



BOOK REVIEW

Imbolo Mbue, *Behold the Dreamers*

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At the age of seventeen in 1998, Imbolo Mbue left Cameroon to study in the United States of America where she has remained, becoming an American citizen in 2014 and publishing in 2016 her debut novel *Behold the Dreamers*. The book, which is a story about the American dream, marriage and immigration, portrays a young immigrant couple from Cameroon beginning a new life in New York City at the time of the financial crisis following the fall of Lehman Brothers, the fourth largest investment bank in the United States. It presents intersections of black and white characters within the geographical settings of Limbe, Cameroon, and New York City, America. The author's central argument reveals that the American dream, with all its promises of opportunities and material gleam, is not without woes.

In *Behold the Dreamers*, Jende Jonga and his wife Neni consider themselves fortunate to have a life in America, where, far away from the poor and difficult conditions at home in Limbe, Jende is happily engaged as a chauffeur by Clark Edwards, a rich Wall Street executive with Lehman Brothers. The couple aspire towards realizing the American dream: the dream of opportunity and escape from poverty and from the dire conditions back home. Coming as the anecdote to the story, America is imaged in the Biblical allusion of the Promised Land:

For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land – a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig-trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills. (Deuteronomy 8: 7-9)

Jende considers America “one million times” better than Cameroon, where “for you to become somebody, you have to be born somebody first” and where if you do not have a family with name or money, you can never become anything (40). America has offered him a good life as well as affirmed his humanity, and he enthuses to his boss: “Look at me today, Mr Edwards. Driving you in this nice car. You are talking to me as if I am somebody, and I am sitting in this seat, feeling as if I am somebody” (44). America is a dream world of opportunities, epitomized in the Obama phenomenon which Jende cites:

America has something for everyone, sir. Look at Obama, sir. Who is his mother? Who is his father? They are not big people in the government. ... And look at the man today. The man is a black man with no father or mother, trying to be president over a country! (40)

The American dream for Jende's wife, Neni, entails the dream of moving beyond the commonplace position of marriage and motherhood to becoming a pharmacist. She dreams that with her salary as a pharmacist, she will improve their living standards and "make herself proud, make Jende proud of his wife, make Liomi proud of his mother." And we read that "She'd waited too long to become something, and now, at thirty-three, she finally had, or was close enough to having everything she'd ever wanted in life" (14).

In any case, even though Jende is paid well as a chauffeur, his job details are daunting. Neni too is saddled with so many things at the same time: attending to domestic chores, working as a home health aide, studying, parenting their son Liomi and battling with pregnancy. In spite of the challenging reality of their immigrant struggles, the couple believe that America is full of opportunities and far better than home. They face their challenges with expectations of claiming their "share of the milk, honey, and liberty flowing in the paradise-for-strivers called America" (19).

America is the dream world where everyone wants to be. Far too many people are lustful for the country, and this puts much pressure on the immigration system. Many get into America on false pretexts, lying and cheating their way through the process. Jende goes to America on a three month visiting visa without ever intending to leave within the given time frame, given the fact that many do not travel "to America only to return to a future of nothingness in Cameroon after a mere three months," and most certainly not when they are "facing a future of poverty and despondency in their own country" (19). Migrants circumvent the laws, and exploit and triumph over the American immigration system to get papers to remain in the country either by filing an asylum or by "marrying an old white woman in Mississippi with no teeth" (19). Even a minister's daughter from a country in East Africa seeks asylum in America; and that is so because "We all do what we gotta do to become American" (20).

In the blend of Jende Jonga, the black immigrant driver, and Clark Edwards, his wealthy white boss, Imbolo Imbue delineates the common humanity of all irrespective of class and racial differences. Employer and employee share mutual affection and respect for each other. Their relationship extends to their families which have striking disparities. The Jongas' poverty, reflected in their sweating struggles and cockroach infested, squashed Harlem residence, contrasts with the Edwardses' material opulence- with the example of their astounding five bedroom summer house that is visited for only a few months a year. Yet the Jongas, unlike the Edwardses, enjoy family cohesion, harmony, order, peace, happiness, love and intimacy. And even when the couple quarrel, they are still able to come together and get reconciled. In contrast, the marital relationship between Clark and Cindy Edwards is marked by unhappy conflicts. There are several indices to the dysfunctional state of the family: Vince, the first son, lives separately, doesn't visit home often and wants to escape to India, away from all the materialism, in search of a spiritual, simpler and more peaceful life. Mighty, the second son, is heartbroken over his parents' squabbles and looks forward to occasional time out at the Jongas. Cindy is unhappy, unloved,

unfulfilled, and lonely, sinking into opium and alcohol abuse from which she eventually dies. Clark, unable to either empathize with Cindy's worsening condition or understand her accusation of his being the cause of the family's unhappiness, buries himself in his career and becomes obsessed with not only providing more material comfort for the family, but also having frequent assignation with prostitutes, buying sexual pleasures to relieve his unhappiness and frustrations.

