

The American Dream.

1

"The eastern nations sink, their glory ends
And empire rises where the sun descends"

— The Plymouth Rock Verses.

Gilbert Chinard, speaking of the American Dream, affirms that "as a state of mind and a dream, America had existed long before its discovery." Ever since the early days of Western Civilization, people had dreamt of a Lost Paradise, a New Eden characterised by abundance, and with the discovery of America, this dream seemed materialized. So rich was the American soil and so great its yield that Columbus, on his third voyage to America, felt that he had located the Terrestrial Paradise.

America came to be regarded as the 'Promised Land of God'; and the early settlers felt that America was God's 'manifest destiny', that is, America was destined by God's will to become a power of eminence in future. All those dreams and ideals that could not be materialized in Europe were taken up with renewed vigour; it was to be a land of liberty, equality, and fraternity, a land of success and opportunity, and a land of true faith. John Winthrop, who preached 'a model of Christian Charity' on board the 'Arabella', the flagship of the great Puritan emigration to Massachusetts in 1630, felt that America would be a world model:

"We shall find that the God of Israel is among us when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when hee shall make us a prayse and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantation..."

Building up a new civilization on entirely new ideals required labour and enterprise besides creative vision, and the Virginia Company of London which sponsored early settlement in America promised 'success' and 'prosperity' only in exchange for labour. "Try and you will succeed" — came to be the chant of American progress, and this fine voice in the travel accounts and belles lettres all of which reflect the aspirations and hopes, the trials and the setbacks of those early settlers who have tamed the wilderness of a vast country?

"Strong thro' shifts, an' wants an' paine
Nursed by stern men with empires in their brains"

— James Russell Lowell.

(2)

The fact that America emerged as a superpower within a span of 150 years since its early settlements shows the substantiality of such an idealistic vision, and still today, America continues to engender this dream of 'success' and 'opportunity' for many. The growth of American Capitalism and Adam Smith's theory of Laissez faire further strengthened the value of labour and enterprise in individual success. A greater impetus came from the Calvinistic doctrines which insisted that men being born sinners, must atone for their sins through penance and honest labour.

Thus, there is no denying that the American dream of 'success' and 'opportunity' gave shape and significance to the course of American civilization itself and had a great role to play in the building up of the nation but it wasn't all 'bright' and all 'sunny' as it apparently seems to be. The American dream had no positive role to play for the natives of America whom these early colonists ousted from their own lands and deprived of their own rights. In order to realize a land free from corruption

and inequality, the colonists themselves resorted to fraud and treachery. For a 'new world' that they were to create, they resorted to the old world values of treachery, looting and plundering, and this is perhaps the greatest paradox of the American progress. The American nation that prizes itself in its Democratic spirit is the very place where slavery flourished and acquired the worst forms of humanity. In Morrison's 'Beloved', we traverse through this dark world of slavery where the torture is so great that a mother prefers the death of her child to a life of slavery. The marginalisation of the Blacks, their social and psychological ostracization are matters of concern for America, even today. But, it is not only the natives who suffer. The colonists who dreamt of success and prosperity have their disappointments too. The growth of capitalist economy which fostered an unequal competition between the skilled and the unskilled, or say, between men and machine, and widened the gulf between the rich and the poor had its own disappointments, exhaustion and fatigue. Men were caught between their person and desires and the social demands engendered by such capitalistic economy. We see Tom (in 'The Glass Menagerie') trying to free himself from this web of social demands. Amanda's call for success - 'rise and shine', 'Try and you will succeed' - are ultimately ferretted out as Tom fails to stand up to the occasion. Tom's escape is almost a visible rendering of the hollowness of the American dream of success. The 'pressure to perform' almost pisses out Tom's inner desire, and he could only but flee to restore himself.

In the final analysis, it can be said that the American dream has worked either ways in

evolving the course of American civilization. On the one hand, it lies at the base of American settlement and accounts for its eminent power and position in the world; on the other, it has its darker stones of treachery, injustice, and slavery heaped on the natives and other men of colour. The American dream was the dream of the early European settlers which with the growth of nationalism, became America's own and continued to add to its history and civilization.

(4)