

Depiction of the American Myth in Contemporary and Postmodern Literary Narratives: A Comparative Study of Charles Bukowski's 'Ham on Rye' and Chimamanda Adichie's 'The Thing Around Your Neck.'

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Abstract

The American myth promotes the idea that everybody has access to all opportunities in the US if they are willing to work hard for it. The immigrants in the US passionately hold on to that belief. Based on Charles Bukowski's 'Ham on Rye' and Chimamanda Adichie's 'The Thing Around Your Neck', which both capture the contemporary situation with immigrants entrapped in the American dream from a postmodernist point of view, this paper attempts to investigate the reality behind the American myth as exposed by these two authors. The characters in both narratives arrive in the US under a grand deception about the American myth. They are first fascinated by the beauty of America. The methodology uses a qualitative research design where the two narratives are subjected to a 'textual analysis' from the dimensions of unemployment, poverty, and disillusionment, in a setting where the immigrants are bluntly marginalized and alienated. The findings reveal how Charles Bukowski provides an insight into the influence of the American myth on an immigrant family during the Great Depression and how Chimamanda Adichie depicted its impact on an immigrant working woman from a developing country who flies to the US in order to pursue her dreams. They reveal the patterns followed by the American myth during its journey under the contemporary postmodernist influence.

Keywords: American myth; Contemporary; Immigrants; Narratives; Postmodern

Introduction

The Oxford English Dictionary mentions that the American dream is "the ideal that every citizen of the United States should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination, and initiative." On the contrary, the aforementioned American dream has become merely a concept that limits the individual in America. Churchwell (2021) has also mentioned that the American dream opens a chasm between fact and fancy, and the whole fine dream is detached from the living zone of the present. This dream of endless progress was indistinguishable, Lippmann wrote, "from those who dream of a glorious past." Both dreams were equally illusory. The history of American myth returned to the postmodernism period, where the 'Great Depression' was the worst economic crisis in the modern history of the commencement of World War II in the year 1939. The fall of the stock market in New York City happened because every American and immigrant had invested their savings in stocks. Consequently, there was a rapid expansion in the U.S stock market, and it reached its peak in

August 1929. The main idea of the American myth empowers the idea that everybody has access to equal opportunities in America as long as they are willing to work hard for it. The aforementioned idea is deeply rooted in the American democracy. The Americans and the immigrants focused more on materialistic goals rather than moral values. Because of such a disillusioned concept, the working-class people aspired to enter into Upper-class society. As Hugh (2005) mentioned, Charles Bukowski was a German who immigrated to America and presented his real-life experiences as an immigrant who flew to America in order to realize his American dream. (p.67). In his debut semi – autobiographical novel, ‘Ham on Rye,’ he depicted the young gentleman called, the life of Henry Chinaski. The novel, ‘Ham on Rye’ was a postmodern novel which was written in 1982. As Bogdanowicz (2014) mentions ‘American myth’ is simply the sum of views, visions, images, values, beliefs and the opinions which are presented United States as a positive country, but the reality is depicted by intervention of the term, ‘American myth’ which embodied the opposite of the positive connotations of the term, American myth (p.15). As Onunkwo & Chigbu (2024) state, a myth is a story that shapes their view of truth and false (p.45). On the other hand, Roseqvist (2023) mentioned that ‘The Thing Around your neck’, which is written by Chimamanda Adichie problematizes the idealization of the American Dream while contrasting it with migrant’s experiences (p.42). Simultaneously, the characters seem to be unable to fully disconnect their lives from their Nigerian origins and always feel somehow displaced both from Nigeria and the United States. The short story ‘The Thing Around Your Neck’ is a contemporary short story that was published in the year 2009.

