

EXPLORING THE MYTH OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN AMERICANAH: A CLASSICAL MARXIST PERSPECTIVE

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Received	Revised	Accepted	Published
02 November, 2024	02 December, 2024	17 December, 2024	24 December, 2024

ABSTRACT

This research work critically examines the portrayal of the American Dream in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah (2013) through the lens of classical Marxist theory by performing textual analysis. The classical Marxism theorized by Karl Marks, including its concepts of materialism, class struggle, alienation, and exploitation of the working class has been used as a theoretical framework for the textual analysis in this research. The main objectives are to investigate the reality of the American dream in Americanah; to analyze it from the lens of classical Marxism; and to identify its effects on the behaviors of the people. The study investigates how the themes of materialism, Americanization, prosperity, and upward mobility are central to the ideology of the American Dream which perpetuates a class-based social system. The study finds that Americanah depicts characters struggling with the illusion of upward mobility and success promised by the American Dream. The novel presents the characters' growing aspirations and disillusionment due to economic determinism and highlights their continuous class struggle, false consciousness, and alienation. Based on the detailed analysis performed under the established framework, the study reveals the continuous economic and societal exploitation experienced by the protagonist due to the capitalist nature of the American Dream in a society divided by social classes. It challenges the ideological accuracy of the American Dream and exposes it as a myth by highlighting the material realities of capitalism.

INTRODUCTION

Karl Marx (1818-1883) is often regarded as a revolutionary thinker and reformer rather than a philosopher because of his philosophical influence on the principles of communism in the twentieth century (Cleaver, 1986). Marx is known for his exploration of history through the perspective of the class system and the struggle between them.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels developed Marxism's main ideas in the 19th century. Classical Marxism focuses on concepts of class struggle, alienation, exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie, dialectical materialism, and a critique of capitalism. These ideas are placed in the original

works of Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels, such as The Communist Manifesto and Das Kapital, (Marx and Engels, 1848 / 1888; Marx, 1868). Karl Marx emphasizes comprehending society by examining economic relationships and class struggles and aims to replace capitalism with a classless society. Marx's early writings explore the concept of alienation which is a unique social issue reflected in human behavior. The Marxism theory focuses on societal changes, particularly those directly linked to economic systems and earnings that have shaped the course of history. It explains how humans interact with society and the environment. It also

emphasizes that survival and resource production depend on material conditions. Marxism argues that these conditions shape human actions and events and are always influenced by history. Each era impacts society. Historical materialism allows people to view the present through the lens of the past (Bukharin, 1926/2013).

Dialectical materialism is a key concept in Marxism, highlighting the ongoing conflict between economic forces. For Marx, history is "dialectical" due to the continuous class struggle, while "materialism" reflects the real basis of human conflict. David Macey explains the concept of Marx regarding dialect in his book *The Penguin Dictionary of the Critical Theory* (Macey, 2000). He says that dialectical materialism represents the clash between opposing classes and its impact on the means of production. Marx's dialectic links with social, economic, and ideological forces and it illustrates that all aspects of society are interdependent. This framework explains societal progress and provides a path for future development. It connects closely with Marx's ideas of base and superstructure.

Base and superstructure are essential concepts in Classical Marxism. It highlights the connection between production systems and the development of civilizations. Marxism divides society into two parts: the base and the superstructure. The base or infrastructure consists of employers, workers, and laborers who produce goods and services and they primarily benefit the upper class. The superstructure, on the other hand, encompasses society's ideologies, institutions, and culture, which are shaped by the base. Karl Marx (1859/1973) explains the difference between these two elements in detail in *Foundations of a Critique of Political Economy*. He says that the mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. (p. 2) Marx viewed commodities as the foundation of capitalism, where goods and services are bought and sold. He argued that laborers themselves become commodities under this system. Because workers have less power and face high levels of unemployment. The laborers are easily replaceable and easily diminish their value (Calhoun, 2002).

The class theory plays a central role in the theories of Marx. He argues that Marxism opposes capitalism and illustrates the historical evolution of economic systems. These two systems naturally chase each other which results in conflict between the social classes. According to Marx, every society is divided between two social classes the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, produced in capitalist society. In a capitalist society, the bourgeoisie controls the means of production, giving them power over the proletariat, who are exploited to meet only their basic needs (Marx and Engels, 1848/1888).

The Communist Manifesto critically examines class struggle and the conflict between capitalism and communism which reveals the relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. They said in *The Communist Manifesto* that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx & Engels 1848 / 1888, p. 12).

Marx and Engels (1848/1888) describe this conflict in *The Communist Manifesto* as a struggle between the oppressed and the oppressor, stating, "It's a struggle between freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf" (p. 12). This battle can only end through revolution or re-constitution of society. According to Marx, a revolution occurs when the oppressed move from a class 'in itself' to a class 'for itself,' a transformation driven by both objective criterion and subjective criterion.

The control of society lies firmly in the hands of the bourgeoisie. As the dominant class, the bourgeoisie exercise their power by controlling means of production and social relations. They position themselves as the ruling force. Marx emphasizes the bourgeoisie's dominance in the same essay that they are masters within democratic states. Major institutions, whether the military, universities, media, churches, or industries—are under their influence. This makes the bourgeoisie the supreme ruling class while the proletariat occupies the role of the plebeians. The laboring class is dependent on the bourgeoisie for survival. The workers forced into labor for minimal wages, face exploitation which inevitably leads them to question their social position and develop class consciousness.

