

Tribhuvan University

Failure of American Dream in Christina Henriquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans*

**A Thesis Submitted to the Central Department of English, T.U
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in English**

By

Purna Kumar Rana

Symbol No.: 00006132

T.U. Regd. No.: 6-2-40-541-2012

Central Department of English

Kirtipur, Kathmandu

March 2020

Tribhuvan University

Central Department of English

Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled "Failure of American Dream in Christina Henriquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans*" submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, by Purna Kumar Rana has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee:

Members of the Research Committee

Internal Examiner

External Examiner

Head

Central Department of English

Date: _____

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my research advisor Mr. Keshab Sigdel, Lecturer of Central Department of English for his intellectual guidance, critical comments, genuine suggestion, and essential materials. His supervision and inspiring suggestion have helped me to prepare this research paper.

I am deeply indebted to Dr. Anirudra Thapa, the head of Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, for approving this thesis paper in present form. I am equally grateful to him for his inspiring suggestions while preparing this paper.

I would also like to express my gratitude to other professors, lecturers and my colleagues who motivated me while making my thesis paper.

Likewise, I must wholeheartedly acknowledge my gratitude to my parents and siblings for their great encouragement.

I am heartily thankful to my dearest sister Tejika Rana for her heartily support, motivation and keen interest in my work.

Finally my special thanks go to Lila Shrestha, proprietor of Durka Computer System, Kirtipur, Naya Bazar for his prompt computer typing, editing and printing.

March 2020

Purna Kumar Rana

Failure of American Dream in Christina Henriquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans*

Abstract

This research paper explores the reason for the failure of the American Dream in Christina Henriquez's The Book of Unknown Americans. In the novel, Alma Rivera and Arturo Rivera leave their comfortable life in Mexico in the hope of getting a better treatment of their daughter's brain injury and for a better education opportunity for her in America. Despite their hard work, Rivera family's dream of living a prosperous life in America remains unfulfilled. The novel shows that the promises of material prosperity rather lead these characters' life to trouble, and unhappiness at the end. The democratic values of equality and respect are crumbled by practices of discrimination based on gender, race and nationality. Immigrants never achieve prosperity and dignified life they had expected. This failure suggests the decadence of American dream. This study deals with the disillusioned and disappointed lives of characters through the racial gender and nationality based prejudice theoretical insight.

Key Words: American Dream, Inequality, Failure, Misrepresentation, Race

Christina Henriquez's novel *The Book of Unknown Americans* published in 2014 tells the story of Latinos. The family has trouble adjusting in new land after moving to America. The narrative covers the theme of alienation and crisis in identity. Immigrants' struggle against prejudice and economic hardship has been presented. The color discrimination faced by characters show the decay of democratic values in modern America in the text.

In the novel, the Rivera family does not know that moving to America may lead to the death of Arturo Rivera. He is one of the central characters who represent

the futility of American Dream. Garrett Miller is a local bully in the United States. He stands for the threat to security and peace in the United States. Miller is a trouble maker who sexually molests Maribel. They are encountered with tremendous challenges and do not find success.

In the text, Arturo and Alma Rivera migrated to America with their daughter, Maribel to start a new life. Maribel suffers from a traumatic brain injury which causes memory loss and difficulty in remembering things. Her guardians are optimistic that schools and hospitals in America will help her resemble her old self. After moving to America, Alma and Arturo settle into the Redwood Apartments. Arturo works at a mushroom farm for hours in the dark even without taking breaks for water and food. Alma struggles to navigate her new neighborhood as she suffers from extreme homesickness. After some months, she happens to be a neighbor of Celia Toro, one of the immigrants from Panama. Alma begins to learn English at a local community center and energized about life in USA .

Mayor Toro, Celia's son, is a high school student who cannot live his father Rafael Toro's dream, the dream of becoming a successful soccer star. Mayor falls in love with Maribel and learns more about her. Mayor rescues her from Miller and begins to protect Maribel. They spend more time together.

One day, Alma finds Garrett harassing Maribel outside the apartment. She frightens Miller away and returns Maribel to the apartment but does not tell about the incident to her husband, Arturo. Miller and Mayor get in to fight at school and Rafael and Celia are called in the school for a conference where they happen to know that Mayor is not on the soccer team for some time. Then Rafael does not allow his son, Mayor with Maribel. At Christmas eve, Rafael throw a large party in his apart to welcome his immigrant neighbors the Riveras, Marcados, Quisqueya Solis, Benny

Quinto, Milcho Alvarez, Nelia Zafon and Fito.

Alma is all the time anxious about Garrett and she tries to report him to the police but due to lack of evidence authorities can do nothing. Arturo notices her worries but she denies that anything is wrong. Meanwhile, Arturo loses his job at a mushroom farm and begins to lament over it for not getting a good job for a long time. Alma stops going to English class. Alma and Arturo cannot job for a long time. Rafael Toro loses a job as well. On their wedding anniversary, Rivera family went to a bustling restaurant and orders just water because they don't have money. Financial crisis badly hit them.

After a long time, Rafael Toro gets a job as a newspaper carrier. Mayor steals Rafael's car while he is in office. Mayor drives Maribel a long distance from town ignoring the messages and phone call of his father. They spend a long time together.

Alma gets worried when Maribel does not come back home for a long time. She searches her everywhere but cannot find. She tries to contact Mayor but he does not respond. Then Alma informs Arturo that Maribel is missing. She doubts that Miller has done something wrong with her. They call the police and start to search her. Arturo also goes out to find her.

