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Decline of the American dream in the American Pastoral

The idea of the American dream inspired many American citizens in the time of great depression and after it. The masses felt that their hard work could lead them towards a prosperous job. American dream proclaimed that every individual despite his class and background can achieve a higher status and social stability only through hard work. Since this idea negated classism and racial issues, American people believed its authenticity and worked hard to uplift their social class. However, this idea transitioned a lot in the American context because rich people became richer and poor classes could not acquire wealth, solely on the basis of their hard work. Philip Roth addresses the idea of the American dream in the novel, *American Pastoral.*

In this novel, the anecdotes of 19th century America are extensively described and how the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the Great Depression era revealed the hollowness of the American dream. The character of Swede is a suitable example of an ordinary American man who worked so hard in the pursuit of achieving the American dream but he ended up carrying a fake persona of this idea (Buell 20). Zuckerman reveals the dark realities behind the class system in America by describing the psychological aspects of this bleak vision which was used as a capitalist strategy. People used to masquerade their unstable financial conditions by faking a lavish lifestyle to stay in the limelight. In these times of crisis when the army just returned from the war and unemployment rate was increasing day by day, new entrepreneurs gained some monetary benefits in these situations but soon they were caught in high debt rates because of the failing economic condition. The psychological effect of the American dream can be seen in the character of Zuckerman when he slowly and gradually deludes himself into this idea. Zuckerman takes help from history and through memory, starts retelling the accounts of swede's life before the idea of the American dream. The traumatic effects of war surrounded the memory of people and they had to pay a psychological cost of America's invasion of Vietnam. Likewise, they were driven by the notion of nationalism that their country is a supreme and intellectual nation under another idea of “Manifest destiny” (American Pastoral).

Swede is referred to as Kennedy in one place because of his ambitious nature but a tragic end. He made the American dream his sole purpose in life and invested all his energies in getting richer and becoming one of the most influential people in the Americans society. He always pictured a home and an established career and happy family life which he later got but his daughter blew herself in a bomb attack. He became so blind in acquiring wealth that he forgot Christianity and other religions and made money his religion because the former practices, demanded him to be content with whatever he has. He, on the other hand, detests ethics and morals since they stress on social services and welfare. These activities make unprivileged people an equal hire for money and bridge the gap between the unequal flow of wealth. His picture of attaining higher future prospects come crumbling down when his daughter kills a lady doctor by detonating a bomb. She cannot escape from the horrors of memory and trauma. Likewise, Swede's yearning for her dead daughter signifies that the American dream although lured people into capitalist markets and consumerism but it deeply affected their sense of morality. The masses migrated from far off places to metropolitan cities such as California to improve their living standard but unfortunately, they were made cheap laborers by the influential businessmen. Besides, they made money at the expense of hard work done by the cheap labor force and in increased times of adversity, they even worked for the price of bread.

Swede’s daughter Mary does not get enamored by the mass broadcasting of America’s heroic victory in Vietnam and actively participates in antiwar movements. It also signifies the disassociation of coming generations with the hollow ideas of getting wealth and faking their low socioeconomic status by creating an aura of wealth around them. The traumatic effects Swede suffers after the loss of his wealth and family symbolize his obsession with getting rich and sustaining his newly formed position in the American society (The Visual Apologetics of Philip Roth’s Pastoral America). In the novel, young Zuckerman is well aware of their national history and the essence of being American. In the same manner, he knows about characters such as Swede and his obsession with the American dream which eventually leads him to destruction. In Swede’s opinion, wealth is everything and the recollections of his memory clearly proclaim his thoughts. However, young Zuckerman still showed some hope in this idea because it appeared to him as a salvation for the great depression and war zone horrors. When Zuckerman meets Swede’s brother and gets to know that all this time he was hiding behind the fake aura of his luxuries he gets disappointed in these ideals of American hollow economy. Likewise, the death of Swede makes him contemplate the more humanistic side of all those people who advocated the American dream and he made a resolve that these people were hard-working but misguided as well. The dream could not flourish and the new entrepreneurs who just joined the business ventures had nothing left to rely on whereas on the other hand, already rich and established people did not suffer from this great recession period of economy. This difference clearly stated the class system and its control on all the state and capitalist markets symbolized the greatest irony. Moreover, Zuckerman’s narrative technique also evokes the difference between the thought process of self and tribe since in a collective society, the decision initiated or agreed upon, becomes the rule and everyone has to follow it. If they refrain from following it, they violated the social codes and they would be treated as social outcasts. Since in the 1920s, the poor class was further pushed into poverty and the affluent classes made cheap labor out of the working class because the dream attracted them as a reality (The Visual Apologetics of Philip Roth’s Pastoral America).

Lastly, Zuckerman narrates the personal anecdotes of people from history who were highly influenced by the ideals of American nationalism and the power of hard work as a driving force behind the industry. Quite to their surprise, they were betrayed and denied equal distribution of wealth because of the strong control of stakeholders and capitalism in the trade market. The novel American Pastoral discusses the transition between the characters of Zuckerman and Swede when it comes to the idea of the American dream that both get equally fascinated by this idea at a young age. However, when Zuckerman inquires in history, he gets to know the hollowness of these claims and as a result, when he grows old, he disassociates himself with the dream and views it as another strategy to endorse capitalism.

Work Cited

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