

The American Dream of *The Godfather*: The Life and Times of Don Vito Corleone

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My paper endeavours to explore Mario Puzo's novel *The Godfather* as an embodiment of the "American Dream". The opportunity of a better and richer life, good education and a way to climb up the social ladder are all implicitly, and at times, explicitly embedded in the novel. But it is not just limited to achieving the Dream. The novel tells the story of a family, or more specifically a particular character, who not only fulfills his American Dream but goes above and beyond it. I have in my paper attempted to pinpoint the issues which make *The Godfather* a perfect example of both the realization of the American Dream and a deviation from it.

The concept of the American Dream is part and parcel of the national ideal of the United States of America where every individual is considered to be free, free to enjoy the opportunities that lead to one's success and prosperity, a way to lead a better, richer and fuller life. The phrase "American Dream" was coined by American historian James Truslow Adams in 1931 in his book *The Epic of America*, in which he defines America as "the land of promise" (214). In his Epilogue he further describes it as "that 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"(404) irrespective of their social class or circumstances of birth. It is not only a dream of economic prosperity but also one of "social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position" (404).

The notion of the American Dream is embedded in the United States' Declaration of Independence according to which all human beings are born equal and that everyone is "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights" among which are "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." However the concept of the American Dream has changed over time and it has now

become a widespread term to describe the American way of life. There is no universally accepted definition of the term since it is always subjective, differing from person to person. For some, the American Dream is related to becoming wealthy and the ability to achieve everything through hard work, while for others it is more than mere materialism. It is, for them, the dream of living a simple, happy and fulfilling life. Another aspect of the American Dream is the idea that people of different nationalities, class, caste, race, culture, religion, beliefs etc. can be fused together into a new nation without losing their diverse cultures; the idea of America as a “melting pot” and a “mosaic culture” where everyone can live together peacefully. As Adams further states in *The Epic of America*:

The American dream that has lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores in the past century has not been a dream of merely material plenty, though that has doubtlessly counted heavily. It has been much more than that. It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in the older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class. (405)

In fact, the American Dream is also the dream of the immigrants to move to and settle down in America in the hope of beginning a better life for them as well as their children. The immigration to the New World can be traced back to the 19th century when many well-educated Germans fled the failed 1848-revolution. They welcomed the political freedom in the New World, and the lack of a hierarchical or aristocratic society that earlier determined the limit for individual aspirations. One of them explained:

The German emigrant comes into a country free from the despotism, privileged orders and monopolies, intolerable taxes, and constraints in matters of belief and conscience. Everyone can travel and settle wherever he pleases. No passport is demanded, no police mingles in his affairs or hinders his movements ... Fidelity

and merit are the only sources of honor here. The rich stand on the same footing as the poor; the scholar is not a mug above the most humble mechanics; no German ought to be ashamed to pursue any occupation ... [In America] wealth and possession of real estate confer not the least political right on its owner above what the poorest citizen has. Nor are there nobility, privileged orders, or standing armies to weaken the physical and moral power of the people, nor are there swarms of public functionaries to devour in idleness credit for. Above all, there are no princes and corrupt courts representing the so-called divine 'right of birth.' In such a country the talents, energy and perseverance of a person ... have far greater opportunity to display than in monarchies. (Bogen 7)

The discovery of gold in California, popularly known as the Gold Rush, in 1849 also saw an upsurge of hundred thousand men seeking to make their fortune overnight—and a few did make it.

In Mario Puzo's popular novel *The Godfather* one can find the portrayal of the American Dream, and essentially, the American culture. The idea of a stable home, the notion of a well-knit family, and the allure of success form an integral part of that culture. But when that ideal is threatened they look for saviors, even those who work outside the fringe of the law. In Puzo's novel, it is the 'Godfather' who is the savior and the scythe, the jury and the executioner. Christian K. Messenger, in his 2002 book *The Godfather and American Culture: How the Corleones Became "Our Gang"* aptly declares:

American economic and family culture constantly seeks narratives and heroes to regulate and explain our national life. The culture is constantly engaged in discourses about home, family, money, greed, and security and does not only search for reinforcement and insight through the extreme violence and sensation of mob narrative but also in other more benign and constrained forms. Vito and

Michael Corleone are not the only fantasy figures who embody American hopes and economic dreams. (13)

The novel opens with a trial in New York Criminal Court where an Italian immigrant Amerigo Bonasera is awaiting justice for his daughter who has been brutally assaulted by two American young men. But he is denied that justice and the judge sets the boys free considering one of them is the son of a powerful politician. All his years in America, Amerigo Bonasera had believed in the law and order of the country and he had prospered thereby. But seeing that law and order “...have made fools of us”, he declares to his wife “For justice we must go on our knees to Don Corleone” (Puzo 8). The next few pages talk about people, both rich and poor— a famous film-star and a baker— who are in need of help and they believe that there is only one man in America who can help them, make their problems disappear – “The Godfather. Don Corleone”, thereby creating a suspense and raising questions such as who this man really is? Why do people refer to him as “The Godfather”? How did such a man come about? What did he do to earn such respect? And most importantly, how exactly does he solve those problems?