Maribel and Mayor return home in the snowstorm after long time. When they arrive back at the apartment complex, Rafael is waiting for them. He asks them to get into the backseat and drives them to the hospital. They have no idea what was going on. Later they come to know that Arturo was shot to death while trying to find Maribel. Mayor feels responsible for the death of Arturo. Next day, Maribel asks Mayor if it was her fault and Mayor assures her that it was not.

After the death of Arturo, Maribel and Alma plan to return to Mexico. Alma recalls the circumstances of her husband's death. It was Garrett Miller's father who

shot Arturo. After that Alma wants to bring the dead body of Arturo back to Mexico but the hospital informs her that she will have to pay five thousand dollars to transport the body. She does not have money to pay. So her neighbors collect money to get Arturo's body back and return to Mexico, their homeland.

Jim Cullen in his book, *American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*, argues that American Dream is associated with the idea of equal opportunities and freedom. For Cullen, "homeownership" (9) is one of the elements of American Dream. It is about achieving the dream of a successful and meaningful life. Living a victorious, prosperous and perfect life is the ideal of the American Dream. It allows every individual to gain the highest aspiration and goals. It is the ideal that the nation ought to protect the opportunity of each citizen to pursue their goal of happiness. All are created equal is the main idea of the American Dream. Making one's dream achievable and attainable or available to all people is the true spirit of the American Dream. Anybody can get whatever they want with their hard work. In Henriquez's novel *The Book of Unknown Americans* the Rivera Family, father, mother, and daughter migrate from Mexico to America searching for a better life. They migrate from their place to another to make the best life possible for their daughter Maribel. The USA is supposed to be the land of opportunities and security. In the novel, the family and other immigrants cannot find appropriate work and live a better life. In this dissertation, the researcher is trying to answer the following questions: How does Christina Henriquez reflect the failure of the ideal of American Dream in her book *The Book of Unknown Americans*? Is hard work enough to achieve American Dream? Is the spirit of American Dream still alive or dead? Have all immigrants achieved their own version of success?

In her novel, Henriquez depicts the unfulfilled dream, depressed condition,

and the insecure life of immigrants in America. Arturo works hard for his economic prosperity and better life. Despite his hard work, he cannot attain his version of success. He loses his life while trying to reach his goal. Through his character, Henríquez has problematized the ideal of the American Dream. Arturo's tragic death shows the predicament of the American Dream. Christina depicts the futility of the American Dream through her character. Mother of Maribel, Alma, lives carrying the deep guilt thinking that she was responsible for Maribel's brain damage. She is frustrated and worried all the time thinking about the uncertainty of their life in the USA. Alma's character questions the idea of living happily as suggested by the idea of American Dream. She is determined to make the best version of Maribel's life but she cannot. Maribel, who suffers from brain injury, is the representative figure of isolation. The American Dream is not fulfilled yet.

Henríquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans* has been reviewed from different perspectives after its publication in 2014. Ana Castillo makes the following comment about the novel in *The New York Times*;

If it's true that — in the long tradition of “Don Quixote” — all novels are about road trips, then perhaps no novels detail the challenges of the journey more than immigrants' tales. The tradition is long and worldwide. The heart of the downtrodden, the forgotten and neglected, swell with hope at the prospect of starting over somewhere. They collect their courage along with essential belongings and begin the trek to the unforeseen. No matter if the stories they've heard about the new country are exaggerated and acculturation is a frightening hurdle, it will — it must — be better than the present situation. In this spirit, the characters in Christina Henríquez's new novel, “*The Book of Unknown Americans*,” have come to the United States. (8)

Castillo highlights the issue of hardship and struggle of the immigrants of Latin America while making a new life in America. She describes the problem that they face while serving canned food instead of fresh ones and difficulty in understanding and speaking language.

In *The Washington Post*, another notable author and critic from Peru, Marie Arana writes:

Henriquez's novel adamantly returns us to the classic immigrant chronicle, the striver's tale — a detailed account of a random, huddled mass in a two-story building, yearning to be free. And so these freshly minted Americans live out their days in that cinder-block hive, sharing little more than language — each from a different country, each with a separate history, all struggling to stake a claim on unfamiliar terrain. (9)

The former editor of *The Washington Post* Marie Arana argues that Henriquez has told the story of immigrants and strivers' story from the perspective of the American Dream. The difficulties and hardship of immigrants' in an unfamiliar terrain has been told. The simple story of immigrants has been written extraordinarily. That is the beauty of this novel. Arana also focuses on the futility of the American Dream.

American writer, Sandra Newman in *The Guardian* comments that *The Book of Unknown American* is a story of isolation and poverty. She explores the weaknesses and strengths of the novel in her review. The Hispanic immigrants move to a new land with the hope of getting their own version of American Dream. Their difficulties while adjusting in new environment help readers to connect with their pain. Newman explains:

The book is markedly stronger when it focuses on the central characters. But Henriquez spends too much time on the periphery of her story, making points

that feel at once too vague and too obvious. She should have let us get to know a few of the unknown Americans here, without twisting their story into a political parable, and without trying to tell everyone's story at once. (7)

Newman points out the major strength and weakness of the novel. She opines that the story of the novel seems too vague and obvious. Instead of giving equal attention to all her characters, she spends much time on her own story. She argues that the novel would have been wonderful if she could stop bringing multiple characters and trying to tell each person's story at the same time. For her, the good point of the novel is telling the story of immigrants' tragedy in detail. Sense of alienation, indifference and panic of missing job has been clearly depicted in the novel. For her, weakness of the novel is in its use of ever-changing point of view. Henriquez novel is a simple domestic drama to social commentary on the lives of recent immigrants in general. She has tried to generalize the American Dream fail by bringing certain failures from different part of the world. But she has not brought the story of those who have been successful chasing the American Dream.

