

American Dreamer By Bharati Mukherjee

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Bharati Mukherjee's "American Dreamer" and Paul Krugman's "The Death of Horatio Alger" examine different dimensions of the American Dream. Mukherjee writes from the experience of an immigrant who chose the United States as a place of cultural and civic transformation. Krugman writes as an economist concerned that rising inequality and inherited advantage have weakened upward mobility. The original essay seeks a middle position: individuals need effort and participation, but government and institutions must provide genuine access to education, work, safety, and equal treatment. That synthesis remains the strongest argument. The American Dream should not be reduced either to a promise that determination guarantees success or to a conclusion that individual action has no value. It is a social ideal requiring both agency and opportunity. Mukherjee emphasizes belonging and the capacity of immigrants to reshape national identity; Krugman emphasizes the economic structures that determine whether talent can become achievement. (Krugman)

Defining the American Dream

The American Dream is commonly associated with the belief that people can build a better life through effort, freedom, education, work, and participation in society. For immigrants, it may also include safety, citizenship, freedom from rigid social hierarchy, and the ability to define identity beyond birthplace. The idea is aspirational rather than a legal guarantee. It becomes misleading when success is explained entirely as personal virtue and poverty entirely as failure. People begin with unequal wealth, schools, neighborhoods, health, legal status, social networks, and exposure to discrimination. A meaningful dream requires institutions that make effort capable of producing progress.

Mukherjee's Position as an Immigrant Writer

Bharati Mukherjee was born in Calcutta and moved to the United States for graduate study. Her writing often explores migration, identity, transformation, and the difference between being treated as a permanent outsider and becoming an active participant in a new national culture. "American Dreamer" is personal and argumentative. Mukherjee describes America not as a finished ethnic inheritance but as a nation repeatedly changed by newcomers. She resists the expectation that immigrants must remain enclosed inside an unchanging ancestral identity. For her, immigration can be creative self-transformation. (Mukherjee)

The Canadian Experience

Mukherjee contrasts her experience in the United States with a period in Canada where she encountered hostility and policies she believed treated immigrants of color as outsiders. Her account is personal and should not be treated as proof that every immigrant experiences either country identically. Its importance lies in how she interprets belonging. A society may officially celebrate multiculturalism while still making some people feel that national identity belongs to an older population. Mukherjee values the American possibility of claiming the national identity rather than remaining permanently hyphenated at its edge.

Assimilation, Transformation, and the “We”

Mukherjee’s argument is sometimes described as assimilation, but her model is more reciprocal than simple absorption. She does not argue that immigrants enter a fixed American culture and erase everything that came before. She describes national culture as continuously reforming. Newcomers change language, food, literature, neighborhoods, politics, professions, and ideas of citizenship. They are also changed by the country. The “we” of America expands and transforms through participation. This position challenges both nativism and a rigid multiculturalism that treats groups as permanently separate cultural containers.

The Risks of Mukherjee’s Argument

The call to participate in American identity can become unfair if it is interpreted as placing all responsibility on immigrants. People cannot integrate into institutions that exclude them through discrimination, unequal schools, credential barriers, immigration restrictions, housing segregation, or employment bias. Newcomers should learn civic and linguistic practices where useful, but belonging should not depend on abandoning religion, family memory, language, or cultural difference. Mukherjee’s emphasis on transformation is strongest when it remains voluntary and reciprocal rather than a demand that minorities prove loyalty by becoming culturally invisible.

Krugman and the Horatio Alger Myth

Paul Krugman invokes Horatio Alger, whose popular stories became associated with poor boys rising through honesty, effort, and opportunity. Krugman argues that this image no longer describes the economic structure of the United States reliably. His concern is not that hard work never matters. It is that inherited wealth, unequal education, and concentrated income increasingly determine who can convert talent into success. A society may praise merit while allowing family resources to purchase better neighborhoods, schools, unpaid internships, healthcare, legal help, college access, and financial protection from failure.

