

“Seeking for a Better Place”: American Dream in Kuntowijoyo’s *Impian Amerika*

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Article History

Received: 15 Agustus 2020

Reviewed: 31 Agustus 2020

Accepted: 18 September 2020

Published: 21 September 2020

Highlights

- the American Dream is understood by immigrants, especially immigrants from Indonesia.

Abstract: *Impian Amerika* by Kuntowijoyo tells stories of Indonesian immigrants who came to New York City with different reasons and backgrounds. They settle, move, go to school, work, and live in the United States-especially around the New York City area. There are Javanese, Achenese, Batak, Manado, Sundanese, Minangs, Makassarese, and others. There are various reasons why they decide to settle in this city, but the majority is for advancement, prosperity, and freedom. Some continue their education or study in the United States because of the more advanced education system. Some chose to work as long as they can go and settle in United States because the country is more prosperous than Indonesia. Other chose the United States because they want to be free and adventurous. In addition, this novel also presents ethic problems between Indonesians and other citizen due to multidimensional relationships and the daily lives of Indonesians. The purpose of this study is to scrutinize how the American Dream is understood by immigrants, especially immigrants from Indonesia. This work used qualitative research method and data was collected from Kuntowijoyo’s *Impian Amerika*. The data was analyzed qualitatively using Marxist literary approach. The result of the study shows that Kuntowijoyo’s *Impian Americas* hows how material success is not automatically followed by spiritual success. As an ethos, the American Dream is able to offer people to come to America to migrate, work and live there forever and promise that anyone can succeed by working hard regardless of family and social background but American dream can also mislead someone or immigrant if he does not have a strong religious and moral basis.

Keywords: America Dream, Ideology, Marxist Literary Approach, Commodification.

Introduction

America has long been known as a place of ethnic mingling since British immigrants founded the first colony in Jamestown, Virginia. In 1607 tens of millions of migrants (mostly from

southern and eastern Europe) entered America (Billing, 1991: 35). With an area of 9,372,614 square kilometers covering 50 states (Alaska and Hawaii became the 49th and 50th states on April 25, 1959), America would continue to have immigrants, including from Indonesia. One of the Indonesian fictions that tells about the life of Indonesians in the United States is *Impian Amerika* written by Kuntowijoyo which was published in 2017.

Impian Amerika contains 30 stories about 30 Indonesian diaspora who live around New York City, the largest metropolitan city in America. They have different dreams and backgrounds. There are Javanese, Acehnese, Batak, Manado, Sundanese, Minang, Makassarese, and others.

In this collection of short stories, the daily lives of typical Indonesians are described factually and lightly making the plot of this novel fun while still presenting meaning. This work also presents ethnic problems between Indonesians and other citizens of the country due to multidimensional interactions. Through *Impian Amerika*, the author interprets the American dreams in different way. Those who come to USA for finding a better life, American dream means achieving material success. They believe that success in material life will be automatically followed by spiritual success. The author, Kuntowijoyo, on the side, believed that spiritual success can only be achieved if he “still adhere to teachings, rules, and implement religious values in their lives. Religious values are divided into five, consisting of belief, ritual, experience, knowledge, and secular consequences, all of which are fulfilled by modern society” (Rahaya, 2020: 21). Most all of his characters in *Impian Amerika*, pursue material success and practicing religious values as well.

What is the American Dream? The American dream is a national ethos of the United States, a reflection of the ideals that should apply in the conduct of life for the people of the United States after they gain independence. This ethos spreads to various areas of life: democracy, rights, freedoms, opportunities and equality. (Barlet and Steele, 2012: 125). It is James Truslow Adams, a writer, who introduced the term American dream as an ethos in book entitle *the book Epic of America*, published in 1931, he wrote:

But there has been also the American dream, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his 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. (qtd in Nevins, 1968: p 25)

The financial success can be achieved in the US merely through initiative and hard work. Financially success means “believe that it is natural to want to “get ahead,” to want to own a better house and wear better clothes. The key word here is *better*, which refers not only to “better than I had before” but also to “better than other people have.” (Tyson, 2006: 57).