Thus, various critics have focused on various aspects of Henriquez's novel *The Book of Unknown American* but no one has attempted to observe this text from the perspective of failure of American Dream. So, this research paper explores the causes of the failure of the ideal of American Dream as depicted in the novel..

This thesis is library-based research. The text is analyzed with a perspective to see the impact of the American Dream on the lives of the characters and its consequences. It uses the theoretical insights, criticism, and reviews for the analysis of the text. It brings the idea from American Dream analysts like Louis Althusser, Lilach Lev Ari, James Truslow Adams, and Jim Cullen. This research paper uses other relevant theoretical insights and ideas while making research on this novel *The*

Book of Unknown Americans.

This research paper investigates the different aspects of American life. The causes of American Dream fail and hardship of immigrants, especially of Latinos, are major concerns of this paper. It makes discussion on how Latinos or Hispanic people come to be unknown American and how those promises made by American Dream fail.

The unhappiness and unsuccessful condition of immigrants such as: Milcho Alvarez, Nelia Zafon, Adolfo "Fito Mosquito" Angelino, Arturo Rivera, Alma Rivera, Quisqueya Solis shows the mythical dream of American Dream. None of these characters live a successful and meaningful life in America suggested by the false ideal of American Dream. The dream of getting name and fame of immigrants does not come true. Their obsession with the dream leads them to mental trauma and loss of their family members. The pursuit of the dream destroys the life of Arturo Rivera. It shows the futility and pointlessness of the American Dream.

The term "American Dream" was first coined by James Truslow Adams in his book *The Epic of America* in 1931. He makes discussion on what the American Dream is really about. For Adams, the American Dream is the dream of opportunity and guarantee of life, liberty, and happiness. Making life better is one of the dominant ideas of the ideal of the American Dream. He explains:

The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest

stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.

(215)

Adam opines that American Dream is a belief that everyone regardless of what class they were into or where they were born can attain their own version of success. The dream is achieved through hard work, sacrifice, and risk taking rather than by chance. It is the dream of having richer, fuller, and better based on his or her ability. Everyone deserves to get equal opportunity in this dream land. Minorities, immigrants and people from all class must be provided opportunity based on their ability. It must be attainable to all people from around the world. The dream covers a wide range of issues besides monetary prosperity. For him American Dream is built on not only material success but the most significant part is equality between and among people. One must be recognized for his own contribution. Every individual has a right and freedom to seek happiness and prosperity, regardless of where or how they were born. American Dream is the view of American society that ignores the problems like racism, gender discrimination, classism, misogyny and hierarchy. Making the dream available to all inclusive genders, incomes and ethnicity is the ideal of American Dream.

The ideal of the American Dream proves to be false through the character of the Rivera family. Cullen argues equality as the "most unsuccessful part of the dream" (8). Immigrants in the United States cannot find guarantee of life, liberty, and happiness. Neither they become rich nor do they get a good job in America. Alvarez who comes from Mexico to America dreaming about becoming a successful photographer cannot fulfill his dream. Another immigrant from Puerto Rico, Nelia Zafon fails to pursue her dream of becoming a dancer. Rico faces so many

discriminations in the United States which challenge the idea of equality as suggested by the American Dream. The country with advanced science and technology fail to heal Maribel's injured brain. After entering America Alma is all the time worried thinking about the insecurity of their life not only economically but also physically. A local bully Garrett Miller is a representative figure of a trouble maker in America. He enjoys harassing Maribel. She states: "I couldn't escape the feeling that anything could happen to her at any time. As if because something terrible had happened to her once, there was more of a possibility that something terrible would happen to her again" (120).

Many critics and authors have tried to dismiss the concept of the American Dream as a myth. Greil Marcus is one of them. In *Dead Elvis*, Marcus criticizes the very ideology of the American Dream as nothing more than a "now-horrible cliché" (129).

In *The American Dream; Short History of an Ideas That Shaped a Nation*, Jim Cullen also defines American Dream. He states that "The Declaration of Independence" is "the Charter of American Dream" through which the American Dream originated and expanded beyond the narrow goal of the document to gain freedom from the British (8). He further states that the American Dream is the dream " of upward mobility, a dream typically understood in terms of economic and/ or social advancement", "the most noteworthy-and unsuccessful of all American Dreams: the quest for equality, focusing specifically in the struggle of African Americans" (8). The most widely realized American Dream "homeownership" (9). And the final Americans Dream, which is " also a dream of personal fulfillment, albeit of a very different kind than that of the Puritans or Abraham Lincoln" (9). Regarding the definition of American Dream, he argues homeownership is cornerstone of

American dream. For many Americans having a house is an essential. Because it conveys a number of financial advantages, such as that ability to collect wealth and access credit by making home equity, reduce housing costs through interest deduction and gaining long-term savings over the cost of renting. For Cullen, one of the features of American dreamers is owning a home as it allows them to own a piece of the USA. This is a dream that everyone in the United States wants to achieve. Living in an owned home makes everyone feel different from living in a rented apartment. For many Americans homeownership enhances the longing for self-determination at the heart of American dream. It develops a sense of being and belongingness. He argues that land is one of the powerful parts of ideal of American Dream. It is something worth. Cullen writes that land is a part of better life and to establish a legacy for immigrants. Owning a home is a part of American Dream.

Not even a single character in the novel *The Book of Unknown Americans* owns house and land in the United States. They are disappointed by their new apartment in the America. This is not a home they envisioned for themselves. Neither Rivera family nor other immigrants from Latinos can own new house and land in the promising land as argued by Cullen. After coming to America they get apartment which is dirty, unsystematic, and messy. Their imaginative home does not come true. Failing to buy home and land makes them feel that they are not a part of the country. The hope of getting better home, job, and education turn out to be just a myth for them. Immigrants' dream of becoming a successful dancer, boxer, soccer star is smashed. The idea of equality is not in practice. Racism is rampant in the America.