E.P. Thompson (1980) in *The Making of the English Working Class* further elaborates on this idea. He describes that class consciousness leads

workers to think critically about social organization. In France, for instance, journalists supported the working class by highlighting their struggles through newspapers, fostering unionization. The role of the press is to unite workers which demonstrates that class consciousness is the initial step toward political mobilization.

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx discusses that class consciousness produces class struggle which will lead to the eventual downfall of the bourgeoisie and the rise of a classless society. He says that the bourgeoisie is their own gravediggers because in the future it may happen that when the proletariat gathers its strength and becomes a superpower through revolution, then they would be capable of transforming the system. However, this systemic change is no simple task and raises the question of how class conflict emerges and what causes it. Karl Marx explains this through the concepts of "Class in itself" and "Class for itself." A "Class in itself" refers to workers who share a collective existence but have not yet realized their shared interests. In contrast, "Class for itself" occurs when workers achieve self-realization, recognizing that they face common struggles. Once they unite to seek solutions to their problems, they transform from a "Class in itself" into a "Class for itself," they become conscious of their collective power and engage in active class struggle.

On the other hand, the American Dream is the national ethos of the USA that was born from the US Declaration of Independence in 1776. America's founding fathers laid the foundation for America's future through constitutional documents. The Declaration of Independence asserts that "all men are created equal" (US, 1776, p. XLV) and emphasizes the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." This idea was restated in their constitutional documents to highlight its importance. However, the term "American Dream" was later coined by James Truslow Adams (1931) in *The Epic of America*, where he describes it as "a land where life should be better, richer, and fuller for everyone, with opportunities based on ability and achievement" (p. 374).

The concept of the American Dream has evolved to offer opportunities and freedom regardless of one's background. American success is often seen as the product of hard work, while wealth is viewed as a

reflection of virtue. Henry David Thoreau's seminal work *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854), investigates the impact of pursuing one's dreams with confidence and determination. Thoreau argues that if an individual follows their dreams with conviction and dare to live the life they truly desire, their strong will and persistence will ultimately lead to success. This idea is associated with Thoreau's transcendentalist philosophy which champions self-reliance, individualism, and the importance of following one's inner guidance.

The concept of the American Dream stirs curiosity in people and is often explored through American literature. It plays a key role in shaping many literary works, where it stands as a central theme. Frederick Carpenter (1968) discusses this connection between American Literature and the Dream,

The American dream has never been defined exactly, and probably never can be. It is both too various and too vague: many men have meant many different things by it...But 'American Literature' has been defined more exactly and has been outlined in courses and embodied in anthologies. Most men agree that it is something very different from English literature, and many have sought to describe the difference...American literature has differed from English because of the constant and omnipresent influence of the American dream upon it. (p. 3)

The American Dream represents various interpretations. For some, it presents upward social mobility, for others, it represents unlimited opportunities for all, particularly for non-native Americans. According to the Oxford Dictionary, the American Dream is "the idea that every citizen of the United States should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination, and initiative" (Oxford University Press, 2008). While different people see success and prosperity as synonymous with the American Dream, societal conflict becomes a failure sign of the American Dream. For example, some argue that economic hardship played a role in the mass attack on the US Capitol in January 2021 (Theocharidou, 2022). However, this event was more of a political conflict than a direct consequence of the American Dream's failure (Theocharidou, 2022). Along with economic factors, the influence of socio-political

dynamics also shapes the meaning of the American Dream which offers a deeper and more aspirational perspective on its significance.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered a speech on civil rights on August 28, 1963. His speech is grounded on the American Dream. He emphasized that this dream was shared by both White and Black Americans. He said,

I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise and live out the true meaning of its creed. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. (King, 1963, August 28)

The American Dream is a fundamental part of political discussions, encompassing freedom, social equality, civil rights, financial opportunities, and personal advancement. It goes beyond material possessions and high incomes; it also emphasizes social norms and rights. Every individual in society regardless of gender, caste and creed has the right to a fulfilling life and social freedom irrespective of their background. This freedom should be respected by others. The American Dream is about the progress and development of both men and women, and it is free from the obstacles of traditional society, class systems, and capitalism. Adams (1931) in *The Epic of America*, promoted the meritocracy system, asserting that individuals should be valued based on their inherent abilities and their potential to achieve their dreams rather than their family background or social class. The meritocracy system aims to maintain a fair balance among people. In the American Dream, one's place, circumstances, and social status are not as important as their merit (Wald, 2017). Merit is the essence of the American Dream in a society without classes, where people would be hardworking, honest, and self-made. No individual would despair or feel disheartened when faced with failure, or when their dream remains unfulfilled (Carlin, 2004).

Marxism and the American Dream

The concepts of Marxism and the American Dream are fundamentally different; however, both aim to provide fulfilling and satisfied life experiences to the individuals in a society. Marxism opposes the

capitalist societal structure by advocating for a classless society and criticizing the accumulation of wealth. On the other hand, the American Dream, as the national ethos of capitalist America, promises equal opportunities for all and seeks to address social inequalities. While in theory, the American Dream promises harmony and satisfaction through equal opportunities, it also conflicts with Marxism as it promotes the accumulation of wealth and class struggle (Carlin, 2004).

