

The reality of the  
immigrant american  
dream in dinaw  
mengestu's the  
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Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* focuses on the life of Sepha Stephanos and the way his immigrant journey intertwines with those around him. Due to the violence he saw before leaving Ethiopia, Sepha is "unable to enact the linear trajectory epitomized by his new homeland's grand narrative: the American dream," making him the perfect narrator for a story centralizing around immigration American dream, which surpasses promises of upward-mobility and white-picket-fences to include a life better than the one held previously (Cesare 115). Sepha's distance from this "grand narrative" allows him to sympathize with his friends and family, while also holding onto reality. As Olopade explains, "Sepha Stephanos has come to stitch himself into the dream that has always blanketed the United States: the promise that you can make it if you try" (135). Sepha describes what opportunities the people around him believe America to have, but then he depicts its cruel truth. Sepha shows what characters do to deal with this reality, specifically him and his two best friends, which is to continuously play a game detailing the violence in Africa. Sepha claims "the liberal idea of America is at its best in advertising," so this paper will focus on what is advertised, what the reality is, and what the characters do to deal with this (Mengestu 98).

Mengestu uses his characters to prove that the American dream, heightened by immigrant ideals, has fallacies that can only then be justified through comparison and denial. The violence in Sepha's past prevents him from wanting to fulfil the immigrant American dream, allowing him the distance to reflect on it properly. As Cesare says, "Sepha was too young and traumatized by guilt over his role in his father's death at the time of his

departure from Ethiopia to maintain any sense of agency in the transition or use it to claim artistic privilege. Because Sepha's narrative does not fit neatly into the category of immigrant or exile, he is doubly dislocated and unable to occupy fully the space in which he finds himself" (121). One of the first times this becomes clear to the readers is when Sepha remembers his uncles "grandest ambitions for [him] when [he] first arrived from Ethiopia" (Mengestu 41). Sepha explains that he did not want to be anything greater than " what [he] already was," saying, " I was poor, black, and wore the anonymity that came with that as a shield against all of the early ambitions of the immigrant, which had long since abandoned me, assuming they had ever really been mind to begin with. I did not come to America to find a better life. I came here running and screaming with the ghosts of an old one firmly attached to my back" (41). Sepha outlines the reason he came to America as it was not to " find a better life," but to escape an old one. This fact separates him from most of the other characters in this novel who are struggling to reach the middle class. Sepha in fact strives on the anonymity that being " poor" and " black" brings him, as it allows him to escape the immigrant American dream. This line is particularly interesting as Sepha literally uses his status as a poor, black man to hide himself in the masses of them in America, running away from immigrant ambitions into this anonymous identity. Sepha distances himself from this immigrant dream and the expectations surrounding it at several points throughout the novel. For example, when reflecting on why he left his uncle's place, he says, " Either I left to create a new life of my own, one free from the restraints and limits of culture, or I turned my back on everything I was and that had made me" (117). Here, Sepha admits that regardless of the reason he left, he did so to <https://assignbuster.com/the-reality-of-the-immigrant-american-dream-in-dinaw-mengestus-the-beautiful-things-that-heaven-bears/>

get away from some remnant of his past and the values that governed it. Sepha runs away to start a “ new life” which, as stated above, is bathed in the anonymity that comes with living in a poor, black neighborhood in D. C. Though Sepha does not subscribe to the ideals of the American dream, he still feels trapped enough to try and run away or hide from it. This makes Sepha the perfect character to narrate this novel detailing the fallacies of the American dream, as he is far enough removed, but also so close to it. Kenneth, Sepha’s close friend, embodies the immigrant American dream as he came to America with the hopes of reaching both the middle class and his life potential. Very early on into the novel Mengestu brings up the time Kenneth bought his first car, describing, “ He had rented a car for the occasion, a midsize sedan that placed him squarely in the middle class, of which he had just recently become a member...It wasn’t just the clothes and the rented car, but an unadorned confidence that I had never seen him with before” (11). Because Kenneth dressed up and rented a car just to buy one demonstrates how excited he was to be “ squarely in the middle class.” Later, Kenneth explains that his father is part of the reason he strives so hard to be part of the middle class: Exactly. That’s it. That’s all he ever was. A poor illiterate man who lived in a slum. And you know what that makes him in Africa? Nothing. That’s what Africa is right now. A continent full of poor illiterates dying in slums. What am I supposed to miss? Being sent into the street to beg white tourists for money? If I die today, my sister in Nairobi will get one hundred thousand dollars. Someone would have to come and move the furniture out of my apartment. My suits will be shipped back to Kenya for my cousins. You, Joseph, would get my car. The only thing my father owned when he died was a picture of Jomo Kenyatta. His great leader. From the day <https://assignbuster.com/the-reality-of-the-immigrant-american-dream-in-dinaw-mengestus-the-beautiful-things-that-heaven-bears/>

