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**DECONSTRUCTION OF AMERICAN DREAM THROUGH
CHARACTER CHRIS GARDNER IN PURSUIT OF HAPPYNESS
MOVIE**

MAKALAH NON-SEMINAR

**AGITA MAHLIKA
1206270413**

**FAKULTAS ILMU PENGETAHUAN BUDAYA
PROGRAM STUDI SASTRA INGGRIS
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NPM : 1206270413

Program Studi : Sastra Inggris

Fakultas : Ilmu Pengetahuan Budaya

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Yang bertandatangan di bawah ini:

Nama : Nike Shinta Karina S.S.

NIP/NUP : 070903016

Adalah pembimbing akademik dari mahasiswa S1:

Nama : Agita Mahlika

NPM : 1206270413

Fakultas : Ilmu Pengetahuan Budaya

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Deconstruction of American Dream through Character Chris Gardner in Pursuit of Happyness Movie.

Agita Mahlika – 120627041

English Studies Department

Faculty of Humanity

2015

Abstract

American dream is an important value that originated from United States of America. It is a term that have been widely used across the nation which describes that every man has a right to obtain success. The Pursuit of Happyness is one of many movies that discussed American dream's elements. Throughout the main character, Chris Gardner, American dream has been reflected in many aspects in the movie Pursuit of Happyness. Asides of the struggle and individualism elements, the movie also depicts a new perspective of American dream in the lens of African American. This paper also comparing movie Pursuit of Happyness with novel A Raisin in The Sun, another literature where explains more about how American dream is seeing by the Generation Y and Generation X. The research uses a textual analysis and sociology approach in order to see how American dream is reflected in the movie.

Keywords: hardship, passion, American dream, Pursuit of Happyness

Dekonstruksi American Dream pada Karakter Chris Gardner dalam Film Pursuit of Happyness

Agita Mahlika – 1206270413

Program Studi Inggris

Fakultas Ilmu Budaya

2015

Abstrak

American dream merupakan sebuah paham penting yang berasal dari Amerika. Merupakan sebuah istilah yang selama ini telah banyak dipergunakan di seluruh Amerika, menjabarkan bahwa setiap manusia memiliki hak untuk meraih kesuksesan. The Pursuit of Happyness merupakan salah satu dari banyak film yang telah mengusung paham American dream. Melalui penggambaran karakter utama, Chris Gardner, paham American dream telah tercermin di dalam banyak aspek di film tersebut. Terlepas dari unsur perjuangan dan individualisme, film ini juga membahas sebuah perspektif baru akan American dream di dalam pandangan seorang Afrika Amerika. Tulisan ini juga mencoba membandingkan film Pursuit of Happyness dengan novel A Raisin in The Sun, sebuah literatur lainnya yang mengkaji lebih lanjut mengenai American dream dalam pandangan Generasi Y dan X. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan analisis tekstual dan serta pendekatan sosiologi di dalam usahanya untuk melihat bagaimana American dream terlihat di film ini.

Kata Kunci: perjuangan, minat. American dream, Pursuit of Happyness

Introduction

Pursuit of Happyness is a movie which is adaptated from the novel. It is released in 2008, but taken setting in 1981. The movie is based on a true story experienced by Chris Gardner, an American stockbroker who is now becoming a successfull investor, entrepreneur, and motivational speaker. This movie is one of the major success in Domestic Box Office since the income had reached to \$162,586,036. There were tons of positive response which praised the movie because it gave an insight, and because it is motivating and moving.

Many critics have also argued that the movie is actually promoting the American Dream, a value which is originated from the United States of America. American dream was first introduced by James Truslow Addams, which emphasizes the point of struggling, hardship and determination, in order to achieve success. Chris Gardner indeed reflects those elements in the movie.

Aside of that, Chris as an African American is also facing a different kind of American Dream. Besides working hard to achieve his dreams, Chris as the African American also needs to conform and adapt with the white collar environment. It is shown that there is a domination of white people in the movie, where most of the stock broker are white. In the research, the movie will also be compared with another literature written by Lorraine Hansberry called A Raisin in The Sun. The comparison will then shows a clear distinction between each literature in seeing American dream throughout their characters.