The Edwards' family demonstrates the complexity of the American dream and equally reveals the tragedy of an over-glamorized country with individuals that are suffering, lonely and severely depressed even in the midst of opulence. As can be seen from the family's condition, dreams turn to delusions. Contrary to the promised bliss of the American dream, the Edwardses, in spite of their many privileges, lack happiness and peace and are rather trapped in some sort of destructive materialism. Earlier in life, Clark has shunned a professor's position on account of its meagre salary for the juicy wealth in banking, his decision having been guided by the fact that, in America, life is not fair to those with insufficient money: "Unless you make a certain kind of money in this country, life can be brutal" (148). In comparison with America, poverty in Africa is much simpler as Cindy, a product of rape and brutal poverty, explains to Neni:

"Being poor for you in Africa is fine. Most of you are poor over there. The shame of it, it's not as bad for you. ...

Over here, it's embarrassing, humiliating, very painful. ... Waiting in lines with homeless people to enter food pantries. Living in poorly heated house in the winter. Eating rice and SPAM for almost every dinner. Being laughed at in school. Having people treat you as if you're some sort of..." (123)

Cindy's rags-to-riches story, therefore, shows the American dream as a condition motivated by the society's negative attitude and disposition towards the poor. It is a dream driven against poverty, which is treated like a curse. The tragedy of this dream is that it does not always come with the promise: the Edwardses attain the dream, and that with neither bliss nor peace. This is best symbolized in Cindy, who, in spite of attaining the American dream, dies a useless death – alone, miserable, and deeply depressed. Clark realizes too late after his wife's death that he has sacrificed his family on the altar of illusions of career, wealth and material comfort. He tries to atone for his mistakes by re-investing himself on the children and learning "the importance of balance" (341). In the final analysis, we see a transformed Clark who acknowledges the value of relationships and the centrality of family in his farewell conversations with Jende: "Family's everything. ... I'm sure you know that already" (369).

Vince represents a dissenting voice to the American dream. Thus, he sees something ugly, frightful, and deadly behind all the material gleam. There is a vacuum – a spiritual and moral emptiness – that repels him from America and attracts him to places with a simple life, like Limbe. Averse to his own country, he is drawn to India and all the time seeks retreat in quiet places, looking for peace and something other than the joyless, sterile materialism of America. He thinks of the American law professionals as vicious liars, as "a cold-blooded cabal" ruling the society, and as "pieces of a ruthless machine that specializes in ripping out the innards of innocents" (105). He underlines his reason for not loving America and goes on to condemn the American domination of the rest of the world:

"All the bullshit the masses are blind to... so much mindlessness. ... But hey, we have our material comforts and we're saving money and corporations are creating sixty-hour-week jobs with sick leave so what does it matter if we're complicit? Let's just carry on with our lives while our country continues to commit atrocities all over the world." (342)

Indeed, Vince has rejected a position at Lehman Brothers in the conviction that corporations like that are destroying the world rather than making it better; and the eventual fall of the corporation arising from their deceitful business practices reveals their moral bankruptcy, which proves him right. The multi faces of America unfold, and all that glitters is not gold after all. The country is exposed in all its dimensions: "America the good country, America the bad country, America the country that no one could argue was the most powerful country in the world" (163).

The financial crisis caused by the fall of Lehman Brothers unleashes untold hardship on all, including the migrants and the nationals. In this period of crisis, even educated professionals "cannot expect a good life in this country anymore", and stories are told about "Mexicans who crossed the border to enter America" trying to cross the border back to their country because "there's nothing left here for them to come and get" (323). Thus, the fall of Lehman Brothers spells the end of dreams not only for the Jongas, but also for all others, hence we are told that "all through the land, willows will weep for the end of many dreams" (185).

Jende loses his well-paying job as a chauffeur to the economic recession and lowers himself to the menial job of dishwashing that pays poorly. Meanwhile, the immigration office files a case against him for overstaying. In the deepening recession and with his immigration troubles, he is diagnosed with a stress related condition that gives him excruciating back ache. He sees for himself the other side of America - the homelessness, unemployment, hunger, struggles and suffering. Finally reviewing his confidence in the American dream, he thus concludes: "I don't like what my life has become in this country.... The suffering in Limbe was bad, but this one here, right now... it's more than I can take" (306). He ponders further on the prevailing situation:

"In America today, having documents is not enough. Look at how even some Americans are suffering. They were born in this country. They have American passports, and yet they are sleeping on the street, going to bed hungry, losing their jobs and houses every day in this...this economic crisis." (307)

The story ends with Jende and his family leaving America with plans of making an enhanced living back home in Limbe with their five year savings. On a paradoxical note, the returning migrants accept and reclaim their country in all its blights: "... it's our government and it's our country. We love it, we hate it, it's still our country. ... It's our country. ... We can never disown it" (380). Finally, hope in the home country wins out as the author, through this final action by the Jongas, resists the path of despair and rather enkindles a vision of the possibilities of a better future at home.

Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* is certainly a masterpiece. Is it then any wonder that it became a New York bestseller, an Oprah Book Club pick and the winner of the 2017 Pen/Faulkner award? Spanning the two continents of Africa and America with an intersection of black and white characters, this narrative tastefully captures contemporary, global, local and diaspora experiences - shedding light on the racial divide and the globalized economic and political structures, polarized into the

rich North and the poor South regions of the world. The novel is, indeed, a masterly addition to the enlarging canvas of African fiction that has unremittingly engaged the subject of the socio-political misfortunes of the post-colonial states, most of which belong to the poor South.

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