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American Literature II

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### The Accessibility of the American Dream to Racial Minorities in America

For centuries, people have had the American Dream. It has permeated the media in various forms: Martin Luther King Jr's "I Have a Dream" speech, F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel "The Great Gatsby," and even the movie "An American Tail," where animated Russian mice sing, "There are no cats in America and the streets are full of cheese!" The term "the American Dream" was first made popular in 1931 by James Truslow Adams in his book The Epic of America. Adams believed the American Dream was a "dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement." (214) He did not see it as a dream of riches or material goods, but of being able to reach one's full potential and to be acknowledged for one's efforts "regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position." (Adams 215) This idea of equal opportunity for all to reach their potentials and to be recognized for their achievements is clearly appealing and immigrants have poured into the United States of America from all over the world chasing this dream. After Christopher Columbus first landed in America, many Caucasian Europeans followed suit and, quickly outnumbering the Native Americans, became the majority race in America. Even with the immigration of millions of Africans, Asians, and Central and South Americans to the U.S., the Caucasians' status as the majority race has not changed. Since Adams' vision of the American Dream was that it applied to everyone, it should not matter if a person is a part of a racial minority or not. However, race has always been an issue, no matter where a person may be

in the world, and this brings up a pertinent question: while the American Dream is meant to apply to everyone, has it ever really been accessible to everyone, racial minorities included?

The term for the American Dream may only have been coined in the 1930s but the ideals behind it have been around much longer than that. Great writers in American literature have been talking about the dream for years, and this essay will specifically examine Adams' definition of the American Dream from the perspectives of writers Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, both of whom were African American men in the 1800s, F. Scott Fitzgerald, a Caucasian American man in the early 1900s who was fascinated by this dream, Junot Diaz, a modern Dominican American male writer, and Jhumpa Lahiri, an Indian American woman who is also a modern writer. Contrasting the lives and works of four racial minority writers from different time periods against the life and works of a majority race writer significantly related to the American Dream will unveil truths about whether writers from racial minority groups really have less access to the American Dream, or if it might be the other way around altogether.

An early example of a writer who had the American Dream is Booker T. Washington. He was born in 1856 as a slave but was freed at a young age and worked in a salt mine. Washington was determined to become educated and made time around his work schedule to go to school and learn to read (Baym 674). Although this lot in life might have seemed unfair compared to much easier, often smoother, routes many others were given to take, Washington wrote in Up From Slavery, "In later years, I confess that I do not envy the white boy as I once did. I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed." (Washington 675).

Washington worked as a janitor at Hampton Normal Agricultural Institute in Virginia to pay for his tuition at the school. When the headmaster of the school learned about his

hardworking nature, he awarded him a scholarship paid for by a Caucasian man. After Washington graduated from Hampton, he became a grade school teacher and attended seminary. He later founded a technical school for African Americans called Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute that became one of the best schools in America (Biography.com Editors).

At the 1895 Cotton States Exposition, Washington made a speech that would come to be known as the “Atlanta Compromise,” one of the “most important and influential speeches in American history.” (Washington and Harlan). In this speech, Washington’s main idea was to “cast down your bucket where you are.” (Washington and Harlan) Instead of asking for handouts, Washington believed that people should make the most of what they had. He felt it was more important to work hard in one’s industry right at that moment, be it agriculture, mechanics, or commerce, than to long for high-powered jobs usually occupied by Caucasian Americans. In addition, Washington asked Caucasian Americans to be willing to cast their buckets down in the African American population, asking them to give African Americans the opportunities to work and prosper in America (Washington and Harlan).