Several theories are used to support the analysis. On sociology approach, there are Charles Sanders Peirce theory about Indexical and Iconic Sign, a way of how symbol can be appeared indirectly and giving some clues to indicate a certain meaning, Robert K Merton theory about Reference Group, to describe an evaluation of one self to form an identity, and Robert Nisbet theory about Conformity, an act of behavior to matches the group expectation. The rest of the analysis will be using textual analysis and also based on qualitative studies of historical facts about United States of America.

Analysis

1. Introducing American Dream

American Dream has been deeply rooted in the American's way of life. From low, middle until upper class, American Dream has shaped the American perspective in living their life. That is, becoming the fundamental nation's identity.

Until now, the American Dream continues to play an important role upon the national economy and finance. Where people aim the American Dream to pursue their career, set up the standard of their living and builds a prestige. The Pursuit of Happyness is one of the blockbuster movie that tries to depicts American Dream issue. Here, there is Chris Gardner, the protagonist, who during his journey has been well-reflecting several elements of people who chasing the American dream.

1.1. The Struggle

James Truslow Addam mentioned that in American dream lies the hardship and determination. Those who want to pursue their dreams are those who work hard and obliged to struggle. This is the first and the most important element of American dream that has been deeply rooted and becoming the main motivation of every Americans.

The movie Pursuit of Happyness taken place in San Fransisco in year 1981. During that time, the economy problem is not only experienced by Chris, but also by the whole nation. It shows in the beginning of the movie, when Chris was watching the news that tells the federal budget is out of control. The country is facing runaway deficits of almost \$80 billion and it is larger that the entire budget in 1957.

Despite the economic condition that the country has been faced, the government still encouraging their citizens to act positive and giving them hope. "We can turn it around," says one of the nation leader (unidentified) that Chris saw on television. This has hint the American Dream elements, which is a strong determination through the hardship.

American Dream ideology can also be identified when Chris was oftenly quoting Thomas Jefferson statement that talking about happiness. He mention that to gain happiness, people need to struggle. The first time Chris acknowledge his struggle is when he went to Dean Witter to be interviewed. In there, he saw a crowd of people who seems really working hard in doing their job. From that moment Chris realized that it is a hard way to be a stockbroker.

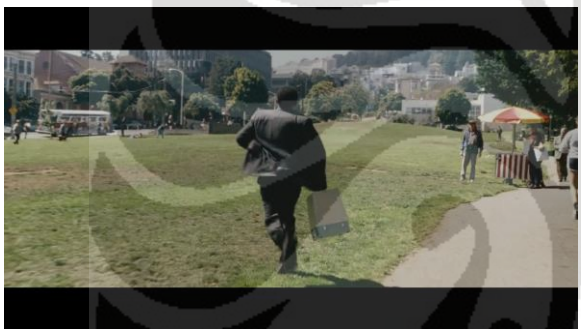
Based on Peirce theory about Indexical Sign, we may also identified the struggle is being symbolized by the running. Chris always seems rushing and in a hurry, and it happened almost everytime and everywhere. In this case, the running can be symbolizes as the struggle and the chasing.



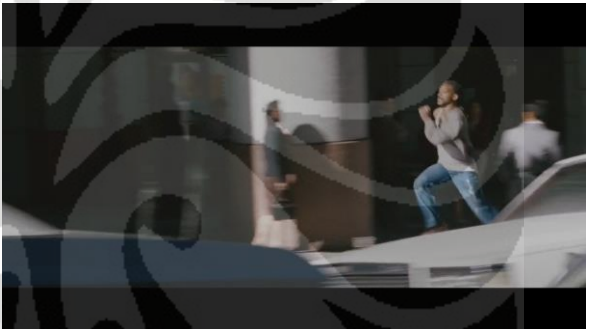
Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3



Picture 4

While working as an intern in Dean Witter, Chris must also feed his kid by selling a Bone Density Scanner, a machine that he used to be businesses in. There was a time when his scanner got stolen and after he got it back, it was already broke. So he had to fixed it again, while he was studying for the upcoming test in Dean Witter.