Economic Mobility

Economic mobility can mean several things. Absolute mobility asks whether children earn more than their parents after adjusting for inflation. Relative mobility asks whether people move to a different position in the income distribution than their parents. Opportunity Insights research has found that absolute mobility declined sharply across birth cohorts, from about nine in ten children born in 1940 earning more than their parents to roughly half of those born in the 1980s. The decline reflects both slower growth and a more unequal distribution of growth. These findings support Krugman's broader argument that the dream cannot be evaluated only through exceptional success stories. (Chetty)

The Role of Inherited Advantage

Inherited advantage is not limited to a large financial inheritance. It includes stable housing, well-funded schools, college preparation, professional networks, freedom from debt, family knowledge of institutions, and the ability to accept risk. A talented student from a low-income family may need paid work while a wealthier student accepts an unpaid internship. One business founder may recover from failure through family support while another loses housing or healthcare. These differences do not eliminate effort; they change the cost and probability of success. A meritocratic society must reduce the extent to which parental wealth determines children's opportunity.

Individual Effort Still Matters

The original essay is right to preserve a role for continuous struggle. Education, skill, discipline, planning, and social participation influence outcomes. Individuals make decisions within constraints, and denying agency can become patronizing. Immigrants and marginalized communities have repeatedly built businesses, institutions, political movements, art, and professional careers under difficult conditions. Their achievement deserves recognition. Yet highlighting effort should not be used to ignore the people who work hard and remain poor. Effort is necessary for many goals, but it is not distributed into outcomes by a neutral machine.

Structural Opportunity

Structural opportunity consists of the institutions that allow ability and work to produce advancement. These include safe neighborhoods, quality schools, affordable higher education, transportation, healthcare, childcare, labor rights, fair credit, nondiscrimination, and an accessible legal system. Government is not the only actor; employers, universities, unions, banks, and community organizations also shape opportunity. Policy cannot guarantee that every person reaches the same income, but it can reduce preventable barriers and protect basic dignity when outcomes differ.

Education

Education is often presented as the main path to the American Dream. It can expand knowledge, earnings, civic participation, and choice, but access and quality are unequal. School resources are connected with neighborhood wealth, while college costs and debt can limit mobility. Credentials earned abroad may not be recognized, forcing immigrants into work below their skill level. Improving opportunity requires early-childhood support, equitable school funding, vocational and academic pathways, affordable higher education, adult language learning, and fair credential evaluation. Education should create capability rather than function as a costly test of who already possesses resources.

Employment and Labor Standards

A dream based on work becomes unstable when full-time employment does not provide adequate income, predictable hours, safety, or advancement. Wage policy, collective bargaining, paid leave, antidiscrimination enforcement, and access to benefits influence whether work creates security. Immigrants may be especially vulnerable when legal status is tied to an employer or when fear of enforcement discourages reporting abuse. Economic integration requires protection from exploitation as well as encouragement to work.

Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is an important immigrant and American ideal. New businesses can create autonomy, employment, and community services. Success requires more than willingness. Entrepreneurs need capital, credit history, legal information, permits, customers, insurance, and time. Discrimination or lack of collateral can restrict financing. Policies supporting small-business lending, technical assistance, transparent licensing, and fair procurement can make entrepreneurship a broader pathway rather than a celebration of a few exceptional founders.

Citizenship and Belonging

Mukherjee's essay emphasizes that economic success alone does not produce belonging. Immigrants need a realistic path into civic life. Citizenship, voting, community organizations, public schools, and cultural participation create membership. Nativist language can tell immigrants that no amount of contribution will make them fully American. That message contradicts the national story Mukherjee defends. Belonging should be based on civic commitment and equal law rather than race, religion, accent, or ancestry.

Multiculturalism and Common Identity

A stable democracy needs common institutions and language for political cooperation, but it does not require cultural uniformity. Multicultural recognition can protect minority history and dignity, while an inclusive national identity provides shared responsibility. The two become rivals only when multiculturalism is treated as permanent separation or nationalism as ethnic ownership. Mukherjee's changing "we" offers a useful bridge: people can retain distinct traditions while participating in and transforming a common political community.