Extensive social discrimination, racism and inequality in the United States, have caused frustration in the life of immigrants. These practices have decayed the democratic values in America. The rampant racial and color discrimination practiced

in America are against the democratic values. The promise of equality is not yet put into practice as suggested by the advocates of American Dream. Commitment to false dreams has resulted in the death of Arturo and sense of alienation of Alma in the text. Black Americans, ethnic groups and racially distinct communities are deprived of opportunities throughout. The hope, dream, vision are presented as nightmare and frauds in disguise.

David Madden, the author of *American Dreams, Americans Nightmare* argues about one of the major causes of failure of American Dream.

Poverty, of course, has always contradicted the Dreams of success. For most of the hopeful... immigrants...America became a nightmare of ironies. Even some of the anarchists, socialist and communist immigrants came to America believing in the dream of freedom, equality and justice. Perhaps they expected, as in a dream, a sudden...realization of all the ideals the European Nightmare has spawned. (31)

Madden explains why immigrants come to America and what they find after entering to the US. He argues that people enter to America in the hope of making their dream come true but when the hope is shattered by unexpected consequence, there comes the nightmare. The gap between haves and have not play vital role to make American Dream Unsuccessful. The discrimination done on the basis of class has crumbled the democratic values of American society. Hard work alone can not make people rich. The promise of material prosperity as suggested by the ideal of American Dream rather leads immigrants' life to harder, unhappiness and adversity. The ideals of freedom, equality, and injustice are rampant in the United States. This practice has challenged the ideals of American Dream. Madden explains that lots of immigrants are deprived of getting opportunities due to their financial opportunities. In *The Book*

of Unknown Americans Arturo Rivera can not fulfill his wishes because of his poor financial condition in the United States. Immigrants do not get proper job opportunities not because of their inability but due to their miserable and poor economic conditions. It shows that economic crisis plays one of the important roles in making American Dream to fail. Poverty overwhelms most of the people in America.

Regarding American dream, Luther Luedtke in his book, In *Making America*, argues hard work alone can not guarantee the triumph, accomplishment and victory in USA as defined by the ideology of American Dream. He observes:

America as a promised land, based on pride in American Government and political institutions, independence and self-reliance accompanied by the hard work and initiative, commitment to communal action voluntarism and 'organizational democracy'... optimism, rights of others equality...a preference for the concrete...coping with all sorts of problems were continuous marked conviction of initiatives. (20-21)

For Luedtke, hard word is essential to attain success. But the perseverance and struggle of blacks and other minorities have gone in vein. The legacy of democratic republicanism and cultural colonialism and the feelings of superiority and inferiority between and among the people created problem in making American Dream come true.

Jennifer L. Hochschild in her book *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* writes" American Dream includes no provision for failure; a failed dream denies the loser not only success but even a safe harbor within which to hide the loss" (30). The pursuit of financial security, economic security and personally fulfilling life, and having ability to control and freedom to participate in achieving the dream have not been accomplished by the characters in the novel. Many

people in America are excluded from taking part in the American Dream since race, gender and class determines access to opportunities. Hochschild argues "American who do everything they can and still fail may come to understand effort and talent alone can not guarantee success" (20). Economic and educational attainments are also crucial component of American Dream especially for family with low income. Ethnic and social discrimination makes worse situation especially of immigrants. Inequalities existing in USA have helped American Dream to remain only as a dream which never gives birth to reality. The unfair opportunities given to pursue dream only to certain group and class are one of the major barriers to achieve American Dream.

Henriquez criticizes American society for depriving Latinos of their American Dream. Although the concept of American dream is changing over time it is still fascinating and inspiring people worldwide. Henriquez in her novel shows that people from minorities no longer have access to upward social mobility. Discrimination is one of the challenges and hindrance for the accomplishment of American Dream. Success has been like an outdated principle.

The American Dream is associated with the idea of achieving prosperity through hard work, determination and courage. These values are still prevalent in the USA. The characters in the novel serve as Henriquez's critique of the American Dream. Characters in the novel embody a criticism of America and American experience. Henriquez deconstructs the concept of the ideal of American dream even in twenty first century. The inequity, prejudice and hierarchy between and among the people are responsible to destroy the ideal of American dream. Characters are rejected from job just because he is not the citizen of the United States. They are misrepresented in the media as gangbanger just because of their nationality. Such evil practices has caused the fall of American dream. These negative practices contribute

to the decay of moral values in the modern society. Moral values are decaying in the American society.

Racism in the United States has existed for centuries. It is a systematized form of domination by one race against another. Mayor, one of the central characters from *Panama*, his experience as an outsider helps to understand the widespread racial prejudice based on skin color prevailed and practiced in the United States. His characterization claim that people are treated differently based on the social implications from cultural meanings attached to skin color. He reveals that individual in America is treated unfavorably just because they are of a certain race and their personal characteristics associated with race. Race is undoubtedly taken as visual realities which badly affects lives of many Latin American. Regarding racial discrimination, Keith says “Assumptions linked to physical difference stem from the widespread belief during slavery times that dark skin and African features were a sign of lack of intelligence, ugliness, and evil, whereas light skin represented purity, civilization, and beauty.” (27) It shows that all assumptions about facial attributes such as skin color, hair texture and facial features determines one's characters. Blacks, women, African Americans, and Latin Americans are still supposed to be less intelligent, ugly, barbaric, and passive whereas whites are thought to be more intelligent, active and civilized in America. One day while driving, Mayor's mother Celia Rafael asks why he was driving dangerously slowly, Rafael tells that cops will pull over black and brown people for even the smallest reason. Rafael was was “just trying to blend in,” as it is “the way of the world” (165). Celia agrees that blending in is at least “the way of America” (165). The conversation between Mayor's father and mother below also describes the situation:

“You don't understand,” my dad said. “They stop you.”