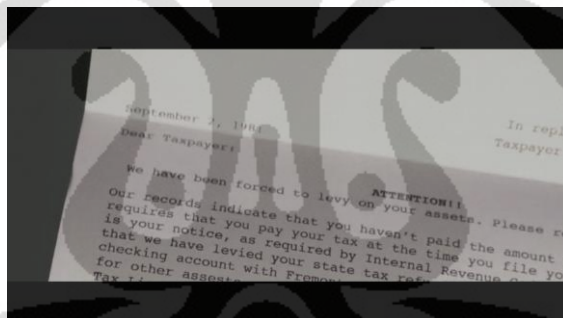
There were also one time when Chris cannot even handle his frustration. It is when he got kicked out from the motel and he is forced to stay a night in a toilet station. That night, someone was trying to get into the toilet, but Chris has locked the toilet door, so that person cannot get in. That condition brought him to tears. He was crying in frustration and it shows that the struggle is very real because he's in a heavy burden. In addition, the struggle elements can be easily found in the movie since Chris has struggled a lot.

1.2. Individualism

American dream cannot be separated with individualism element. The success is depended on how each individual fight for themselves, becoming independent and self-reliant. The movie is somehow really potrays individualism through Chris' character. Chris is depicted as someone who is very individualist, he does not seek for anyone helps, even when he got kicked out from the motel and forced to stayed in a homeless shelter.

1.2.1. Being Debt Free

Aside of supporting the notion of American Dreams, the movie is also depicts the government's power and authority in handling public's money. In the movie, Chris was having many debts and one day, his bank account has just empty. The only announcement that the government gave to Chris is an announcement letter that tells that his bank account has been emptied due to the penalty of his taxes.



Picture 5

Department of the Treasury

Internal revenue service

September 2, 1981

Dear Taxpayer:

ATTENTION!

We have been forced to levy on your assets.

Current balance \$ 34.00

Penalty \$ 9.00

Interest \$ 25.00

Amount seized: \$ 600.00

The movie shows that taxes is actually bothering most of the Americans. This is also a from of satire to the government that implicitly, the movie show that American dream is when American free from the debt and any form of government financial regulation. In Picture 6, Chris was talking with his potential client from PacBell firm and it can be assumed from the conversation, both Chris and his client agreed that it is their dream to be financially secure and being debt-free.



Picture 6

Client : We'd like to retire and maintain our lifestyle without paying a lot of taxes.

Chris : So basically, you want nobody's hands in your pocket but your own?

This notion is also being supported by Adam Levin, Co-Founder & Chairman of Credit.com. Levin has conducted a several survey among the Americans and the result from respondents shows that even until now, American Dream is considered succesfull if you finally able to getting out of debt.

2. Introducing African American Dream

Dreams for African American cannot be equated with the general American dream. African American has experienced slavery for centuries and until before 1865, dreams that they only had is related with the freedom and to be treated equal. Nowadays, dreams for

African American has been changing. There are several elements that distinct the American dream for African American with dreams for common white American.

Dreams for the African Americans has been quite issued in this movie and we cannot talk about the meaning of American dream for Chris without also concerning about his race. Chris Gardner is black and he certainly aware that he is limited because of his race. Almost all of the interns in Dean Witter are white and it quite emphasizes that being a broker is a typical job that most white people choose, not black. Chris, however, was trying to break the stereotypes by chasing the dream to be a broker. It is not easy for a guy like Chris, of course.

During his internship, Chris is feeling underrated and unappreciated. He always being asked to do the chores and being asked to do something that is not related with his job like buying a coffee or donuts for his boss. Here we could sense a bit of racism in here because among all of the other interns, it is always Chris who is being tasked.

2.1. Reference Group

Based on Robert K Merton Reference Group's theory, the movie indicates a Reference Group that Chris was belong to. There are the homeless group, dominated by black people, and there were also broker group, which was dominated by white people.