As the story progresses we gradually come to know that the “Godfather” is actually an Italian immigrant by the name of Vito Corleone who came to America at a very young age and went on to become the head of the Corleone crime family – the most powerful Mafia family, in New York City. As psychoanalyst Dr. David Abrahamsen opines in the *San Francisco Examiner and Chronicle* (18 November, 1975) “The American dream is, in part, responsible for a great deal of crime and violence because people feel that the country owes them not only a living but a good living”.

The ascent of the Corleone family is the case in point. The origin and transition of Vito Corleone to Don Corleone and finally to the “Godfather” is gradually unravelled. He is depicted as an ambitious Sicilian immigrant who moves to the Lower East Side of Manhattan and builds a Mafia empire. His business might be founded on gambling, bootlegging, and corruption, but he is by no means an immoral man. He is known to follow his own strict moral code and believes in

unwavering loyalty towards whom he considers friends and, above all, family. At the same time, it is the traditionalist in him who demands respect from all, even his closest friends who address him as "Godfather" or "Don Corleone" rather than "Vito". In flashback, we come to know that Vito was born in the small town of Corleone, Sicily, on December 7, 1891. After the death of his father and brother at the hands of the local Mafia boss, Don Ciccio, for refusing to pay tribute, Vito's mother sacrifices her own life to help Vito escape. He is then smuggled away, fleeing from Sicily to seek refuge in America on a cargo ship full of immigrants.

Vito is later adopted by another immigrant family, the Abbando family in Little Italy on the Lower East Side and he befriends their son, Genco, who is no less than a brother to him. Vito initially begins making an honest living at the Abbando family's grocery store on Ninth Avenue, but is gradually thrust into criminality and then resorts to unfair means for self-defence. He shoots Don Fanucci, an extortionist and the local neighbourhood so-called patron, and then establishing his own control over the neighbourhood, though more fair than Fanucci ever was. As a young man, Vito starts an olive oil importing business with his friend Genco, which eventually becomes a legal front for his growing organized crime syndicate. Nevertheless, his business becomes highly successful and grows to become the largest olive oil importing company in the nation. Between olive oil importing business and his illegal operations, Vito becomes a very wealthy man. In the mid-1920s, he returns to Sicily for the first time since fleeing as a child and avenges his family by killing the Mafia Don who had murdered his family. By the early 1930s, Vito Corleone has already established the Corleone crime family based on his illegal operations. It is soon believed to be the most powerful crime family in the nation. In fact, the very beginning of this powerful tale of brute force, crime and grit is marked by a quotation by Balzac: "Behind every great fortune there is a crime".

The notion of the American Dream is that the American socio-politico economic system makes success possible for every individual; the ideals of freedom, equality, and opportunity, a life of

personal happiness and material comfort as traditionally sought and held to be available to every individual in the U.S. Vito Corleone's life is very similar to that of achieving the American Dream. He entered America as a poor but ambitious Sicilian who had nothing. Then with the help of a few friends he started his business and became extremely successful through hard work. He started his family, educated his children and achieved success, perhaps more than he himself had hoped for. The story of the Godfather, Vito Corleone, is a story about how a poor immigrant realizes the American Dream by hard work, discipline and devotion to the family. He was quick to realise that in America, money, power and respect are closely related. Success through wealth and power has been implemented as one of the primary goals in American culture and as part of American Dream. But can his success really be called that of fulfilling the Dream? He killed people, founded his business on gambling, bootlegging and union corruption, and gradually went on to become the most feared mafia crime boss in New York. He became the justice system in his own right. When America fails to uphold its professed aims of equality and freedom, it is the "Godfather" who delivers his own kind of justice.

Moreover Vito Corleone is not just a successful businessman, a simple Sicilian who turned the dream into reality but becomes one who surpasses the Dream. He is so powerful that there is nothing he cannot or will not do for his loved ones. He has no qualms about threatening people or killing a few to get what he wants or simply to establish his reign. He is presented in the novel as someone who can even scare death, as one of his friends on the verge of death will cry out, "Godfather, Godfather... save me from death... stay here with me and help me meet death. Perhaps if He sees you near me He will be frightened and leave me in peace" (Puzo 46- 47). Don Corleone has a strange moral code and strict principles by which he leads his whole life, as is evident from his refusal to take any part in the narcotics business even with the prospect of earning enormous monetary profit. But that does not prevent his very name from striking mortal fear in the hearts of his enemies. The world that Don Corleone created for himself and his children in his way to

become a Mafia lord would, however, ultimately consume them. He never wanted his children to be a part of his business but in spite of all his power he could not prevent them. When Michael Corleone takes over the family business and becomes the new Don, he surpasses even his father in his ruthlessness. With the rise to power, one is acutely aware of Michael's simultaneous transformation into a vengeful murderer. He kills his own sister's husband to avenge the murder of his brother because there is no scope for forgiveness in the dangerous world where he lives. The Corleone family might go from being penniless to one of the most prosperous and influential families in the nation over two generations, but that prosperity comes at the cost of sacrificing family members, friends, and individual moral values. As Tom Hagen puts it, "Michael could have forgiven it, but people never forgive themselves and so they would always be dangerous" (447).