I was born, there have been only two leaders of Kenya. The first was terrible, and now the second is even worse. That's why I am here in this country. No revolutions. No coup. (186) Kenneth came to America for this immigrant heightened version of the American dream, searching not only for money, but for a more peaceful, democratic life. Kenneth explains how his father was "nothing" and in doing so he explains his search to become something in America—someone who matters and is of more consequence. It is interesting that Kenneth mentions that "someone would have to come and move the furniture out of my apartment," because the purpose of it only seems to be that Kenneth dying will effect more than just his family and friends, as someone will have to do something about it. When talking about his sister Kenneth highlights another main aspect of the immigrant American dream, which is sending money back to his family. Even Sepha does this and explains, "I send them money once every few months when I can afford to, even though I know they don't need it. I do it because I am in America, and because sending money home is supposed to be the consolation prize for not being home" (41). Sepha explains that he sends money back to his family because he feels like he has to, proving that it is part of living the immigrant American dream. In his speech Kenneth also lists his material things that will go to people when he dies, his money, suits, and car, because to him these things equal his self worth. His father had nothing, ergo he was "nothing," Kenneth has things, ergo he is something. Kenneth explains all of the major aspects of the immigrant American dream, his desire to have money and send some home, his need to matter, his search for a better life. Kenneth shares this immigrant American dream with most other characters close to Sepha, especially his uncle and mother. Because Sepha had become a <https://assignbuster.com/the-reality-of-the-immigrant-american-dream-in-dinaw-mengestus-the-beautiful-things-that-heaven-bears/>

scholar he explains, “ To the friends and acquaintances of my uncle, all refugees like him, I was already a moderate success, someone to be teased and bragged about over dinner conversations. To my mother in Ethiopia, I was the penultimate accomplishment of a long-awaited dream” (98). This quote illustrates the advertising of America, how being a student can be the “ penultimate accomplishment of a long-awaited dream” to someone in Africa and illustrates how America’s advertising has infiltrated his mother’s thoughts from all across the world. In the novel, the reality of the immigrant American dream as little more than advertising sets in slowly, like most things, as the excitement the characters have for a new beginning begins to fade. For example, when Sepha glances at the monuments he thinks of his friends and says, “ It’s been years since either of them has gone near those buildings, and how could blame them? Reality has settled in, and they’re both still waiting to recover” (47). Sepha explains that when his friends first came to America the monuments were so significant and representing of opportunity, but now that they have been there for a while “ reality has settled in.” Sepha claiming that his friends are “ still waiting to recover,” denotes that they were extremely disappointed with the truth of the immigrant American dream. Sepha also shows this sense of disappointment in the actions of Joseph, his other close friend, explaining, “ Those early lines of poetry gave Joseph just enough romanticism to make it through his years at the Capitol Hotel, and now the Colonial Grill, but they were losing their power. Now, when he talks about the restaurant, it’s exclusively as a joke of sarcastic comment. He refers to it as the Colony” (117). This quote displays how the reality of living in America slowly sets in on Joseph. Joseph likes to romanticize America and does so for several years until the poetry loses “