“Who? What are you talking about?” my mom asked.

“That’s why I was being cautious.”

“Who stops you?”

“The police. If you’re white, or maybe Oriental, they let you drive however you want. But if you’re not, they stop you.”

“Who told you that?”

“The guys at the diner. That’s what they say. If you’re black or if you’re brown, they automatically think you’ve done something wrong.”

“Rafa, that’s ridiculous. We’ve lived here for fifteen years. We’re citizens.”

“The police don’t know that by looking at us. They see a brown face through the wind shield and boom! Sirens!” (165)

The practice of prejudicing black and brown people in American society dismantles the democratic values and assumption. Black Americans and immigrants from Latin American countries still suffer from hate crime in the United States. The mounting number of such racially motivated hated crimes is threat to the equality and justice for all people as said by the American dreams. It reveals how much black and brown faces are harshly treated and undervalued by the white people. The discrimination between white and blacks have contradicted the core values of fairness and equal treatment for all people in America. The idea of equality suggested by American dream is destroyed when Latin American family faces such racial discrimination in the society. The above conversation between Mayor’s father and mother suggests that even though it has been long time the American society has been fighting for equality. Many individuals from around the world still are facing the similar kind of prejudices in the United States. Blacks are still oppressed and immigrants are still marginalized based on their color skin and racial background. African, Asian, and Latin American

people are taken as source of wrongdoing and barbarism. When something wrong happens in the society, the first thing the whites do is to doubt blacks.

Sexual objectification of women is one of the reasons which decays the moral values of American society and ultimately leads to the failure of those ideas promised by American dream. Women are supposed to be the prey and object of men in American society. Quisqueya Solís, an immigrant from Venezuela who got abused and raped by her own stepbrother when she was sixteen. She is treated as a mere object of sexual desire. Quisqueya's difficult and even dangerous life story highlights the vulnerability and desperation many immigrants face. For men, she is behaved as a commodity without regard to her dignity. She feels that she is constantly watched and targeted with sexual perspective by her own step brother just because she is a woman. Regarding sexual objectification of women, one of the popular feminist writers, Soraya Chemaly in her book *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women's Anger* writes:

I was as much an object of reproduction as I have ever been an object of sex. The physical transformation of a person's pregnant body, in a rapid and highly visible way, is a material objectification. Pregnant women are stared at, commented on, and touched; we belong to everyone. Even strangers feel free to comment on our weight or size and tell us how to eat, what to drink, and how to move. When women themselves perceive that they are being objectified, which happens every day to a visibly pregnant woman, they act more like objects, moving less and speaking less. (103)

Chemaly argues that women are constantly watched as an object. They are more likely to be targeted with hateful violence simply because they are women, each day. Such practice prevails especially in patriarchy where society is dominated by men.

They do not have right on their own body. It is male who controls her physical body and they can use her whenever they want. They are supposed to be touched and stared at by male counterpart. Conservative values and patriarchal structure gains importance and popularism. Quisqueya becomes the victim of so called patriarchy even in America. Her body was severely used by her own stepbrother. She states:

It's okay. We're not really brother and sister, so it's fine." But it wasn't fine with me. I tried to push him off, but he was stronger than me. I wasn't a prude. I had kissed boys before. But this was not what I wanted. He came at me again. He knocked me to the floor and climbed on top of me. He did unspeakable things, all against my will. I don't know why, but he thought he could do whatever he wanted. That's how boys are. Later, I told my mother what he had done to me, but she didn't believe it. She accused me of trying to ruin things for her. She said, "Look at this life they've given us." She warned me not to be ungrateful. Of course, I was only more upset after that. (117)

A home is always associated with the idea of security, safety and love but a woman is not secure even in her own home. Her character reveals that America still has a patriarchy. Male dominance is weakening but it's not completely gone. Violence and injustice against women is not over yet. Such practices have caused the degradation of American society. Women have not completely been able to exercise their freedom as suggested by the American dream. For men, women are like an object and they can play and use it whenever they want. Women in American society are under compulsion to endure the oppression and repression imposed by their male counterpart. Such discrimination has truly violated the freedom of women. Undemocratic practices and activities are some of the reason of the downfall of so called the American Dream.

Rocil Rivadeneyra, L. Monique Ward, Maya Gordon, in their journal *Distorted Reflections: Media Exposure and Latino Adolescents' Conceptions of Self* argue that Latinos are portrayed as the most hot-tempered, aggressive and laziest people. They write:

Media portrayals of Latinos are often stereotypical. On primetime television, Latino characters are more likely than characters of other ethnic groups to be cast as having low-status occupations, including being four times as likely to portray domestic workers than any other ethnic group and having lower job authority than European-American characters. In addition, Latinos are more often represented in stories related to crime and participate in a disproportionate amount of conversations about crime and violence on primetime programming. Latinos are more likely than members of other groups to be portrayed as having an accent, as less articulate, and as less professionally and appropriately dressed. (162)

This reveals that immigrants in the news media of the United States are often portrayed as conservative and less intelligent. It is the American media which picturizes immigrants as drug dealers. Even in film they are provided the role of criminal and rapist. One of the Latino character in *The Book of Unknown Americans*, Micho Alvarez becomes the very victim of misrepresentation of other countries in American news media. Alvarez states:

You listen to the media, you'll learn that we're all gangbangers, we're all drug dealers, we're tossing bodies in vats of acid, we want to destroy America, we still think Texas belongs to us, we all have swine flu, we carry machine guns under our coats, we don't pay any taxes, we're lazy, we're stupid, we're all wetbacks who crossed the border illegally. I swear to God, I'm so tired of

being called a spic, a nethead, a cholo, all this stuff. (235)

It shows that immigrants are inequitably represented in American news media. The stigmatizing terms like "gangbangers" (235) and "drug dealers"(235) are appeared in the headline news of American media to portray Latinos depressingly. The main stream media treat them like criminals. They are often portrayed with derogatory descriptions in American media and their voices are rarely covered. They are thought to be undocumented and unauthorized in most of the media coverage. Latinos are addressed with dehumanizing terms like illegal immigrants and illegal aliens in almost every news outlet. No coverages are concerned on the health and well-being of them. Most of the news article about immigration contains racist terms, derogatory and misleading in reference to immigrants. Such stereotypical representation of Latinos characters attack the entire ethnic group's morality, work ethics and dignity. Immigrants are usually reported on in drug related stories and transgression. Latinos and immigrants are more likely to be stereotyped as unintelligent, aggressive, unprofessional, comedic and criminals. It is media witch criminalizes immigrants. They are portrayed as other and outsider even in social networking sites. The hegemony of American media network upon the world helps in shaping the false vision of America. American media network usually produce false concept about the Latinos. The white operated media presents them as essentially uncultured and weaker. In many movies, they are shown as barbaric and uncivilized creature.

Another problem of the American society is the nationality-based discrimination. The practice of nationality-based discrimination is still widespread in the United States. The culture of immigrants is not accepted and appreciated in the United States. American culture is still practicing the worst kind of prejudice. Open discrimination against Latinos and immigrants from different countries in the world

has decayed the moral values of American society. People are not treated as they are but judged by the type of passport immigrant possess. Immigrants in the United States are still deprived of getting job opportunities just because they are not Americans. Hernandez in her novel introduces a character named Nelia Zafón, who came from Puerto Rico to be a dancer in New York becomes the very victim of Nationality-based discrimination. She cannot get the opportunity to be a good dancer just because she was an immigrant. She is disqualified not because she was not able but due to her ethnicity. Zafón states:

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. (176)

Zafon's character represents the widespread nationality-based prejudice observed in the United States. Such undemocratic practices have caused the decadence of moral values in US. Zafon's role in the novel reveals the face that those ideas of getting of equal opportunity and chances as suggested by the American dream, regardless of where you born or what class you were born into can attain your own version of success are false belief. Your chances of being selected in job interview depend largely on your nationality but not on personality and ability. Such practice exists not only in major business and company but also in movie theatre. Zafon is rejected to play the role of housekeeper in a Spanish play due to her ethnicity and nationality. Talent, hard work and capability are not enough to get the work, the idea of

nationality still matters in terms of getting better job and life style. She can't perform in the play because she was a Puertorriquena, an immigrant. Your struggle to be recognized for your efforts in the job market goes in vain if you are not the citizen of the United States. It proves that you have to be an American to get something without any hindrance. The idea of equal opportunity is just a myth for immigrants.

Hate crimes in the United States plays vital role for the decadence of American dream. Such phenomenon has caused the downfall of democratic values and assumptions. The injustice based on the religion and race is still prevalent in the United States. Such factors have played vital role in making American Dream fail. Immigrants' cultural practices are not appreciated in America. Micho Alvarez is one of them who is frustrated by the hatred attitude of Native Americans towards immigrants. In the novel Alvarez narrates “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?” (237) The Hispanic immigrants in Henriquez' novel are largely unknown, lost and hated both socially and culturally. Through her character we can know that hate crimes are widespread in American society. It is prevalent in US. American really have hatred attitude towards immigrants. The practice of ignoring and insulting people from around the world has violated the democratic values and assumption of the United States. The rampant racial and religious biases persisted in United States are the sign of failure of all those ideas set by the American dream. Such hatred crimes lead to the downfall of American society. All immigrants who has lived and worked in the United States have contributed for the development of America but what they have gained in return is the discrimination and hatred. Their

life is devalued and their contribution is always underestimated.

Violence against women has many serious forms. One type of hostility faced by immigrants in the United States is sexual brutality. The practice of dominating and assaulting women physically and mentally is against the moral values. Such activities practiced in American society have caused the loss of human values and ethics.

Women in Us are not safe and secure. Garrett Miller is a white American bully who sexually assaults Maribel and her mother is prevented from going to report the incident to the police. Alma is all the time worried that somebody might rape her daughter Meribel. Garrett is a bully who sexually molests Maribel. His character reveals the fact that there is no sense of security in America.

Because of him, Arturo dies in a confrontation with the Miller family. He stands for the unfair treatment in U.S. Such incidents make Alma unhappy all the time in a so-called land of opportunity and happiness. Alma states:

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. I screamed. The boy startled and spun his head around. “Get away from her!” I yelled. I raced to wedge myself between them, yanking Maribel’s shirt down, shielding her with my body. The boy said something in English, something unintelligible to me, but I could hear the indignation in his tone and without thinking, I turned and spat in his face. He grabbed my arm, digging his nails into my skin. “Go, Maribel,” I shrieked. “Go to the apartment! (121)

This line said by Alma shows the horrific condition of women in American society. It

shows the ignorance of sexual violence though it has remained largely in the society. The mounting number of sexual assaults has also contributed to the decadence of American dream. Even in so called modern democratic country like America such rape culture and sexual harassment is common. Through Maribel character we can know that misogyny runs rampant in society. Sexual abusers are not punished because women are terrified to tell the authorities about their assault. The never-ending cycle of sexism has plagued American society for years. Such Rape culture has increased the social degradation. Even in so called modern society women are still suppressed and taken and seen as inferior to men. They are supposed to be the weaker sex. Such kind of mind set up can be found through Garrett Miller's character in *The Book of Unknown Americans*. Miller's character tells more about the American society where an environment for women is created to treat women with less respect than men. Even the films and videos and book provides adventurous for men whereas women are given the role of dependent and traditional stereotypical roles.