Adichie depicted the character ‘Akunna’, who was struggling with poverty in Nigeria and moved to the United States while following the American myth. Both writers have narrated the story of American myth in two different time periods and the ways in which the lives of those characters have become unfortunate because of following American myth. The purpose of the present research study is to investigate the performance of American myth in both the Postmodern and the Contemporary contexts. The objective of the present research study is to investigate the performance of American myth in both postmodern and contemporary contexts through referring to the story of ‘Ham on Rye’ by Charles Bukowski and the story of ‘The Thing Around Your Neck’ by Chimamanda Adichie. Thus, the study examines how the concept of American myth is depicted in the postmodern story, ‘Ham on Rye’ and the contemporary story, ‘The Thing Around Your Neck’.

Materials and Methods

The present study uses a qualitative research design where the stories of the ‘Ham on Rye’ and ‘The Thing Around Your Neck’ are analyzed through ‘Textual Analysis.’ The two stories are analyzed using a specific theoretical framework of American myth. The theoretical framework of American myth is created through referring to scholarly research articles.

Results

According to Priyanshu (2022) the poor Americans were continuously affected by unemployment and poverty because of the consequences of the Great Depression. The Immigrants were disillusioned because of the American myth, and the poverty was widespread like the sea without a shore. People were helpless without a job. Bukowski (1982) has portrayed the fate of all the fathers of Chinaski’s neighbourhood as follows,

All the fathers in my immediate neighbourhood had lost their jobs. My father had lost his job. Gene’s father sat on his front porch all day. My mother went to her low-paying job each morning, and my father, who did not have a job, left each morning too. Although most of the neighbours were unemployed, he did not want them to think he was jobless. So, he got into his car each morning at the same time and drove off as if he were going to work. Then in the evening, he would return at exactly the same time. (Ham on Rye, 1982)

Unemployment also caused widespread poverty. The condition of the immigrants was worse than that of the Americans because they were deeply marginalized, unlike the Americans. In the novel, *Ham on Rye*, the young Chinaski has been provided with harsh treatment for scars on his body at the L.A. Country General Hospital. It seems that the treatments were at the experimental level while using young Chinaski. Bukowski (1982) has portrayed the level of harsh and unfair treatment of boils at the hospital as follows,

My sessions with the drill were endless. Thirty-two, thirty-six, thirty-eight times. There was no fear of the drill anymore. There had never been. Only an anger. But the anger was gone. There wasn't even resignation on my part, only disgust, a disgust that this had happened to me, and a disgust with the doctors who couldn't do anything about it. They were helpless and I was helpless, the only difference being that I was the victim. They could go home to their lives and forget while I was stuck with the same face. (Ham on Rye, 1982)

On the other hand, Franklin (2013) mentioned that immigrants who highly worshipped the American myth believed that high performance would bring economic success. The aforementioned fact has itself become a myth because the Great Depression had already ruined the ways of Economic success. Kheirandish (2024) mentioned that if one wants to achieve success in America, they should keep struggling without asking questions. As Patrizi (2022) states American dream has created the disillusionment of the ideal America, which is available in the imagination of immigrants who immigrated to America with the hope of economic success, which is beyond their hope in the current moment. As Daniel (2024) indicates that the character is not able to locate themselves in a particular society because they are alienated from the available society. The character was going through the inevitable struggle to maintain their African culture and principles while trying to assimilate into American culture. According to Ryan (2007), the postmodernist text is the opposite of a classical text. The postmodernist texts do not welcome self-reflexiveness because postmodernists believe that while self-reflexiveness is a technique which facilitates the chance of avoiding the problem of worn-out plots. On the other hand, postmodernist fiction writers refuse to accept the hegemony of representational truth and instead accept the uncertainty of the status of reality in their texts. Simultaneously, Barthes (2008) mentioned that the myth contains the system of natural language, or object-language, possessed by the myth in order to build its own, and it contains the myth itself, or metalanguage, which is a secondary language used for describing the primary one.

The aforementioned discussion of the scholars paved the way for the following three dimensions. Each dimension will be analysed in relation to both postmodern narrative and the contemporary narrative.