Discrimination

Racial and ethnic discrimination affects hiring, housing, education, policing, health, and daily interaction. Telling marginalized people simply to work harder can make structural exclusion invisible. At the same time, communities have agency to organize, vote, litigate, educate, and create institutions. The original essay's call to fight marginalization is valid when it recognizes that people subjected to discrimination should not carry the entire responsibility for ending it. Government, employers, and the majority population must enforce equal rights and change discriminatory practices.

The Myth of Equal Starting Points

The Horatio Alger ideal becomes harmful when it assumes that everyone starts from the same line. A child's environment shapes exposure to books, pollution, nutrition, violence, teachers, healthcare, and expectations. Recognizing unequal starting points does not mean children are predetermined by class. It means public investment can increase freedom. Programs are most effective when they provide durable capability rather than temporary symbolic help.

Redistribution and Broad-Based Growth

Krugman's concern about inequality raises the question of how growth is distributed. Progressive taxation, income supports, public services, and investment can reduce extreme inequality, but redistribution should not be understood only as transferring cash after markets operate. Predistribution matters: wage bargaining, education, competition policy, financial regulation, housing supply, and access to capital affect the original distribution of income and opportunity. The goal is not punishment of success. It is an economy in which gains are broad enough to sustain mobility and democratic legitimacy.

Personal Responsibility and Public Responsibility

A balanced view assigns responsibility at several levels. Individuals should pursue education, follow lawful opportunities, develop skills, and participate in community life. Families and communities can provide support and cultural resources. Employers should pay fairly and evaluate talent without discrimination. Government should maintain equal protection, infrastructure, education, social insurance, and competitive markets. No level can substitute completely for the others. Public policy without individual effort may not produce fulfillment; effort without opportunity can produce exhaustion and resentment.

The American Dream as a Democratic Promise

The dream should be measured not only by whether a poor person can become extremely wealthy. A democratic version includes security, meaningful work, education, family life, civic voice, and the ability to recover from setbacks. An economy in which a few rise spectacularly while millions face permanent insecurity does not fulfill the ideal. Mobility matters, but so does the quality of life available to people who remain in ordinary occupations. Dignity should not depend on becoming rich.

A Middle Position Between the Texts

Mukherjee and Krugman address different questions. Mukherjee asks how an immigrant can claim and reshape American identity. Krugman asks whether the economy still rewards talent and effort widely. Their arguments can coexist. Cultural participation is meaningful only when economic institutions provide opportunity, and economic reform is incomplete if newcomers remain socially excluded. The American Dream needs both an open national “we” and broad-based mobility. Individuals should be able to change themselves and the country, while the country should ensure that inherited class and racial position do not determine the future.

Policy Directions

A practical response includes equitable education, affordable training and college, fair immigration procedures, recognition of foreign credentials, labor enforcement, affordable healthcare, childcare, housing access, antidiscrimination enforcement, competition policy, and support for small business. Policies should be evaluated through outcomes rather than slogans. Do children from low-income families move upward? Do immigrants’ skills receive appropriate use? Are wages sufficient for stability? Are public institutions equally accessible? These questions translate the dream into measurable responsibility.

Conclusion

“American Dreamer” presents immigration as a process of active belonging and cultural transformation. “The Death of Horatio Alger” warns that inequality and inherited advantage have made upward mobility less reliable. Neither personal effort nor structural reform is sufficient alone. Immigrants and marginalized communities possess agency and should be recognized as participants who reshape the nation, not passive recipients of assistance. Government and institutions must also remove discrimination and provide education, fair work, healthcare, housing, and access to capital. The American Dream remains credible when determination meets genuine opportunity and when national identity is open enough to include the people whose work and imagination continually recreate it.

Works Cited

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