Garrett Miller constantly bullies Mayor and sexually assaults Maribel. Her mother goes to the police after witnessing the assault. But the police dismiss the incident in between just because she can't speak English well. She says "English was such a dense, tight language." (132) Alma's inability to make conversation in English leads to miscommunication and a misunderstanding of the facts. She feels traumatized and deeply concerned that her husband will blame her for not keeping daughter safe. Not single agency tracks arrests the perpetrator although the incidents are supposed to be reported to the local police. Such bullying impacts on the dignity of female in American society. There is no one to speak in favor of immigrants in the United States. Justice is usually denied in American society. Through this incident there is no genuine policy that provides a mechanism of restore for the victim. Justice for the

victim is not guaranteed in the United States. Such immorality causes the loss of human values. Among many reasons for the loss of human values, using women as an object is one of them which contribute to the loss of humanity. Garrett character reveals that men do what they want.

Apart from these, there are other factors as well which causes American dream to fail. Steven F. Messner and Richard Rosenfeld in their book, *Crime and the American Dream* argue that the American dream is responsible for the increasing number of crimes in the world. This book makes a discussion on how the ideal of the American Dream contributes to the high rate of violent crime and its aftermath. The ideology of the American dream contributes to crime by making people employ illegal means to achieve goals. It indirectly effects on crime. The American Dream contributes to crime. They take the American dream as a cause of crime problems in the contemporary United States. They write "serious crimes in the United States are higher than other advanced nations is population heterogeneity" (27). One of the causes of the increasing number of crimes in America is population diversity. In the novel, Henriquez introduces one of the immigrants from Nicaragua, Benny Quinto works as a smuggler to get out of Arizona where he was forced to live in horrible conditions with others until he could pay off the debt he incurred in his journey over the border. It is the ideology that forces him to work as a smuggler and to cross the border illegally. They write:

The American Dream thus has a dark side that must be considered in any serious effort to uncover the social sources of crime. It encourages an exaggerated emphasis on monetary achievements while devaluing alternative criteria of success; it promotes preoccupation with the realization of goals while deemphasizing the importance of how the goals are pursued; and it helps

create and sustain social structures incapable of restraining criminogenic cultural pressures. (11)

Benny Quinto is a Nicaraguan immigrant who came to the U.S making money but end up on working as a smuggler to get out of Arizona where he was forced to live in a horrible condition with other immigrants until he could pay off the debt he incurred in his journey over the border. To pay that debt he comes to be a drug and weed supplier. Quinto's version of the American Dream is dangerous than he thought. He becomes a theft coming to America. In the beginning, he says "drugs hadn't come into my life then" (136). Later on when he cannot earn money, steals money from the church. Running after American dream ruins his life. It makes him theft and druggist. So the idea of getting own version is now observed in his life. The ideas set by American Dream do not come true in the life of Quinto. Chasing American dream, he end up becoming a smuggler.

José Mercado, an immigrant from Puerto Rico is a representative figure of the American dream failing. He prefers to be a poet. Markedo cannot be what he wants rather he joins in the military which is his father's wish. His father is overjoyed when he becomes navy but he is upset. It shows in America people are guided not by their own instinct. They are walked by certain people's opinion but not by their own.

Marcado states:

I love esoteric things in life. My father used to call me an aesthete. He meant it not as a compliment, of course. He was disappointed by my interests and by the fact that they were not the same as his, which were farming and raising livestock. He believed a man should work hard with his hands, that toil and sweat were evidence of a virtuous life. He did not appreciate that I wanted to read books and that I saved money to buy an easel when I turned fifteen and

that I would spend the afternoons painting pictures of trees. The only time he was proud of me, in fact, was when I joined the navy. (214)

Achieving own version success is not probable yet in American society. People in America are still controlled by their parent's wish. They are not free to pursue their own version dream. They can't become what they want to be. His character reveals the unpredictability, futility, and uncertainty of life. Success, happiness, and achievement are just a false concept. People are not accepted for what and who they are. They are not controlled by their own wish but somebody's order and insights control them leading them to the stage of unhappiness.

Henriquez problematizes the ideal of American Dreams through immigrants like Rivera family, Quisqueya Solis, Nelia Zafón, Milcho Alvarez and Adolfo "Fito" Angelino in her novel. Immigrants in the United States cannot attain their own version of success. The dream of achieving success, the pursuit of happiness, earning name along with fame, and living prosperous lives of these characters remains unfulfilled. The false ideology of the American dream leads them to an uncertain direction. The idea of success and happiness is not guaranteed on its virtue. They find the American dream nothing more than just a myth. Its ideology of the American dream does not offer what they thought it would. The reality of the American dream is uncertainty, unknowability, difficulty, and struggle.