The American Dream promises that through hard work, creativity, and skill, anyone can start from nothing and achieve a higher standard of living. It includes owning a house, a car, or a business, selecting the ideal workplace, and having the courage to take risks, with the potential to be rewarded for those efforts (Horton, 1982).

The primary reason why many people around the world desire to immigrate to America is to pursue the American Dream. They are willing to take risks and make sacrifices to achieve this dream. This ethos indicates that people are not restricted to a class system in America and have numerous opportunities to change their fortunes (Jillson, 2004). Some scholars, such as Illouz (1997) and Taylor (2017), argue that the American Dream has strayed from its original ideals. They suggest that during the remarkable economic growth in America in the 1960s and 70s, the emergence of industrial or economic giants who achieved their American Dream paved the way for a capitalist society based on a class system, overshadowing the original concept of the American Dream. Marx also expressed similar concerns in *The Communist Manifesto*, he highlighted the potential for a class system to emerge in American society based on its capitalist structure.

Modern industry has established the world market, for which the discovery of America paved the way. This market has given an immense development to commerce, navigation, to communication by land. This development has, in turn, reacted to the extension of industry; and in proportion as industry, commerce, navigation, and railways extended, in the same proportion the bourgeoisie developed, increased its capital, and pushed into the background every class handed down from the Middle Ages. (Marx and Engels, 1848 / 1888, p. 4-5)

Ideology arises from the true or false consciousness of the thinker, whether it be repressive, capitalist, or Marxist ideology. The thinker must shape the structure and content of their thoughts, and decide whether to accept the prevailing ideas in society or develop their ideology. Engel (1893) explains the process of ideology in his letter written to Franz Mehring about Marx and Engels Correspondence. Engels explains this process of ideology, stating that a person's "real motives remain unknown to them; otherwise, it would not be an ideological process at all" (para. 4). Ideology and human consciousness are closely connected, as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels explored through the concepts of infrastructure and superstructure. Infrastructure relates to the means of production, while superstructure represents the illusory notion of ownership held by the upper class. In a capitalist society, the superstructure oppresses the working class through low wages and exploitation and makes the worker feel trapped in their role. Marx argued that this oppressive behavior of the superstructure creates uncertainty and instability in both society and the economic system.

The concept of the American Dream and the ideology of capitalism promote an imbalanced and repressive system in society. Capitalism is also seen as a repressive ideology because the ruling class easily disguises itself and presents human behavior as being in favor of all classes when in reality they are not. Althusser (2006) explains the repressive state ideology in his book *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. He describes the state as "a 'machine' of repression or violence, which enables the ruling classes to ensure their domination over the working class" (para. 52). He further explains that religion, school, family, and politics are the main forces in the Ideological State Apparatus and their function is to subtly promote the same repressive ideology in society. This ideology fosters a culture of competition within the system and works to present this trait as a natural aspect of human behavior. Such behavior reflects social Darwinism, which supports the survival of the fittest. Social Darwinism plays a crucial role in promoting industrialization and laissez-faire capitalism in America.

Industrialization and wealth in America have led to overproduction and deflation. Karl Marx (1867 /

1887) states in *The Capital* that "the capitalist production process breeds over-production, speculation, crises" (vol. 3, chap. 15, para. 4). Marxist theorists argue that social Darwinism and laissez-faire capitalism benefit only a few while the American dream spreads these inequalities. Marxist theoretician Karl Kautsky describes the financial life of the American worker in his article *The American Worker* as "the spectacular development of American capitalism implied that American workers should be especially impoverished" (p. 258). The American Dream not only tells the story of American capitalism but also diminishes class consciousness among American workers.

In the following sections of this paper, we will discuss the research questions, objectives, methodology and significance of the study that lays the foundation for this research. Finally, the textual analysis of the portrayal of the American Dream in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* through the lens of classical Marxism will be presented along with the conclusion of this research work.

Research Questions

1. What is the reality of the myth that enshrouds Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*?
2. How can the American Dream be examined from the perspective of Classical Marxist study portrayed in *Americanah*?

Research Objectives

1. To examine the myth of the American Dream in *Americanah*.
2. To identify and explore the ideals of the American Dream in *Americanah* from a Classical Marxist view.

Research Methodology

This research paper uses a qualitative approach to conduct a Marxist analysis of the selected text. The research paper focuses on textual analysis, it examines themes of class struggle through the lens of classical Marxist theory. The research paper explores the Marxist element in the novel by analyzing its narratives, character relationships, and themes which highlight these aspects and critique the class dynamics within the story.

Research Statement

The research is conducted to examine the American Dream in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and identify the classical Marxist elements. The protagonist is an African migrant to the United States, who is in search of better opportunities as promised by the ethos of the American Dream. She faces multifaceted challenges during her quest for upward mobility. Although the American Dream promises equal opportunities for everyone in the USA, the challenges faced by the protagonist and other characters in the novel are mainly introduced by the capitalist origin of the American Dream and the societal structure of America. The characters represent the traits of continuous class struggle, dialectic materialism, commodification and disconnection from their own self that leads to different kinds of alienation during their quest to achieve the American Dream. Their dissatisfaction and discontent with the American Dream eventually led them to class consciousness, self-discovery and actualization. Therefore, the need to analyze, understand and evaluate the myth of the American dream and its effects on society from the contrary point of view arises evermore.