The American dream is an ideology, a belief system, not an innate or natural way of seeing the world (Tyson, 2006: 58). From a Marxist perspective, the role of ideology in maintaining those in power is so important (Tyson, 2006: 59). Those who have power means those who have money or other commodities because they lie not in what they can do (*use value*) but for which they can be traded (*exchange value*)...the social status they confer on their owner (*sign-exchange value*). (Tyson, 2006: 62).

Due to the above reason, this study was carried out to analyze American dream in Kuntowijoyo's *Impian Amerika* and to see how the American Dream is understood by immigrants, especially immigrants from Indonesia.

Method

The method used in this study is descriptive qualitative. According to Sharan B. Merriam,

“A qualitative research method is a study which includes and emphasizes understanding, experience, qualitative characteristics, and making meaning. This method has six types that can be used namely qualitative case studies, critical qualitative research, narrative analysis, phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory. In this study the authors chose the narrative type method, which uses stories as the main data. (Merriam: 2009: 03)”

The data source is taken from Kuntowijoyo's *Impian Amerika* (2017), a collection of short stories. The taken data is in the form of words, sentences or paragraphs that describe the American dream believed by the Indonesian immigrant community in the United States. The techniques of data collection are note-taking and literature study and analyzed using content analysis techniques. Close reading method is applied to see the ideology concept which is represented in this fiction (Greenham, 2019: 6) This research is important to do because with the knowledge of the American dream, one will avoid understanding that the United States is a better place than Indonesia.

Discussion

In *Impian Amerika*, Kuntowijoyo mentioned several types of work performed by Indonesian immigrants in the United States, such as kitchen stewards, bell boys and taxi drivers. The

Indonesian Diasporas are described as people who work really hard. Apart from working and pursuing their dreams to succeed, they also practice the religious teachings they believed. In order to get success, they go to college to get a better education. They finish their school at their own expense. With their educational background, they become successful people who work in large companies; living in houses that have large yards or in expensive apartments.

C.1.From Rags to Riches

Rags to Riches is a term used to describe someone from being poor to becoming rich (Brinkley, 1999: 207). Along with the American dream this term is used to describe someone who can succeed with hard work and have dreams about success, they can go from poor to rich.

C.1.a. From a kitchen steward to Senior Executive of Indonesian Marketing Agency

The story of a man who initially worked as a kitchen steward and later became a senior executive at the Indonesian Marketing Agency is the story of Akbar. Akbar and his family previously lived in an apartment next to the narrator. The apartment could be said to be inadequate, especially for raising children. There are pile of trash, dirty, quite a slum environment, and unsecured surrounding. Most people who live there are unemployed, drunkard and drug abuser. These are the reasons that make Akbar move out. Akbar move to a "proper and better place" because "orang baik-baik (good person)" from Indonesia, a person who is financially established, or a middle class person, will be afraid to live in a such area. As a "good person" Akbar and his family move to an area which he called the area of the white people, the area of the WASP (White anglo Saxon Protestan) people. WASP culture is the culture of the founding fathers which is a central and inseparable component of what is called American identity (Brookhiser, 1991). One of the American identity is white middle class. White Middle class is the center of existence for middle-class Americans. Most of them live in suburban area. It was the place in which children were molded to be good citizens, and endowed with a strong moral compass that rested on a simple set of perennial truths. (Rader, 2006: 187)

Another reason that makes Akbar move from his quite a slum environment is he has got a promotion as an executive in Indonesia Marketing Agency which is located in Manhattan "*He asked me to come to his office, surprisingly, he mentions the most elite place in Manhattan*" (Kuntowijoyo, 2017: 48). As the most expensive place on earth, Manhattan is a borough in New York City and has been described as the cultural, financial, [media](#), and [entertainment](#) capital

of the world... The world's two largest stock exchanges lie only minutes apart in the Wall Street area of Manhattan, New York City (Rolando Y. Wee, 2017).