Washington’s vision lines up with certain aspects of Adams’ definition of the American Dream. Washington believes that the lives of the African American population would be improved if they took any opportunity they could to work hard and do their best, which is a belief in agreement with Adams’ that the American Dream fulfilled would be for people to be given opportunities according to their achievements. However, Washington’s vision did not seem to encapsulate a life that would be “better,” “richer,” and “fuller” for the African Americans. His vision was of a stable life for the people of America, whether Caucasian or African American, but it was more practical and realistic without the ideal of reaching one’s full potential. In fact, it leaves out the part of the American Dream about reaching the dream

regardless of one's birth because Washington's vision seemed to accept that African Americans would have to work more labor-intensive, menial jobs under the supervision of the Caucasian Americans. It is not a dream of fulfilling potential but of getting by as well as one can considering the circumstances. Even back in the 1800s, before many new laws on equality of human beings were passed, chasing a dream of living to one's fullest potential seemed unrealistic to Washington.

While Washington seemed satisfied with improving the present, W.E.B. Du Bois, an African American civil rights activist in Washington's time, believed that people needed to change the future in order to achieve the American Dream. While Du Bois was born only about ten years after Washington, in 1868, his young life was very different from Washington's. Unlike Washington, who was born a slave and grew up in the reconstructionist South, Du Bois grew up in Massachusetts and graduated as valedictorian of his high school. He received a Bachelor of Arts from Fisk University as well as from Harvard University. He went on to receive his Master's degree from the University of Berlin and his doctorate from Harvard University (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). Even though he funded his education through working summer and part-time jobs, scholarships, and money borrowed from his friends, his opportunities for education were still much greater than Washington's (Biography.com Editors).

From a young age, Du Bois noticed the racism of the people around him, but this racism began to trouble him more deeply when he encountered the Jim Crow laws in college (Biography.com Editors). These laws forced segregation between the different races represented in America – mainly, between the Caucasian Americans and everyone else (Smithsonian National Museum of American History). Du Bois began working as a professor at Atlanta

University and during this time, made his disagreement with Washington's Atlanta Compromise speech publicly known. He believed that Washington had not used his influence to improve the lives of African Americans as he should have; instead of fighting for equality in America between Caucasian and African Americans, Washington seemed more concerned with ensuring African Americans did well in the industries they already worked in (Biography.com Editors). Du Bois felt that African Americans deserved something more, and that something was to have the same rights as Caucasian Americans did in America. Du Bois became a prominent civil rights activist and was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People).

In W.E.B. Du Bois' work The Souls of Black Folk, he wrote, "One ever feels his twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." (Davis) In contrast to Washington's views that more obstacles meant a greater advantage for a person, Du Bois seemed to believe that the "twoness" of an African American presented him or her with an additional challenge that kept him or her behind those who did not have to first overcome the "warring ideals" within his or herself.

Du Bois had a stronger sense of the American Dream than Washington did. Du Bois' belief that African Americans deserved to be treated better than they were indicated his hope for a better future for them, where they could have better opportunities and reach their potentials. Du Bois' civil rights activism embodied the American Dream.

Close to the time of Du Bois' prominence as an activist, towards the early 1900s, was when F. Scott Fitzgerald was born. F. Scott Fitzgerald was a Caucasian American writer who had an early start in writing when one of his short stories was published in his school's newspaper as

a young boy. He was a student at St. Paul's Academy, and then the Newman School, a prestigious Catholic preparatory school, and then Princeton University (Biography.com Editors).

Fitzgerald had dreams of becoming a literary success but he met and fell in love with Zelda, whose father was a Supreme Court judge in Alabama. Since Fitzgerald wanted to marry Zelda, he took a job with an advertising company in order to earn the money he needed in order to pursue Zelda. However, it was not long before Fitzgerald quit this job to continue working on his novel (Biography.com Editors).

Many of Fitzgerald's stories seem to center around wealthy characters who fall in love with the wrong women. His first novel, This Side of Paradise, was based on his life and was about an ambitious man who was rejected by both rich women he was interested in. Fitzgerald's own love life took a downward spiral as Fitzgerald fell deeper into alcoholism and his wife Zelda suffered from mental illness (Biography.com Editors). To Fitzgerald, the American Dream was not a better life with more opportunities; it was an enticing and superficial ideal of wealth and glamor – and yet, even once this idealized status was reached, it was never as fulfilling as one might have hoped. The excitement of the American Dream to him was more in the journey towards attaining it, hoping for a better future and going about it in the wrong ways, and attaining the dream only really resulted in disillusionment.