Significance of Study

This research presents a critical approach to readers and will help them explore Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* from the perspective of Karl Marx's Classical Marxism. The Marxist literary interpretation of the American Dream portrayed in *Americanah* and presented in this work will allow readers to broaden their perspective of social and economic life in America. It nurtures their imagination of a society that, supposedly, revolves around the concept of happiness and satisfaction. This study will be helpful for readers to initiate the necessary introspection of the contemporary societal values in the USA and other parts of the world with a capitalist societal structure, and to advocate for a model of development that values equality, human connection, community well-being, and cultural integrity over mere financial metrics.

Literature Review

Critics have often been drawn to the unique style and approaches of Adichie and appreciate the peculiarities and attention to detail in her work. Adichie's work has garnered a wide range of responses. American literary figure Ruth Franklin (2013) in her article *Homeland Truth: A Young Woman from Lagos Upends her False American Existence*, praises Adichie's writing. Franklin highlights how *Americanah* offers a fresh, eye-opening perspective on the world. She also points out that the novel focuses on the arrogance of white women and emphasizes their indifference to the struggles of black women. According to Franklin, Adichie masterfully conveys the pain and challenges faced by black women through her protagonist Ifemelu.

Nigerian essayist Yemisi Ogbe (2013), in her review titled *Americanah and Other Definitions of Supplemental Citizenship*, explores the novel's portrayal of the Nigerian people's journey toward self-awareness and realization in America. Ogbe highlights that in the U.S., Nigerians are seen through the lens of race and color, whereas in Nigeria they are simply Nigerians with no distinctions based on skin color. She also touches on the challenges Adichie faces as a Nigerian writer in choosing the language for her work, as many African authors write in the language of their colonizers. However, Adichie views English as a global language that most people can understand. By blending English with the Igbo language in her novel, she adds a new depth to her writing, infusing it with cultural significance. This, Ogbe notes, reflects the idea that language is closely tied to culture.

In *A New Generation of African Writers: migration, material culture & language* (Cooper, 2013), she praises Chimamanda Adichie's blend of Igbo and English, she also highlights its cultural richness. Scholars Faith O. Ibhawagbe and J.N. Edokpayi sketched Adichie's empirical approach to the writing in their article *Situational Variables in Chimamanda Adichie's and Chinua Achebe's (Ibhawagbe & Edokpayi, 2012)*. They also note that Adichie's use of both languages not only preserves African culture but also challenges Western cultural dominance. In *Americanah*, the

characters Ifemelu and Obinze navigate life abroad through their multilingual skills. Ifemelu's ability to seamlessly mix African idioms with English helps her build social and cultural connections, illustrating the power of language to overcome segregation and cultural gaps.

Antoine Berman's (2021) article *Translation and the Trials of the Foreign* highlights the challenge of translating prose. He observes that novels often reflect a mix of languages within a polylingual society. In *Americanah*, Adichie skillfully balances translated and untranslated words she tries to maintain the essence of both Igbo and English. This blend preserves the beauty of the original languages while also drawing from global literary traditions. The protagonist of the novel Ifemelu masters in foreign speech. A key aspect of the novel is code-switching between languages, showcasing the characters' multilingualism and Adichie's talent for conveying their spontaneity

Davies's article *Mobility, Embodiment and Resistance: Black Women's Writing in the US* (1994), explores Adichie's unique perspective on family, society, and identity. Adichie addresses themes like cosmopolitanism, Afropolitanism, Afrocentrism, and Nigerian nationalism, particularly through Ifemelu's blog in *Americanah*. Louis Chude-Sokei (2016), in his article *Redefining 'Black'*, discusses the novel's portrayal of the old and new diasporas. He highlights how Ifemelu, as an international student in the U.S., reflects the experiences of black students and challenges universities to reconsider their policies on international students, noting that black immigrants often benefit from the broad category of "black" (para 12).

In the article of Serena Guarracino (2014) *Writing "so raw and true": Blogging in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah* discusses the Ifemelu's blog in *Americanah* that "Americanah is...a story that self-consciously engages with the tropes of Afropolitanism in its arena, social media, by having its character writing a blog not just on Nigeria or the US, but on race as a global discourse" (p. 11). She engages with Afropolitanism and addresses race as a global issue through social media. The blog serves two main purposes: to critique the traditional writing of post-colonial authors and to highlight racial discrimination in America. Adesanmi and

Dunton (2005), in their article *Nigeria's Third Generation Writing*, describe Adichie as a third-generation Nigerian writer. She has deeply concerned with issues like migration and displacement in Nigeria and she prioritizes political struggles.