Even those who initially disregard the power of the Don, soon realizes the force they are dealing with. As Jack Woltz, the most powerful movie magnate in Hollywood, will realise "That despite all his wealth, despite all his contacts with the President of the United States, despite all his claims of friendship with the director of FBI, an obscure importer of Italian olive oil would have him killed" (69). It is noteworthy that Jack Woltz himself, is another product of the American Dream and a corrupt one at that:

At ten years of age Woltz had hustled empty beer kegs and pushcarts on the East side. At twenty he helped his father sweat garment workers. At thirty he had left New York and moved West, invested in the nickelodeon, and pioneered motion pictures. At forty-eight he had been the most powerful movie magnate in Hollywood. [...] Now at the age of sixty he collected old master paintings, was a member of the President's Advisory Committee, and had set up a multimillion-dollar foundation in his name to promote art in motion pictures. His daughter had married an English lord, his son an Italian princess. (55)

Tom Hagen is another character in this novel whose rise to power is similar to the rags-to-riches stories associated with the American Dream. Tom was the son of a drunkard father and a blind mother. At twelve years of age he found himself an orphan, roaming the streets with an eye infection. It was Don Corleone who gave him a shelter, a family and paid for his education. He went to law school, became a lawyer and joined the Corleone family business. From being an outsider he went on to become the “consigliori” or counsellor to the Don himself, his right-hand man. If he stayed loyal to the Don, he would become rich, wield power and earn respect. Even if he were to die, his wife and children would be taken care of. In other words, in Tom Hagen’s eyes Don Corleone himself is his American Dream, who saved his life, gave him the opportunity to make the best of himself and secured a much better life for his family than he had ever hoped for. Thus, as Messenger describes:

The Corleones, the violent, immoral, misogynist Corleones, were a proto-family for our time, the tightly knit unit, the family that murdered together stayed together. The Godfather posited a truly complete American fantasy, that of New World mobility and power within an Old World identity. Here was an American melodrama that took root in the national imagination as it did on the charts. The Corleone family takeover was both psychic and economic in the American culture. They had in fundamental ways become us. They were “Our Gang.” (4)

The novel also brings forth the question of how credible and realistic the American Dream really is. Does it really offer equal opportunities to everyone alike? Vito Corleone was forced into crime to save his own life and Tom Hagen would have died wandering the streets without the help of the Corleone family. For Amerigo Bonasera, the American Dream has been the most fulfilling. He says, “I raised my daughter in the American fashion. I believe in America. America has made my fortune” (28). But when the boys, who sent his daughter to hospital, is set free with just a warning, his trust in America shatters and his dream turns into a nightmare. It is then that he turns to Don

Corleone for proper justice. When the Don asks him to forget, forgive and be happy with the justice that America has given him, Bonasera emphatically declares “No. They gave the youths justice. They did not give me justice” (30). What is considered to be justice for one, is injustice to the other. Dream for one, nightmare for another.

For the Americans, the American Dream is probably more about spiritual happiness than material possession. It is the belief among the majority that working hard is perhaps the most fundamental aspect for getting ahead. However, for an increasing minority, hard work and determination do not always guarantee success. Achieving the Dream through fair means often becomes increasingly difficult and sometimes without progress. There is an ever increasing pessimism regarding the professed equal opportunities among the working class to be able to turn the Dream into a reality. This is the case in this novel as well. Vito Corleone’s life is almost an inversion of what is called the American Dream. He achieved success but at what cost? The American Dream is the slogan of America to present itself as the land of opportunities, which it truly is for some, but for others it is not as picture-perfect as it is generally believed. There are still some who believe that there is no “American Dream” anymore. As J.G. Ballard, in an interview in *Metaphors* (No.7) in 1983, declares:

The American Dream has run out of gas. The car has stopped. It no longer supplies the world with its images, its dreams, its fantasies. No more. It's over. It supplies the world with its nightmares now: the Kennedy assassination, Watergate, Vietnam.

However, “The constants firmly mixed in *The Godfather* continue to enthrall: America. Citizenship. Family. Ethnicity. Identity. Business. Reason. Murder” (Larke-Walsh 7).

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