Akbar financial success shows that Indonesian immigrant can be a successful materially if he works hard.

C.1.b. From a bell boy to floor Manager of Woolworth

Another success story of Indonesian Immigrant living in the USA is the story of Mushofa. Mushofa, who is from Kuningan Cirebon, was a student at University of Indonesia . He believed that life belonged to God and was governed by Him. That was also his reason why he move to America. When he was a student, he took part in student demonstration in 1974. The Malari incident in Jakarta in 1974 made him became a police fugitive.

To avoid being arrested by the police, Mushofa then fled to a cruise ship, worked as a kitchen steward then a bell boy. When his contract in a cruise ship ended, he decided to stay in USA and lived as illegal immigrant. In order to live and work legally in America, Mushofa had to marry someone in “kawin surat” (a marriage contract to legalize residence permit). Mushofa then met Liza, a singer in a restaurant, in which Mushofa worked as a kitchen steward. As a religious person, Mushofa believed his meeting with Liza was God's plan. They finally got married and Liza is converted to Islam. Because of hard work, his wife was able to go to College and he became the floor manager at Woolworth.

C.1.c. From a Taxi Driver to the Owner of Taxi Company

The next success story of Indonesian immigrant living in the USA is the story of Lukito. Lukito came to the USA for the common reason for Indonesians. He has siblings working at the consulate, attending school and gets married. Lukito has a good appearance, is good at tennis, polite, well behave and quite intelligent . Every mother in his surrounding wants him to be her” future son in law”. He continued his study got his MBA, worked for a Navy company that shipped goods to and from America and Asia and married a Filipino girl named Vanesa. Lukito is also described as a successful person from where he lives “Meanwhile Lukito managed to buy a house across the Hudson River, in the suburban of New Jersey”. (Kuntowijoyo, 2017: 29). His house has a nickname the vacation spot in the city. Living in suburban area is “ in the popular mind involve the people who live there: allegedly white, middle class and socially homogenous.” By residing in suburban area, Lukito social status has increased, he is no longer a member of the working class society but he has become part of the middle class, from a taxi driver to the owner of a taxi company.

C.2.a. Better Place does not mean a Better Life

Migrating to America and becoming successful person is everyone's dream, especially immigrants who come to America. Their success is not obtained instantly but through hard and diligent work. Efforts to achieve this dream are somewhat reckless. Various professions from cleaning workers, taxi drivers to servants are taken to make a living. In the early days of life as an immigrant, it was not easy, some were always chased by the police, offered to marry using "kawinsurat". Living in a slum and unsafe area where many unemployed, drunkards and gamblers have to live for a dream that is a better life because of their dream about America as "the promise land".

Promise land is one of the great myths Americans have about their country. This myth along with American dream tempt everyone to come. For those who want to come to the USA, it is a place represents a promised land of freedom and social mobility though some of them are disappointed, such as the story of Purnomo. From his full name, Purnomosidi, he was born on a full moon, which his grandfather used to predict him as someone who would be successful. Purnomo is described as a good father and husband. Purnomo worked for PT Timah, but he left his job because he wanted to become an entrepreneur to be self-employed. With a capital of 60,000 dollars, Purnomo bought taxis and became a businessman "he wanted to prove whether the American Dream is still true that a polish man can become a shoe factory owner." (Kuntowijoyo, 2017: 80)

Initially his business was running well, he could see his children leaving and coming home from school. He thought that he would be closer to his family. However, the phone call ordering a taxi that goes off late at night is often protested by his son. As an entrepreneur, he enjoyed financial success, but he has to pay for what he took. He had to be examined by the police because of the rampant narcotics. He also had an affair with a Spanish night club dancer who smell of alcohol. Purnomo was not happy with his life. He is disappointed and decided that being an entrepreneur was not his way of life. He then sold the taxi and worked again at PT Timah. Purnomo's return to his old job shows that he is disillusioned and questions moral values in an ego-driven society.