Textual Analysis

The textual analysis of the *American Dream* in *Americanah* from the perspective of classical Marxism is presented in the following section

1 Commodification of Labor in *Americanah*

The characters in Adichie's novel represent the nuances of commodity and value in their pursuit of class struggle. The book portrays America as a place where different nations, like Nigerians, Japanese, and Chinese, unite and explore each other's cultures. "The best thing about America is that it gives you space" (Adichie, 2013, p. 434). Whether it's Ifemelu, Obinze, or Auntie Uju, they all work hard to transition from a "class in itself" to a "class for itself." This journey helps them in their quest to achieve the American Dream.

Obinze, like many young Nigerians, views America as a land of opportunity where dreams can be realized. He often tells his mother, "America is the future" (Adichie, 2013, p.88). The belief is that through political and economic freedom, the American Dream is attainable for anyone regardless of social status, with sacrifice, hard work, and determination. Richard M. Huber (1971), in *The American Idea of Success*, emphasizes that the American Dream is accessible to those who show resilience and strong resolve, affirming that with effort and success is within reach for all.

To achieve the American dream Obinze leaves Nigeria in pursuit of better opportunities and to break free from the constraints of his social class. However, he soon finds himself as a commodity and entangled once again in the confines of the capitalist society of the United Kingdom. Marx & Engels (1848 / 1888) said in *The Communist Manifesto* "The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honored and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-laborers" (p.5). The upper class takes away the dignity of people who belong to the middle and lower classes. The lower class

becomes the regular workers who get paid to work for the upper class, instead of being admired for their special roles. Their work is valued only to help the bourgeois to keep control. Obinze is treated the same way. Being a commodity in the UK, Obinze struggles hard to earn a living. An Angolan advises Obinze that to survive in London, he must work hard. "You can work, you are legal, and you don't know how fortunate you are" (Adichie, 2013, p.227). Obinze also receives advice from Ojiugo, his cousin Nicholas's wife, who warns him that trying to change social status and fit into such a system can be extremely challenging and frequently useless. "This country is not easy" (Adichie, 2013, p. 240). Obinze works tirelessly to improve his social status but apart from hardship he is unable to secure a white-collar job, he works various menial jobs, including cleaning bathrooms and loading warehouses, using a fake identity to survive and obtain an NI number.

"Obinze -as Vincent informed his agency after his experience with the curled shit on the toilet lid, that he would not be returning to that job. He scoured the newspaper job pages made calls and hoped, until the agency offered him another job, cleaning wide passages in a detergent packing warehouse." (Adichie, 2013, p.251)

Despite Obinze's hard work, he faces similar challenges in the UK which he used to face in Nigeria. In a capitalist society and being treated as a commodity, he works at a warehouse where his efforts outweigh his earnings. To improve his financial situation, he seeks a salary increase as he considers his services to be a valuable commodity. In capitalism, labor is treated as a commodity because they are powerless and can easily be exploited for profit. High unemployment devalues labor and leaves workers struggling. Karl Marx was troubled by this exploitation and devoted himself to fighting for the working class. He condemned the mistreatment of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie because it promotes the class struggle in society.

2 Class Struggle in Americanah

Job opportunities play a key role in class struggle because it inspires the working class to climb the social ladder and achieve equality. The proletariat envisions a society without the division between rich and poor, where equal opportunities exist for all.

This hope for equality drives their efforts to create a classless society. Fungai Mbengo (1978) explains in his article Marxist Theories in Class and Class Struggle that "carrying the fight on until it results in socialist revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat, extinction of the classes and the creation of classless society are being prepared." The ultimate goal of a socialist revolution is that it will lead to the extinction of social classes. The proletariat's struggle is focused on achieving equal rights and advancing their future by eliminating class distinctions.

In the book by Robert L. Heilbroner *Marxism: For and Against* (1980) explains that Marxist class struggle that "Marxist depiction of class struggle is not merely that of a never-ending contest that will continue as long as mankind exists. Rather, it is a struggle that eventually achieves the conditions necessary for its own resolution" (p.73). Similarly, in *Americanah*, Ifemelu faces class struggles and seeks solutions through her blog, using it to address and resolve her social class challenges. However, her class conflict is further complicated by the influence of economic growth and political power.

In *Americanah*, the characters strive for economic empowerment because they believe it will give them influence and the ability to shape society according to their values. Ifemelu and Auntie Uju share the view that the capitalist system offers opportunities for everyone to succeed financially. An American author Lois Tyson (2014) says in her book *Critical Theory Today: A user-friendly guide* "Get- rich- quickly" (p. 69). It reflects the belief that wealth can bring fast success. Ifemelu believes that financial success and hard work bring recognition and admiration to herself and she will become the part of bourgeois which shows that economic status, social power and influences on society. To achieve her financial goal, she faces lots of problem. Being a black woman and being part of the working class Ifemelu faces many challenges in America. Finding employment can be challenging for black individuals with kinky hair, leading some to consider removing their braids or other protective styles to increase their chances of getting hired. "Later, she said, "I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair. Kemi told me that I shouldn't wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional"

(Adichie, 2013, p.119). In the quest for the American dream through class struggle and social mobility, individuals frequently end up compromising their identities. The result of Americanization is the erosion of one's sense of self as people become disconnected from their original identities.

