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### The American Nightmare: Debunking the American Dream

Ask any immigrant what they hope to achieve when they move to America and chances are that they will mention the American Dream. They hope to one day have the nice house with the white picket fence, 2.5 kids, and a high paying job. The media and even we Americans play up the hype. We proudly declare that yes, you too can achieve success beyond your wildest dreams and be incredibly happy in America. Everything comes easy here. But is this dream accessible for everyone? In *Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora*, Andrew Lam chronicles his move to America from Vietnam. Lam mentions the American Dream several times and suggests that is why many immigrants chose America as their new home. Many Vietnamese people risked their lives to come to America before and after the Vietnam War, but it was not the paradise they thought it would be revealing how the false lure of the American dream has dark repercussions.

In Lam's account, Vietnamese immigrants and refugees were led to believe that moving to America would solve all their problems when they should have been better prepared for the harsh realities. According to Lam the common held belief was, "Go to America and your sufferings end. Go to America and your sons and daughters will grow up to be astronauts or presidents of rich computer companies" (Lam 13). This falsehood is reinforced when Lam describes immigrants like Quang who felt embarrassed about his lack of success so greatly embellishes and writes to his family back home that he met President Clinton and obtained a

degree from Harvard. Yes, success is possible but for the most part, it only happened to the more educated and affluent first wave of immigrants. Those in the second wave were not as lucky. The American dream often skips the vast majority of the unskilled, uneducated, and poor. Those who did not or could not achieve such success due to the realities of working long, hard hours for very little pay were left disillusioned, disappointed, and feeling inadequate. This unrealistic ideal can be dangerous to people with already fragile psyches.

Another reality that the American dream hides are that some immigrants, especially poor refugees, will find themselves forever marginalized not only economically but socially. As Lam reflects, “Here we were mousy, impoverished, miserable exiles living in a deep, dark hole” (61). When Lam and his family moved to the United States, they shared a small, cramped apartment with his aunt and cousins. Even with many wage-earning adults, they struggled just to make ends meet. Lam’s brother and father, both of whom were accomplished and respected men back in Vietnam, were broken by their diminished status in the U.S. The brother became a disheartened supermarket worker and the father sat on the couch all day reliving the past. Lam’s family eventually worked their way up the financial and social ladder, but they were the lucky ones. Some of the immigrants they knew, no matter how qualified or hard they worked, could not escape poverty. Compounding their unhappiness over their financial plight was the social exclusion they suffered. Americans are often unforgiving of accents, so those with thick accents, are often not treated seriously. As Lam’s uncle Tho observes, “Americans turn a deaf ear to foreign accents. You’ll never get anywhere fast if you sound like a foreigner” (Lam 113). Uncle Tho was highly educated and had a law degree, yet no one would hire him because of his accent. The hostilities resulting from the Vietnam War also did not help matters. The Vietnamese immigrants who had escaped from Vietnam, opposed the Communist regime and sided with the

Americans, but in the U.S, they were often ignored at best and treated like an unwelcome enemy at worst. Even the once sympathetic Americans suffered from compassion fatigue towards the wave of new Vietnamese immigrants. The American dream masks the realities that race and class are entrenched barriers that keep many from success.

For those few who do manage to achieve some of that American dream success, there is a high price to pay in the form of cultural loss. Lam sees his Vietnamese values that put obedience and family above all else slowly replaced with American materialism and individualism. Lam recalls, “Didn’t I see America invade the household when the conversations at dinner in our new home leaned slowly toward real estate and escrow, toward jobs and cars and GPAs and overtime and vacation plans- the language of the America Dream?” (64) In addition to materialism, disobedience and family problems now became the norm. Lam and his siblings were more concerned with themselves or “I” rather than what their family wanted. This in turn led to fighting within the family and blatant disobedience, issues that were nearly nonexistent when they lived in Vietnam. This hidden cost of family alienation was another price the Lams paid for their piece of the American dream. Many immigrants are not warned that the cost of having a “better” life includes potentially losing the ideals that made them who they were.

The American dream promises a lot but delivers to only a few. It creates large often unattainable hopes and demands sacrifices of assimilation that can be devastating. America is a wonderful place, but it is also a country with contradictory messages to and treatment of immigrants. Lam describes a commonly held belief that “If you escape to America, you’ll come back somebody” (Lam 119). However, for many immigrants, they may not have bargained for or recognize the “somebody” they or their children become. This is not to say that people should

stop coming here in an effort to make their lives better, but they should come with expectations that are not based on a dream.

Works Cited

Lam, Andrew. *Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora*. Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2005. Print.