Some Indonesian diaspora who live in USA would like to return home someday, if only they could do so securely. In the story of *Anak Angkat Pak Aminullah*, it begins with "Aminullah's family plans to return to their homeland forever, because they feel satisfied, stuck," (Kuntowijoyo, 2017: 52). Initially working as local staff at the Indonesian consulate in New York City, Pak Aminullah then opened a travel agent business and was successful. In his

old age he and his wife return to Indonesia and his daughter, Ayu Khadijah, will continue his travel business.

Unfortunately, the marriage life of Ayu Khadijah is not like her parents. As an American girl, the idea of virginity is different from Indonesian girls "*It's impossible to forget, Auntie. Since I was in High School I have always been taking pills*" (Kuntowijoyo, 2017: 56). Using contraception is common when a girl is still sexually active. At the end of the story Ayu Khadijah divorced her husband and returned to Indonesia and married Indonesian man.

C.2. Commodification in *Impian Amerika*

As an ideology or a belief system, the American dream acts as the dream of immigrants who come to the United States and believe that anyone can be successful materially. Whoever the person is, without having to know his family background, if he works hard he can get success such as a taxi driver to a taxi company owner, from a kitchen steward to become a senior executive in a company because of his ability to strive forward. A person's success is always seen from how much money he has, not based on morals or religion.

Hard work and success are two words that are always associated with the American dream. In *Impian Amerika*, the author tells the readers how the characters work hard so that they become successful people because "*USA is a heaven for those who like working hard*" (Kuntowijoyo, 2017: 171). Success is associated with material success. Success in the material field or financial success is seen from home, workplace and clothing that in Marxist term called commodities. Commodities not only have use values, *commodification* is the act of relating to objects or persons in terms of their exchange value (Tyson, 2006: 62)

The commodification in *Impian Amerika* can be seen in the following description

Sometime later Akbar makes a surprise. He's calling from the office! The Indonesian Marketing Agency has opened, although it is only a promotion section. I was asked to come to his office. The office address is even more surprising: it is in the most elite place in Manhattan!

I went to his office. I talked to a beautiful, young, white woman — I became sensitive to skin color. Akbar is talking on the phone, my eyes are all over the room, Akbar taste is high, and he is smart about choosing employees. Akbar is wearing suit and tie (Kuntowijoyo, 2017: 48).

Akbar uses his office address, his secretary and his cloth as exchange value that he is a successful person. By having office in Manhattan Akbar shows that he has a lot of money and very successful person because real estate in Manhattan is the most expensive in the United States, with the average property in the borough eclipsing all other locals (Catherine Clifford, 2018). Not only his work place, Akbar also shows the narrator that his secretary is white means

that she belongs to White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, yang dianggap sebagai “*a chosen race and at the same time has a mission of freedom*” (Rujito, 2008: 5) Besides that, Akbar’s outfit also shows that he is not a blue collar worker anymore because he is wearing a suit, he is a boss of a big company in the United States.

Conclusion

In *Impian Amerika*, Kuntowijoyo exposed the story of Indonesian immigrants living in the USA. Though American dream is associated with the story of successful immigrants, Kuntowijoyo does not only present stories of success but also failure and disappointment. It is a story about the success of a kitchen steward to become an executive in the Indonesian marketing agency, a story of a bell boy who become a floor manager at Woolworth or a story of a taxi driver who became the owner of a taxi company, but at the same time it is also a story of Indonesian couple who return to Indonesia unhappily.

Through *Impian Amerika*, Kuntowijoyotold readers that material success is always associated with sign-exchanged values such as residence, office address, job and profession. However, he also told that material success is not automatically followed by spiritual success. As an ethos, the American Dream is able to offer people to come to America to migrate, work and live there forever and promise that anyone can succeed by working hard regardless of family and social background but American dream can also mislead someone or immigrant if he does not have a strong religious and moral basis.

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