephanides – the son of Lefty and Desdemona – is the single-minded pursuer of the American Dream of Success, a rugged individualist who follows a straight-line assimilation. The early American reproductions in the couple's bedroom, offering them "connection with the country's founding myths", are indicative of the couple's integration (Eugenides 266). Milton scrambles up the ladder of socio-economic opportunity and achieves inclusion fighting his way alone out of overwhelming material deficiencies.

Taking up his father, Lefty's business, he sets up Hercules Hot Dogs chain and becomes successful in the Greek business *par excellence*, restaurant-ownership. He is smart, intuitive and has vision. He is the self-made man. He is more American than his parents and rejects Greek culture in favour of scientific advances. Milton builds an empire from hot dogs. He longs to realise his American Dream and he succeeds eventually only to lose everything. He has successfully made the transition from his first generation Greek parents and has, in turn, transformed the third generation into an American one. Although Milton loves his children, he cares too much about his property and business and neglects his family. He refuses to work and live in a Greek town but threads the family's way through the different layers of American society to the upper class suburb of Grosse Point, "where you go to wash yourself of ethnicity" (Eugenides 382).

Milton follows the cosmopolitan tradition of the American egalitarian spirit. Yet once settled in Middlesex, the name of the street and of the futuristic house that symbolically evokes duality, he looks to the government for protection of the middle-class all-Americanness, inveighing against Stephen J. Roth, the judge who rules the desegregation of Detroit schools: "You see, Tessie? You understand why your dear old husband wanted to get the kids out of the school system? Because if I didn't, that goddamn Roth would be busing them to school in downtown Nairobi" (Eugenides 318).

Milton, lured by the American way, rejects his roots many times. His attraction for Tessie is because of her American looks; he supports the Turks in their war with Cyprus and is not interested in restoring the dilapidated church in Bithynios which Desdemona wants him to do. His invective, "To Hell with the Greeks", seals his betrayal (Eugenides 410). When he receives the ransom calls, Milton – with his confidence in money – plans to buy his daughter back from her abductor but his plan backfires. He is unaware of the fact that it is his own brother-in-law who has made the fake calls. When he learns about Father Mike's deception, he is not willing to let go of his money.

He decides to put his faith in his Cadillac which he believes can chase out Mike's Gremlin. The "difference between a luxury automobile and a newfangled cartoon car" becomes evident (Eugenides 508). Mike heads for Canada and Milton follows in a high speed chase. Milton "had been confident of bringing Father Mike to justice in the U.S. courts. But who knew what would happen once he got to Canada?" (Eugenides 507). Milton's car crashes and ironically he dies on the northern edge of the United States border with Canada. His death at the fringe of American border reinforces the idea that he is still not wholly American.

Milton's American Dream of Success ultimately collapses. His faith in money and all material things permits him to climb the ladder of success but at the end of his life, these illusory markers of success vanish. His wealth is lost and he dies in an isolated spot on the fringes of America far from his family, his house and his native land.

The third generation protagonists are fully assimilated Americans. The fact that the second generation in the novel shows remarkable signs of economic and social mobility means that their children can reap the benefits of it: they grow up in a prosperous environment as Americans. Tessie the daughter of Sourmelina and Jimmy is conceived in the same parallel moment as her husband/cousin, Milton. Milton and Tessie are born Americans, they forget their roots. Here the intermingling and weaving of the family continues. True to her open nature, Tessie is better at accepting Callie's destiny than Milton, who, had he lived, would have been unlikely to understand and accept Cal as he is. Although she feels "crushed by what had happened she intends to endure it" which proves her to be a true American (Eugenides 520).

Chapter Eleven, Milton and Tessie's son, does not dream of business success, accumulation of wealth, security, goods or status. Milton's business left in his hands goes bankrupt in less than five years. Anti-war sentiments are high unrest due to the Vietnam War and he joins the anti-war movement in an act of protest. At the same time, he radically rejects family values and leaves home abruptly in order to explore other identities.

Calliope, as she is named, refers to the Greek muse of epic poetry and eloquence. Callie, as both a man and a woman, is the observer in the novel; her eyes are the camera that captures the events on behalf of the reader. Cal is the unsurpassed choice for the narrative voice because he embodies the cross-cultural nature of America.

Cal never blames anyone for his physical condition. Even before Desdemona reveals the secret that she and Lefty are not only husband and wife but also brother and sister, he has come to terms with his body and has accepted his male identity. He is not upset by the revelation but believes that he is going to have a good time. Upon Milton's death, Cal writes, "A real Greek might end on this tragic note, but an American is inclined to stay upbeat" (Eugenides 511). Cal is both.

The American Dream in *Middlesex* appears to be a mirage that disappears when the characters approach it. In the multigenerational saga of striving for the Dream, much is achieved but the Dream itself remains elusive for the most part. The only exception in the multigenerational saga seems to be Cal. He alone is able to gain entry into one of the highest institutions of American society, the State Department. Cal becomes a cultural attaché in Berlin, an official representative of American culture.

Compared to the other characters in the novel, Cal is more pragmatic and realistic. In the conflict between dreams and reality, Cal chooses reality. He takes control of his own fate and faces his destiny. Cal is a hermaphrodite but he accepts and recognizes his sexual identity and uses that confirmation to go on to live a productive life.

Cal's American Dream is not focused on idealistic or materialistic advancements but on identity. He travels through space and time, looking for answers in his family's past, mythology and genetics. Cal accepts his hybrid nature in private, but there is no social recognition of his physical hybridity. He says "I live my own life and nurse my own wounds. It's not the best way to live. But it's the way I am" (Eugenides 106). Eugenides' novel seems here to be pushing the boundaries of the American Dream by posing the question of what it

would mean for people like Cal. Most notably, by portraying Cal's predicament, the author points to the lack of societal recognition of persons with a hermaphrodite condition. The house in Middlesex, a mirror to Cal's condition, is "a place designed for a new type of human being, who would inhabit a new world" and Cal openly declares "I could not help feeling of course, that that person was me, me and all the others like me" (Eugenides 595). While the house can accommodate all Cal's needs, it is doubtful if the new world outside will be able to accommodate his personal demands of freedom and dignity as a hermaphrodite.

*Middlesex* reveals different layers of the American Dream in the twentieth century but it is also a reminder that the Dream in its present state remains far from inclusive. The American Dream seems to be a myth that is calculated to end in failure and disillusion. While the dream is losing its luster and Americans recognize that it is becoming significantly harder to achieve, the concept endures in the minds of the numerous individuals who continue to dissect and reassemble the Dream into the form that fits their ideals. Eugenides' "masterful dissection and reassembling of the American Dream into a shape not seen anywhere before" has been commended in *The Daily* as one of the most original works on the American Dream.

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