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their power,” illustrating the gradual decay of the character’s romanticization of America. Later on, when glancing in the mirror, Sepha explains his image, saying, “ I look exactly like what I am: a desperate man, on the verge of middle age, with only the money in his pockets to spare. I have dark rings under my eyes, a nose and forehead damp with sweat” (115). Sepha demonstrates what the stress of living in America has done to him, making him “ desperate” with “ dark rings” under his eyes. He also brings up that he has “ only the money in his pockets to spare” with disappointment, almost as if in being poor he has failed somehow. In this passage, Sepha shows the mental and physical toll living in America has brought upon him, as the reality for him is not some glorious life, but instead one of hardship. Even Kenneth, despite his confidence in the immigrant American dream, does not have an ideal life. Sepha explains avoiding seeing Kenneth when they lived together, saying, “ I couldn’t bear the sight of him sitting frozen and lifeless in a plastic lawn chair by the patio windows drinking beer after beer , wiggling his toes in his expensive wool socks. I came home one night and found him laughing hysterically to himself” (145). To Sepha, the American dream has made Kenneth “ frozen” and “ lifeless” in his expensive “ wool socks,” demonstrating how even if Kenneth has money, he still does not necessarily have a better life. Further, Kenneth “ drinking beer after beer” and “ laughing hysterically to himself,” almost denotes that in a way Kenneth has lost himself and maybe the dream he pursues has turned him a little insane. The quote proves that even for those who deeply follow the immigrant version of the American dream, the reality of it is not as amazing as they thought. To deal with the actuality of America, Sepha and other characters in the book constantly compare their situation to Africa to feel

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better about their choice. Sepha does this in many ways, but the most apparent is in the game him and his friends play. At the very beginning of this book, Sepha introduces the game, explaining, “ So far we’ve named more than thirty different coups in Africa. It’s become a game with us. Name a dictator and then guess the year and country. We’ve been playing the game for over a year now. We’ve expanded our playing field to include failed coups, rebellions, minor insurrections, guerilla leaders, and the acronym of as many rebel groups as we can find” (8). As the book progresses, the game becomes a way for the three friends to distract themselves from the harsh realities of living in America. For example, when Sepha learns he is going to lose his shop due to his long history of overdue and unpaid rent, he calls Kenneth. Kenneth and Sepha get into a short conversation about why Sepha did not work harder to keep his shop, but before Kenneth can offer Sepha money he cuts him off, explaining, “ I know what he wants to say next, but I won’t let him. ‘ Joseph Kony,’ I say” (70). Sepha brings up the game of naming different coups in Africa to distract them from the truth of his life in America. Additionally, by bringing up the African coups while talking about his store, Sepha draws comparison between the two. In another instance, Sepha thinks about calling Kenneth, saying, “ I want to reassure him and tell him that I am going to do something, with my store and with myself, just as he asked me to. I have one more name for him first: Valentine Strasser” (95). Again, Sepha finds the game a way to ignore his problems in America. When Sepha’s store was succeeding in a way he was as well, but as his store declines, Sepha’s life in America comes into focus and he understands the fallacies of the American dream. And he avoids talking about them by instead bringing up African coups, because at least if the American dream

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isn't working out for them they are, generally, in a safer place. In fact, the first time they play the game Kenneth and Joseph are talking about why Sepha hates America, Sepha distracts them again, explaining, " before either of them can tell me something else about America (" " This country cares only about one thing... ' ' There are three things you need to know about Americans...'), I call out, ' Busakka'" (145). Sepha's constant use of the game to distract his friends or stop a conversation about different aspects of the American dream go to show how he deals with this truth. And while the comparison between the American dream and African tyrants probably exists to make the characters feel better about their situation, it also goes to show how Sepha truly feels about the American dream. To him it is worse than just advertising at these points, and instead an ideal that rules over his life and the lives of his friends almost like the tyrants. He even compares the emotion he felt when first seeing the monuments, the " silent, almost fearful awe," to when his parents saw " the emperor in Ethiopia" (46). Sepha and his friends use the game to distract them from their life in America, but by doing so they also draw comparison between America and Africa.

Throughout the novel readers are confronted with the disparity of what the character's believed life in America would be and what the reality is. The character's deal with this by playing the game and drawing comparisons between Africa and America. The billboard that prompted Sepha to claim that the " liberal idea of America is at its best in advertising" said " Taking You Where You Want To Be," but throughout the novel Sepha has goes nowhere (98). The book begins with him in his shop and ends with him looking at it and knowing he will lose it. Sepha has gone nowhere, will not go

anywhere, and this book details him coming to terms with this reality and his process of dealing with it.

#### Words Cited

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