What Fitzgerald saw as the unattainable American Dream continues to be a theme in the works of acclaimed writers in America many years after Fitzgerald's writings, and one modern writer who addresses this dream in a similarly cynical way is Indian American author Jhumpa Lahiri. Lahiri's parents moved from India to London before Lahiri was born: Lahiri was born in the United Kingdom in 1967. When Lahiri was a child, her family moved to Rhode Island in the U.S. for her father's job and Lahiri grew up in Rhode Island (Biography.com Editors). However,

despite having American citizenship and having spent most of her life in the U.S., Lahiri has had difficulty feeling as if she belongs in America. In a 2008 interview with the National Public Radio, Lahiri said that she has a “halfway feeling” of being American, presumably because of being an immigrant and a part of a racial minority in America. She said, “It didn’t matter that I wore clothes from Sears; I was still different. I looked different. My name was different.” (National Public Radio). Despite the fact that Lahiri grew up in America, the color of her skin and the assumptions that come with it still cause her to feel like an outsider and make the people around her treat her differently from her Caucasian American counterparts.

When Lahiri was 32 years old, her first book, “*Interpreter of Maladies*,” a collection of stories about Indian American characters and crossing cultural boundaries, was published (Crain). It won Lahiri a Pulitzer Prize, the PEN/Hemingway Award, and The New Yorker Debut of the Year (Knopf). Four years later, in 2003, Lahiri’s next book, “*The Namesake*,” was published. “*The Namesake*” is about an Indian couple in an arranged marriage who find themselves moving to the U.S. (Lahiri) The novel was also extremely well-received and became a New York Times Notable Book, a Los Angeles Times Book Prize finalist, and named “one of the best books of the year” by several well-known publications such as USA Today and Entertainment Weekly (Knopf). Through writing about ethnically Indian characters who immigrate to the U.S., Lahiri has found a way to face her own reality. While she spent much of her growing years “denying or fretting or evading,” she has come to accept that her family is connected to two distinct parts of the world, and she finds freedom and peace in acknowledging this fact (National Public Radio).

Lahiri seems to be close to achieving the American Dream: she has taken opportunities to work to her full potential and has received impressive recognition for her talents. However, as an immigrant to America who has struggled between identifying as Indian and as an American,



there is a question of whether having to leave one's home country to a place where one might never truly feel one belongs really allows for a fuller, richer, better life.

The American Dream is once more explored by another critically acclaimed modern writer with a Pulitzer Prize under his belt, Dominican American writer Junot Diaz. Diaz was born in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic as the middle child of five children, but his family moved to New Jersey in the U.S. when he was six years old. When Diaz's father abandoned his family, Diaz's mother had to hold them together (CBS News). With his mother's support, Diaz went on to attend Rutgers University and in 1996, at 27 years old, Diaz published a collection of short stories called "Drown" that received critical acclaim. From 1997 to 2002, Diaz taught at Syracuse University (Cornell Chronicle). In 2008, he won a Pulitzer Prize for his novel, "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao," which details the life of a boy who loves science fiction, does not fit in with other children his age, and whose family immigrated to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic (National Public Radio). "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao" also won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the John Sargent Sr. First Novel Prize, and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize. Diaz currently works as the fiction editor at the Boston Review as well as the Rudge (1948) and Nancy Allen professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) (Diaz).