If the group was classified based on the race, Chris is actually did not belong to the broker group, since he is black and also poor. However, Chris seems to be insisted in joining the broker group. He tried to blend in by hanging out with them. However, even after he hung out with the group, Chris found out that he still cannot be categorized as a part of the group. He was an exclusion, not an inclusion.

Compare to the broker group, Chris also could not found himself matched with the homeless group. In picture 7 it shows that among all the homeless people, only Chris who wear a suit, while the homeless people in his surrounding wearing a very casual clothes. Using Peirce Iconic Sign's theory, the suit indicates that Chris seems to have a more promising life than the others, even though they were all poor.



Picture 7

2.2. Conformity

What is also shown from the picture is that he's been affected with the broker group or white people's way of life by mimics their appearances. We can tell that Chris is actually not becoming himself, since he was trying so hard to becoming a typical white collar American. In other words, Chris is trying to adapt with the broker group, so that he could be finally accepted and become a part of it. His adaption is part of the Conformity based on Nisbet's theory.

Chris behave very polite toward their colleagues and thanking them a lot as a form of his conformity. He also tries very hard to avoid any topic that related to his wealth. There was a time when his possible client asked him to put his Bone Density Scanner machine in his car, Chris pretend to be stung by bee.

Client : Hey, why don't you just put that in your car?

Christopher Jr : We don't have a car. (The kid is trying to be honest).

*Chris : *Tries to grab his client's attention by pretending to be stung by a bee.**

Chris doing this intentionally hoping so that his client will not hear what his kid has just said. This is also a form of his conformity since Chris ashamed if his client knew that he does not have a car. Chris does not want to be seeing as someone poor that might be degrading his reputation or image.

2.3. Faith

In the past, African American has been oppressed by the slavery. They faced inequality and been experiencing many forms of racism. In their frustration, they seek for God's help, that's why people may found African American is very concern with their religious faith. It is faith that stimulates them to work harder and drives their motivation to keep struggling. It is also reflected in how Chris could cope and managed his stress to pursue the dream.

We know that the movie is not being set in the time were slavery still happened. However, it can be assumed that more or less, most African Americans have been influenced by the dogma. We can see in the movie that Chris is captured went to the church with his son. The church is dominated by African American where they were singing gospel songs. Many of them are praying and also cried. The scene tries to identifies how African American deals with their problems, by relying on God.

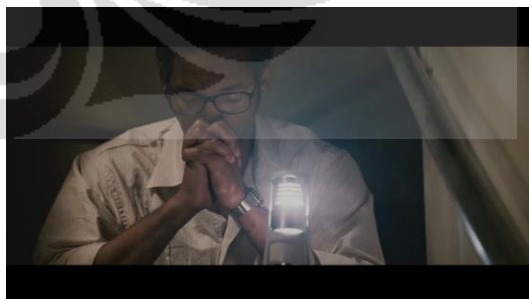


Picture 8

The element can also be seeing when Chris was repairing the machine in the homeless shelter. The machine is finally fixed and the light is glimmering in the dark room of homeless shelter. In that scene, Chris close his eyes and prayed. To African American, American dream is seeing by relying their struggle and effort to the hands of their Creator.



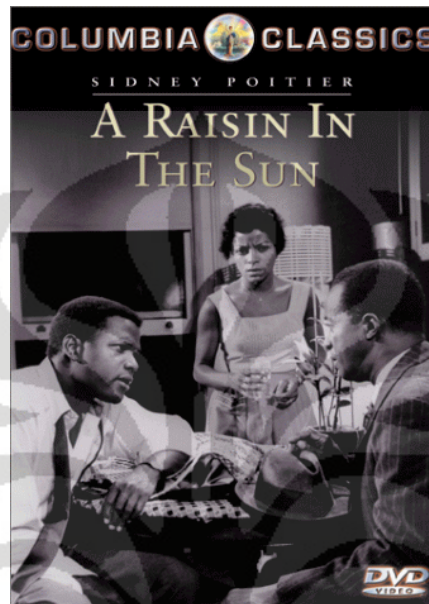
Picture 9



Picture 10

3. Millenials versus Baby boomers. Literature Comparison: A Raisin in The Sun

There were plenty of literatures and other works that discussed an American Dream issue. In here we will examine one of Lorraine Hansberry work that also touch an issue of American Dream, A Raisin The Sun.