Arturo and Alma Rivera migrate legally to America from Mexico in an attempt to heal their brain-injured daughter, Maribel. America which is known as the country with advanced technology can not heal Maribel. They cannot find a better job and live meaningful lives. They are all the time unhappy after entering the land of the USA. They are unable to accomplish their own version of a dream. There is so much discrimination within America. Immigrants are treated like drug dealers, gangbangers

and terrorists by media. Alvarez is the best example of it. His dream of becoming a successful photographer does not come true. He does not get anything as suggested by the ideal of the American dream. What he gets in America is discrimination, prejudice, hatred, and humiliation. Alvarez's characters show the falsity of the American dream. Cultural and linguistic barriers make characters feel that the American dream is a fantasy. Another, Nelia Zafón from Puerto Rico come to America dreaming of becoming a big dancer gets frustrated by her inability to score any roles just because of her ethnicity.

Adolfo Fito Angelino from Paraguay cannot fulfill his dream of becoming a successful boxer. He cannot earn name and fame. What he earns is the nickname "Fito Mosquito" (145) due to his small frame. Quisqueya Solis from Venezuela also does not have a wonderful story. Rather she has a harsh and bitter life story which is the story of struggle, discrimination, and prejudice in the United States. She wants to keep the story secret. She does not want anybody to know her story just because she does not want anyone's pity. They are unknown in America and nobody wants to know them.

The analysis of the novel shows that the uncontrolled prejudice and inequality that exist in American society are major reasons for the failure of American Dream. The widespread discrimination on the basis of skin color, gender, nation and class causes hindrance to achieve those ideals set by American Dream. Undemocratic activities, immorality, hate crime and sexual violence also lead to failure of American Dreams. Misrepresentation of immigrants in American media is against the democratic values of American society. Brown faces and black people are always treated as criminal and gangbangers in the United States. Immigrants are treated as aliens in American culture. Similarly, the sexual violence is also prevalent in

American society. Patriarchal belief system also contributes to American dream fails. Women are still suppressed and dominated in the so called modern and free country, the United States. The ideal of equality and justice is limited only to the papers of American constitution. Racial prejudice is another important factor which does not allow achieving success. People are deprived of opportunities just because of their skin color and nationality. What people get is the unhappiness, frustration and alienation in America.

Henriquez's characters struggle hard with the disappointment of not being able to be recognized in America and for not getting their dreams in reality. Characters suffer from the feeling of unseen and unrecognized. The pain of not getting what they want has been depicted by Henriquez in her novel. They are unhappy all the time on their uncertain journey. They are under compulsion to look back to their past for the solace and peace which was in their homeland. Chasing American Dreams makes their lives hard. It leads them to death as well. Looking for material progress and prosperity leads their life to sadness. Happiness is lost in their lives. The days of sadness and frustration begins when they enter a new land or Promised Land, America. American dream turns out to be nothing more than just an illusion and myth. It shows the futility, pointlessness, and predicament of American Dream.

Henriquez critiques on the ideal of the American Dream through her novel *The Book of Unknown America*. The social injustice and prejudice in the United States are responsible forces for the failure of American Dream. Hard work alone cannot guarantee better life in the United States. Not everyone can attain his/her own version of success as suggested by the ideology of the American Dream. The idea of life, liberty, happiness is not guaranteed yet. The ideal of the American Dream is just an illusion. The reality of it is a life full of struggle, tragedy, unhappiness, and most

importantly uncertainty. The idea of equality is limited only to the theories mentioned in the Constitution of America. This novel reflects the frustration and anxiety of people due to running after the American Dream. The quest for American dream leads the human life to the illusion. The life is missed when one chases the ideals set by American Dream. It leads people to the uncertain journey and direction. The tragic and miserable situation of characters in Henriquez's novel *The Book of Unknown Americans* indicates the predicament of American dream.

The analysis of this novel shows the flaw of American Dream which has resulted into the decadence of American values and cultures. Rampant racial discrimination, sexual violence, hate crimes, cultural hegemony, patriarchal belief and poverty are the major reasons for the dissolution of America's democratic values. Characters' failure to achieve their own version of success suggests the decadence of moral values and ethics in America. The ideal of prosperity and richness suggested by the ideology of American dream remains unfulfilled at the end. The practice of social injustice and color discrimination are also responsible for the tremendous deterioration of democratic values in the United States. The idea of equality, independence, and pursuit of happiness do not exist in Henriquez's characters. The promise of success and fulfillment fails. Most of the characters come to be unhappy and become the victim of tragedy running after American Dream which is reflected in Henriquez's novel as the critique of American Dream.

Works Cited

- Adams, James Truslow. *The Epic of America*. Little Brown, 1931.
- Arana, Marie. "The Book of Unknown Americans by Cristina Henríquez." *The Washington Post*, 24 June 2014.
- Castillo, Ana. "Americanos." *The New York Times*, 3 July 2014.
- Chemaly, Soraya L. *Rage Becomes Her: the Power of Womens Anger*. Atria Books, 2019.
- Cullen, Jim. *The American Dream: a Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Henríquez Cristina. *The Book of Unknown Americans*. Vintage Books, 2014.
- Hochschild, Jennifer L. *Facing up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*. Princeton University Press, 1996
- Luedtke, Luther S. "Making America: the Society and Culture of the United States." *Amazon*, The University of North Carolina Press, 1992.
- Madden, David, ed. *Introduction: American Dreams, American Nightmares*. Amsterdam: SouthemIllionis UP, 1770.
- Marcus, Greil. *Dead Elvis: Chronique Dune Obsession Culturelle*. Allia, 2003.
- Messner, Steven F. Messner, and Richard Rosenfeld. *Crime and the American Dream*. Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2013.
- Newman, Sandra. "The Book of Unknown Americans by Cristina Henríquez – Review". *The Guardian*, 19 July 2014.
- Rivadeneira, Rocío, et al. "Distorted Reflections: Media Exposure and Latino Adolescents Conceptions of Self." *Media Psychology*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2007, pp. 261–290., doi:10.1080/15213260701285926.