- The unemployment, poverty and the disillusionment
- Immigrants were bluntly marginalized
- Alienation

Discussion

In the postmodern narrative, the Chinaski family was a German immigrant family who settled in America to achieve economic success. The family was disillusioned from the beginning. Since every character is disillusioned, the characters were not guided to get out of disillusionment. Everyone lost their job and stayed at home. Some of the characters tended to commit suicide. Henry's father followed the disillusioned idea without question. Due to the fall of the stock market, everyone lost their jobs. Young Chinaski's father had pretended that he was going to work. Bukowski (1982) portrayed the disillusioned life as a result of the American myth as follows,

My mother lost her job. My father kept leaving in his car every morning as if he was going to work. "I'm an engineer," he told people. He had always wanted to be an engineer. (Ham on Rye, 1982)

The adult Henry aspired to be a writer whose career dream had been shattered due to his poverty. On the other hand, the life story of Akunna is depicted in the contemporary narrative 'The Thing around your Neck' by Chimamanda Adichie. Akunna was a poor Nigerian woman who came to America with the belief that she would be supported by her uncle. Unfortunately, Akunna was raped by her uncle. Akunna remained silent because she was poor, and she was not ready to believe the unfortunate reality of the American dream. For both of the characters, young Chinsiki and Akunna, survival was not easy. Adichie (2009) started her work by introducing the American myth, which seems to be familiar to Sri Lankans as well. In that way, this concept of the American dream is not only limited to a certain part of the world, but it is a universal concept.

You thought everybody in America had a car and a gun; your uncles and aunts and cousins thought so, too. Right after you won the American visa lottery, they told you: In a month, you will have a big car. Soon, a big house. But don't buy a gun like those Americans. They trooped into the room in Lagos where you lived with your father, mother and three siblings, leaning against the unpainted walls because there weren't enough chairs to go round, to say goodbye in loud voices and tell you with lowered voices what they wanted you to send them. (The Thing Around your Neck, 2009)

In the postmodern narrative, the Chinsiki family has immigrated to America from Germany. Henry was diagnosed with a skin acne where he gets boils. He visited the hospital intending to receive medicines for his boils. Consequently, Henry was provided a strict treatment with severe pain. The young Chinsiki has learnt that the aforementioned treatment had been performed on Henry as an experiment. Bukowski (1982) portrayed the unfortunate situation of young Chinsiki because of being a victim of the American myth. Being poor, he was not able to get the privileges that were received by the rich. He was discriminated being the experiment of the treatments for the rich.

What I minded was that they didn't know how to deal with me. I sensed this in their discussions and in their manner. They were hesitant, uneasy, yet also somehow disinterested and bored. Finally, it didn't matter what they did. They just had to do something -- anything -- because to do nothing would be unprofessional. They experimented on the poor, and if that worked, they used the treatment on the rich. And if it didn't work, there would still be more poor left over to experiment upon. (Ham on Rye, 1982)

Henry missed the success of his first job application, and the same was offered to an American. In the contemporary narrative, Akunna has been raped by her uncle. Her voice is silenced because she is an immigrant to the United States, and she is not familiar with the cultural context of that particular country. Besides, Akunna falls in love with an American. On the contrary, Akunna feels that she has marginalized within the relationship because of being a Nigerian in America. Adichie (2009) mentioned Akunna does not want her boyfriend to visit Nigeria or sympathize over her helplessness.

You did not know how you could ever afford a ticket and your rent. He said he really wanted to see Nigeria, and he could pay for you both to go. You did not want him to pay for you to visit home. You did not want him to go to Nigeria, to add it to the list of countries where he went to gawk at the lives of poor people who could never gawk back at his life (The Thing Around Your Neck, 2009)

Many Americans were curious about Nigeria and asked Akunna many questions. In such a context, Akunna was touched by the warm welcome of her boyfriend's parents. She looked at them and felt grateful because they did not examine Akunna as an exotic trophy and an ivory tusk (p.23, The Thing Around Your Neck). Akunna feels that even her boyfriend loves her because he has appreciated the cultural values of her country. At the beginning of their relationship, Akunna is followed by an American senior of a state university (later her boyfriend). Adichie (2009) mentioned that the American has taken his first move to get along with the Nigerian girl as follows,