As many of Diaz's characters are Dominican people living in the U.S., Diaz has clearly drawn inspiration for his works from his own experience as an immigrant in the U.S. Even though he was very young when his family moved to the U.S., he felt the difference between himself and his non-immigrant peers distinctly. "The solitude of being an immigrant, the solitude of having to learn a language in a culture from scratch, the need for some sort of explanation, the need for answers, the need for something that would somehow shelter me, led me to books," said

Diaz in an interview with NPR (National Public Radio). However, as he grew older, Diaz saw two sides to America: a side that was “racist and xenophobic,” but also a side “where anything is possible.” (National Public Radio)

Both Diaz’s life and his stories embody the American Dream. “Drown,” Diaz’s collection of short stories, is about the life of Yunior, a boy living with his family in the Dominican Republic. Yunior’s father left the family when Yunior was very young and Yunior’s mother has to work extremely long hours in order to support the family; however, the family is so poor that they sometimes have to go without food in order to purchase other necessities. A few years later, Yunior’s father arrives from the U.S. to take Yunior and his brother back to New Jersey with him. They are slightly better off materially after arriving in New Jersey than they were in the Dominican Republic, but they are still living in poverty. When Yunior is in high school, he lives with his mother and works to help to pay for bills. The next stories in the collection detail the life of Yunior’s father after he first moved to the U.S. and his struggle to earn enough to support his family back in the Dominican Republic. Despite his drive and hard work, he has difficulty succeeding in the U.S. He ends up marrying a U.S. citizen who was also originally from the Dominican Republic so that he can become a U.S. citizen as well, after which he goes back to the Dominican Republic to get his family. Yunior’s father learns about an apartment building in New Jersey that is offering a paycheck and a free place to stay for a superintendent job, and this is where he brings his family to live (Diaz). The short stories document an immigrant family’s difficult reality of striving towards the sought-after American Dream of having opportunities and fulfilling one’s potential. Although Yunior and his father both hope for a better life in the U.S., how their lives in the U.S. really unfold is much more grim and full of hardship.

However, the way the American Dream displays itself through Diaz's life is much more hopeful. After immigrating to the U.S., Diaz made his way out of the "bad" New Jersey neighborhood he lived in to earn himself a Bachelor's degree and went on to become a critically acclaimed, Pulitzer Prize-winning author who also worked as a professor at the prestigious MIT. Diaz has taken the opportunities given to him and been acknowledged for his tremendous efforts, and if Yuniors less fortunate life prior to immigrating to America is any indication, leading a fuller, better life because of the opportunities he received thanks to living in America.

What does this suggest about the American Dream's accessibility to racial minorities? For each of the five writers discussed in this essay, certain parts of the American Dream were attainable, but there was always at least one aspect out of reach. For Washington, the idea of having a brighter future had to take a backseat to the more realistic importance of having a stable job to support oneself in the present. Du Bois saw the American Dream as a whole and worked hard to make this dream a reality for future generations of African Americans; however, he did not anticipate that his struggle with the "twoness" of the African American self was one that would live on to other racial minority writers in America, such as Lahiri. Lahiri has achieved great things in her lifetime but her "warring ideals," as Du Bois might have described them, between being Indian and also being American makes achieving the American Dream in its fullness seem impossible. Similarly for Diaz, his status as an immigrant follows him even in his success as his writing, much like the writings of Washington, Du Bois, and Lahiri, finds its depth and meaning in the unique, more difficult experiences of growing up different from the majority in America. The fulfillment of potential and recognition of efforts might lead to a more comfortable, more successful life, but the success finds its origins in the pain of being an outsider because of the color of one's skin.

Fitzgerald, in contrast, did not see the American Dream as being attainable as he felt that in achieving success – perhaps by becoming wealthy through the recognition of reaching one’s potential, a person would realize that success is not all it is cracked up to be. This casts a very different light on the success of the racial minority writers discussed: these writers took their lifelong struggles from being a part of a minority and transferred these emotions and experiences into powerful, creative works, which in turn allowed them to fulfill their potential and receive recognition. However, Fitzgerald’s writing suggests that for people in the majority race in the U.S., reaching the top with relatively little struggle means that once one achieves one’s goals, there is nowhere to go but down. In this sense, the American Dream might be even more accessible to racial minorities in America than to the majority race. It seems that Washington was right: success in life may be more accurately measured by the obstacles a person has to overcome to succeed than by the position that person eventually attains (Washington 675).

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