In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, the story not only touches on economic class but also explores deeply social struggles and the influence of economic power. The novel portrays workers like Obinze and Auntie Uju as part of the working class whose labor supports the privileged bourgeoisie. Auntie Uju's endless efforts to improve her financial situation and for that she had to work three different jobs in America. After the General's death, Auntie Uju forms a relationship with Bartholomew, attracted by his well-paying job and his divorce. Her marriage to him is driven by a desire for social and financial security. To cope with the difficulties she faces in America, she even adopts a fake American accent, using phrases like "wanna" and "gonna." In a capitalist society, the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat is often framed as a class struggle which could eventually give rise to revolutionary communism. The theme and formation of the novel attract the reader to read according to Marxist perspective. The novel presents the synergism where American Africans, African Americans, and Africans only get the experience of life in a capitalist society where society is divided into two major blocks Upper and Lower classes. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1848 / 1888) present these differences in society in a political document with the title *The Communist Manifesto*. It presents the theory of class struggle and revolution. They say, "Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat" (p.4). Karl Marx argued that the upper class holds immense power because they control businesses and the means of production. This control allows them to manipulate and exploit the lower class and workers by restricting their opportunities and limiting their potential. The reduction of labor to a mere commodity is a defining feature of class conflict.

Class conflicts have led to societal divisions throughout history, A phenomenon that has endured

since ancient times. Karl Marx was against the capitalist system. He argued that whenever the bourgeoisie gained power, they exploited the working class by taking everything from them as commodities. In such societies, human labor loses its significance across all forms of value—whether use-value, exchange-value, or intrinsic value. Marx critiqued the economic structure of capitalism in his book *The Capital* (1867/1887), where he states, "The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as 'an immense accumulation of commodities,' with its basic unit being a single commodity" (p. 27).

3 Glimpses of Alienation in *Americanah*

In America's capitalist society, the shades of alienation are apparent. The **detachment** between labor and its product creates tension and division within the community. Workers become alienated not only from their products but also from the production process. Workers can see the product but they are unable to buy it because of the low wages and high prices which eventually lead to feelings of powerlessness and separation. This treatment of the bourgeoisie demonstrates a disregard for the working class. Furthermore, it appears that the bourgeoisie does not recognize the importance of seeing women as individuals and treat them with equal respect. As Marx and Engels (1848 / 1888) say in *The Communist Manifesto* "He has not even a suspicion that the real point aimed at is to do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production" (p.20). In pursuit of respect and equal status in society, Ifemelu seeks to rise from the lower class to the upper class. She is deeply involved in the class struggle which leads to her alienation. In *Americanah*, Marx's concept of alienation is visible in various characters. The alienation from the product is observable in the staff and waiters at Curt's hotel. The waiters feel completely disconnected from the food they serve. Apart from this detachment, the waiters of the hotel feel more separated when they see that their owner Curt hires black people for the position of waiter. "The only black person was a stiffly dressed waiter" (Adichie, 2013, p.231).

The protagonist of the novel *Ifemelu* also experiences the effect of alienation in the U.S. The theme of alienation appears in the context of identity, race, and the migrant experience. All these

traits of alienation are affected by social and economic structures. Ifemelu faces all the challenges of alienation in the U.S. She feels alienated from her Nigerian identity and sense of self. Her experience of low-paid menial jobs illustrates estrangement from work because it does not reflect her capabilities and her intellectual ability. When she used to work at a gas station, where a Mexican man humiliates her by objectifying her: “You’re here for the attendant position? You can work for me in another way” (Adichie, 2013, p.145). Her struggle for a job in the United States of America further alienates her from her true Nigerian self. Ifemelu’s interview with the tennis coach alienates her from her dignity, chastity, and work. The capitalist economic system forces her to get such jobs which decreases her value and pushes her towards alienation from work which shows the weak status of labor under capitalism.

Apart from her work alienation, the detachment from herself further moves forward as she steps into the upper class. This social alienation pushes her in a different direction. On one side Ifemelu enjoys the luxuries of upper-class life with Curt by having numerous visa stamps, first-class travel, and fine linens. She briefly considers marrying him for a more comfortable life but at the same time, she thinks that she has to reevaluate her values, race, and identity because American societal expectations force her to adopt the behavior and attitudes that feel foreign to her. “Ifemelu thought, as she sometimes fleetingly did, of being married to Curt, their life engraved in comfort” (Adichie, 2013, p.199). As an African immigrant, Ifemelu experiences not only social alienation but also emotional alienation in her romantic relationships with Curt, Blaine, and Rob. Despite their affection, her cultural and racial differences leave her feeling isolated and disconnected. Her colorism separates her from American society and economic structures in the U.S.

The indifferent attitude of American society makes Ifemelu marginalized and excludes her from the dominant culture. This racial, emotional, and social alienation is rooted in the capitalist society she lives in, which often intensifies competition and prioritizes individualism.

4 Dialectical Materialism in Americanah

Karl Marx presents dialectical materialism. He introduces new ways of thinking that challenge the traditional ideas of Hegel. Karl Marx (1844 / 1970) says in his book *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, “Accordingly, the idea of the ‘real’ world loses its true significance as reality and becomes only the external, phenomenal appearance through which or in spite of which one should recognise the rational” (p. 13). From Marx's perspective to realize thoughts and ideas requires active effort. The occurrences in the real world should be taken into account and reflect this reality of ideas. The emphasis is on the interplay between ideas and actions. Society doesn't evolve solely through ideas; instead, material conditions shape ideas and society.