After your shift that night, he was waiting outside, earphones stuck in his ears, asking you to go out with him because your name rhymed with hakuna matata and The Lion King was the only maudlin movie he'd ever liked. You didn't know what The Lion King was. (The Thing Around Your Neck, 2009)

In the post-modern narrative, the Chinskai family is alienated towards the cultural aspects of that country. Henry's father encouraged Henry to be well-educated and be the best in the class. Unfortunately, being the best has been owned by the Americans. The story depicts the growth of the young Henry. The readers can be exposed to the life of the young Henry, including how Henry has been exposed to the knowledge of puberty. Henry's father does not allow him to play with his friends in the backyard because his father believes that Henry should play with rich American children. On the contrary, Bukowski (1982) has mentioned that the particular behaviour of his father has led him to be secluded in society. In that way, one can understand the fact that the father is alienated from the available social context because he is a blind follower of the American myth. Simultaneously, Henry has become a socially secluded individual. Even at the end of the novel, the adult Henry leads such a socially secluded life without his family and friends.

I still wasn't allowed to play with the children in the neighbourhood. but sitting in the bedroom often got dull. I would go out and walk around in the backyard, looking at things, bugs mostly. Or I would sit on the grass and imagine things. One thing I imagined was that I was a great baseball player, so great that I could get a hit every time at bat, or a home run anytime I wanted to. But I would deliberately make outs just to trick the other team (Ham on Rye, 1982)

In the contemporary narrative, Akunna is a young immigrant who has immigrated to America with the hope of achieving economic success. Unfortunately, she feels that she does not belong to the American culture, and she yearns to be with her community in Nigeria. The aforementioned fact has been reflected through a specific phrase which is used in the narrative. When she goes to bed at night, 'The thing wrapped itself around your neck, that nearly choked you before you fell asleep, started to loosen, to let go.' She always thought of going back to her roots, but she tries to survive in the American culture. Adichie (1982) has mentioned that most of the time, Akunna is emotionally depleted. Akunna is with her boyfriend in his apartment. He mentioned that he discarded his parents' offer to visit the summer cottage in the Quebec countryside.

You dropped a glass, and it shattered on the hardwood of his apartment floor, and he asked what was wrong, and you said nothing, although you thought a lot was wrong. Later, in the shower, you started to cry. You watched the water dilute your tears, and you didn't know why you were crying. (The Thing Around Your Neck, 2009)

Finally, when her father dies, she is not able to stay in America any longer, and she returns to her roots in Nigeria. Akunna feels guilty and conscious of being unaware of her father's death. She has tried to remember and locate where she was when she lost her father. Adichie (2009) has hinted to her readers that Akunna is not supposed to return to the place where her soul has been unfairly depleted. It seems that Akunna would stay in her home country. She would select being in her comfort zone back in her home rather than being with an American in an unknown country.

He said you knew what he meant, Would you come back, come back? You turned away and said nothing, and when he drove you to the airport, you hugged him tight for a long, long moment, and then you let go (The Thing Around Your Neck, 2009)

Conclusion

The present research study provides insights into the evolution of American myth from the time period of Postmodern period to the Contemporary period. During the post-modern period, the influence of American myth is weightier than in the contemporary period. Charles Bukowski has depicted a dark

image of American society. It further relates the beginning of the American myth as a consequence of the Great Depression. On the other hand, Chimamanda Adichie has depicted the impact of American myth towards an immigrant from a developing country who flew to America in order to pursue her dreams and the dreams of her family. In addition, Charles Bukowski's writing has depicted the harsh and cynical visual imagery of American myth. On the other hand, Chimamanda Adichie's writing style makes the reader empathetic towards the main character of the story, Akunna. Both contexts lead towards the life which has been survived at the deception of American myth.

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