Karl Marx’s concept of dialectical materialism focuses on material conditions in society that create conflicts, and divide people into two main classes. This division drives social change and affects individuals' lives. In *Americanah*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie captures the essence of dialectical materialism by showing how material realities shape her characters' lives and identities. Through their thoughts and experiences, she explores the roots and impacts of these material conditions by highlighting the link between the characters’ circumstances and the way their beliefs and perspectives evolve.

In *Americanah*, the protagonist Ifemelu, her friend Obinze, and her aunt Uju all experience the harmful effects of dialectical materialism both in Nigeria and America. The influence of material conditions and the economic system pushes Ifemelu toward the American Dream which motivates her to work tirelessly to achieve her goals. However, when she moves to America, her skin color becomes a major obstacle. Being identified as Black in the U.S. significantly impacts her economic opportunities and lifestyle which reveals her deep racial and economic inequalities in society. This conflict highlights the divide between Black American immigrants and white Americans. The conflict of race and color intensifies economic disparities.

The pressure to fit into societal norms also affects Ifemelu’s identity. For example, she straightens her hair to conform to workplace standards. “Her hair was hanging down rather than standing up, straight

and sleek, parted at the side and curving to a slight bob at her chin. The verve was gone. She did not recognize herself. She left the salon almost mournfully; while the hairdresser had flat-ironed the ends, the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss” (Adichie, 2013, p.208). This illustrates the loss of identity and economic demands force her to change aspects of herself. This suggests that in a capitalist system, material shapes both personality and identity.

Obinze faces similar struggles. As an illegal immigrant in the UK, he works for low wages, barely managing to survive. He left Nigeria hoping for a better life but found that the reality in the UK was far harsher than expected. His material struggles reshape his outlook and personality which demonstrates that a capitalist society favors the bourgeoisie and those with economic privilege while marginalize others who lack wealth or status.

Aunty Uju embodies the theme of dialectical materialism, as her thoughts and actions are shaped by her material needs. Even in America, these needs drive her intentions and decisions, highlighting how her circumstances continue to influence her worldview. “At the grocery store, Aunty Uju never bought what she needed; instead, she bought what was on sale and made herself need it” (Adichie, 2013, p.108). Karl Marx (1959) says in his political document *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy* that “the mode of production in material life determines the general character of life's social, political, and spiritual processes. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness” (p.43).

In *Americanah*, the main characters—Ifemelu, Obinze, and Aunty Uju—navigate their lives through the material realities of earning a livelihood, which shape their workplaces, cultures, and beliefs. The novel emphasizes that it is not just thoughts and ideas that define the world but material conditions that influence resources, social systems, and even personal beliefs. Through the lens of dialectical materialism, *Americanah* illustrates that money, race, and social status profoundly affect the lives and identities of these characters. Their struggle highlights the economic pressures that drive

significant changes in society and shape individual experiences.

5. Base and Superstructure in *Americanah*

Karl Marx's concepts of base and superstructure are based on a societal structure that highlights class development, cultural norms, and thoughts. The capitalist society is divided into two sections which are the base and the superstructure. The base consists of the working and lower class while the superstructure is made up of the upper class. These two classes move in different directions. These different directions not only reflect economic disparities but also affect social life. Mode of production enhances the power of the superstructure which affects various aspects of culture, policy, religion, ethics, values, and customs. The differences in wealth and opportunity between Nigeria, the United States, and the UK highlight how economic conditions shape individual choices

In *Americanah* Ifemelu, Obinze, and Aunty Uju experience many hardships because they belong to the lower economic class which forms the foundation of society. Obinze being part of this marginalized group, faces immense struggles as he tries to become a legal immigrant in the UK. He takes on menial jobs such as cleaning toilets and working in a warehouse, which highlight the economic inequalities and the exploitation he endures as a laborer.

Similarly, Aunty Uju is deeply affected by the superstructure of society. She juggles three different jobs just to cover her basic needs and her aspiration to marry an accountant and settle in America reflects her desire to move from the lower class to a more privileged position in society. Her son, Dike also suffers under the weight of this system. As a marginalized, black individual with limited economic opportunities, he becomes so overwhelmed by the pressures of racism and inequality that he attempts suicide. “Ifemelu, his suicide attempt was from depression” (Adichie, 2013, p.?)

In *Americanah* Ifemelu also struggles with economic hardships in America. To survive, she uses someone else's Social Security number and accepts whatever work she can find including a humiliating job offered by a tennis coach just to earn \$100. Later, she becomes a babysitter to make

ends meet in America's capitalist system. Her journey from the lower economic class to a more stable position is incredibly challenging. Even as she navigates these struggles, Ifemelu encounters the cultural dominance of the upper class. American cultural ideals—like beauty standards and racial ideologies—shape her experiences and reinforce white supremacy. Through her blog, she highlights societal superstructures uphold inequality and maintain the power of the privileged class.

The novel shows that the cultural and social systems (the superstructure) are deeply tied to the economic system (the base) which preserves capitalism, labor exploitation, and wealth inequality. Americanah critically examines how superstructure interacts and influences the lives of marginalized individuals.

6 Transition from Class in Itself to Class for Itself in Americanah

America is often seen as the land of opportunity, where the American Dream promises that with hard work anyone can achieve a better life regardless of financial struggles. This idea, first coined by Adams (1931) in *The Epic of America*, defines it as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (p.374). Americans envision America as a place where life is richer and fuller, with opportunities based on ability. Many immigrants, escape difficult conditions in their homeland. Initially, they find America more promising and they earn through menial jobs, enjoy more freedom, and hope for a better future. However, their optimism is often shattered by the harsh treatment and humiliation they face from others.

America is seen as a land of opportunity and it also expands the working class. The rise of the proletariat is tied to industrialization in the late 19th century which heightened the idea of upward mobility. While Americans pursue hard work to show equality and opportunity. The capitalist system ultimately reinforces the power of the bourgeoisie. This turns the working class's American Dream into a myth, filled with illusions of happiness, a house, a car, and a family.

In her pursuit of the American Dream, Ifemelu feels disillusioned upon arriving in America. "She stared at buildings and cars and signboards, all of them

matte, disappointingly matte; in the landscape of her imagination, the mundane things in America were covered in a high-shine gloss" (Adichie, 2013, p.104). The reality is harshly contrasted with her expectations, symbolized by the grimy windows of buildings. She had imagined a shiny, idealized America, but instead finds a place with "dirt on the building windows. Ifemelu believes that America is the ideal destination for non-immigrants. She told Obinze" It's wonderful but it's not heaven, she told Obinze" (Adichie, 2013, p. 110)

In Americanah, the American Dream is linked to the dominance of the ruling class and the challenges faced by Africans, particularly Nigerians, who seek opportunities in the U.S. Ifemelu aims to shift her class status from "in itself" to "for itself," but her journey reveals that achieving the American Dream is more difficult than she anticipated. Her growing class consciousness and misconceptions lead to disappointment and emphasize the detrimental effects of capitalism.

Ifemelu hopes to explore America and believes it offers new opportunities for her to gain social significance and achieve success. However, she encounters the harsh realities of American society, where capitalism poses a significant obstacle to realizing the American Dream. Karl Marx (1848 / 1888) says in *The Communist Manifesto* that "The discovery of America, the rounding of the Cape, opened up fresh ground for the rising bourgeoisie" (p.4).

In the novel, Ifemelu faces numerous challenges that compel her to take risks to enhance her social standing. She works diligently and follows the rules. Which strives to maximize her potential with her skills. Ultimately, it emphasizes the importance of fair opportunities for everyone to succeed based on their efforts and abilities. Jennifer Hochschild (1995) says in her book, *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*. "The American dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one - if you work hard and play by the rules you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you" (p.18).

Conclusion

The primary objective of this research paper was to unearth the American Dream in the context of Classical Marxism in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's

Americanah. This novel strongly represents the American national ethos of the American Dream, through the experiences of an African migrant, which has a deep-rooted philosophical and social impact on American society. Americanah provides a broader perspective by incorporating issues of class mobility, race, and immigration. The protagonist, Ifemelu's journey from Nigeria to the United States highlights the challenges that she faces to achieve the American Dream as an African immigrant. Her experiences during her journey to the American Dream present several barriers that restrict class mobility and the exploitation of immigrant labor in the capitalist system. The struggle to find her identity and place in American society is filled with racial and societal exploitation that impedes her class struggle and reflects issues like race and economic inequality. The novel also presents the intersection of race with class struggle in America and offers insight about the complexities it adds to the pursuit of the American Dream for a black immigrant. Ifemelu's encounter with systemic racism and economic exploitation during her journey toward the American Dream exposes the contradictions of the American Dream and aligns with the Marxist narrative of capitalism where people are mere commodities and means of production. The novel critiques capitalist values that prioritize profit over human dignity through the blog of the protagonist, Ifemelu, whose observations support the Marxist arguments against capitalism.

This research involves analyzing the depiction of social classes, economic structures, and the conflicts arising from the American dream due to its capitalist ideologies in the narratives of the novel. This interpretation revolves around class consciousness, exploitation, alienation, upward mobility, dialectic materialism, exploitation of proletariats, commodification of labor and accumulation of wealth in American society with the American Dream at its center.

- Although a cherished ethos, the derivation of the American Dream from its capitalist core is undeniable. This research finds that the American Dream is deeply rooted in Capitalism, which according to classical Marxism is an evil social and economic structure. In theory, the American Dream promises integrity, economic

upheaval, and opportunities for everyone, but the critical analysis of the texts under discussion proves an otherwise case that introduces a competition for the accumulation of wealth and infinite struggle to achieve this dream. The research shows that the economic and social structure of American society exploits Americans and non-American middle-class equally. It does not only give false hopes and disillusion to the individual in a capitalist society, it also treats human as commodities and objectifies the accumulation of wealth and social status at the cost of human dignity, exploitation of proletariats on the hands of the bourgeoisie, their social exclusion and alienation from self and their produce. The paper exposes the myth of the American Dream and concludes that true fulfillment, liberation and self-actualization cannot be achieved within a capitalist society that prioritizes material wealth and societal conformity over genuine human connection and self-actualization..

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