Courtesy of amazon.com

The story is telling about an African American family who lived in poverty in Chicago. They are the Youngers; Walter and Ruth Younger. Travis Younger, their son. Mama, Ruth's mother, and Beneatha, Walter's younger sister. In the story, the Youngers are very poor, but they really determine to got out for such circumstances. This has created many conflicts among the characters since each family members are having different ways to raised their family strata.

Comparing to another Pursuit of Happyness, there are a few difference in how each literatures see American dream issue. The discrimination towards African American is still very noticeable in A Raisin in the Sun story. The Youngers are still experiencing segregation when they were wanting to buy a house in a white people's territory. This is shows that in A Raisin in the Sun, African Americans who wants to chase the American dream are somehow still limited by the race.

3.1. Baby Boomers/Generation Y

Apart from that, another interesting thing is how American dream is seen in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Each of the Younger's family members are having different ambition, but we can still see the correlation of each member's dreams. That they want to have a big house. The acquisition to live in a big house and become rich has become their primary goal. This is somehow shows that in this literature, American dream is seeing to be focused more on the 'material'.

A Raisin in the Sun is set in year 1959, after World War 2. Seeing from the historical fact, post World War 2 was the era where America facing the economy growth. The nation's gross national product rose from about \$200,000 million in 1940 to \$300,000 million in 1950. This also resulted that many houses are becoming more affordable. Therefore, many Americans then becoming more materialistics and dreaming of the acquisition of fortune is pursuing the American dream. This generation called as Generation Y or known as Baby Boomers.

3.2. Millenials/Generation X

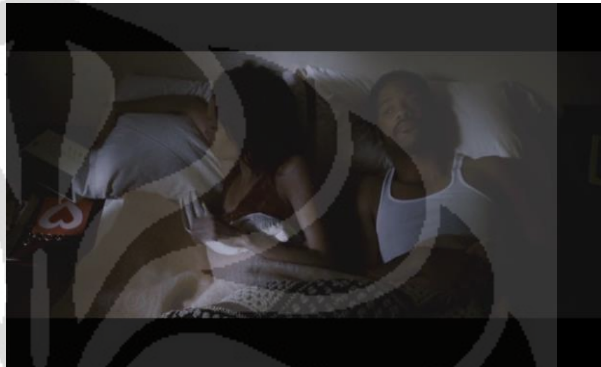
It is President Reagan, who served as the 40th President of United States from 1981 to 1989 the first person who marched the redefinition of American Dream and its achievements. To Reagan, material well-being is only one form of accomplishment, but "a right to say what they want say, do what they wanta do, and fashion a world into something that can be great for everyone." (quoting from). In other words, it is the time where the meaning of American dream was slowly shifting. That is to be more focus on how Americans seek the dream based on passion, rather than focus on how acquiring fortune. This generation was called Generation X or Millenials.

Chris Gardner in the movie *Pursuit of Happyness* is categorized as generation X. In the movie, it is clearly shown that Chris is actually played with his ego and selfish. Chris is taking a leap of faith to work as an intern in a firm called Dean Witter, which he knows that to work there, he obliged to not to be payed for six months, since the internship is only for probation. Moreover, among all of the interns who applied, only one who could get the job, which means if he did not accepted, he would become a permanent unemployed. Chris is willing to take all of the risks, but what for? If he wants to get a job with enough salary (since he `was broke), he could have worked as a waiter in a restaurant or become a dishwasher.

Chris willing to do all of that because it is what he wants. Chris is looking very happy when he first saw a person which happened to be a broker. In his mind, those brokers are looked very happy. The tone in the scene is quite reflected the situation. In Picture 1 we could see a very bright tone, wide range and wide area. Contradicts with Picture 2, the area is rather small and the tone is dark. We could also see the difference of facial expressions in these two scenes. The first one is indicating happiness, whereas the second one shows unhappiness, which is felt by Chris.



Picture 12



Picture 13

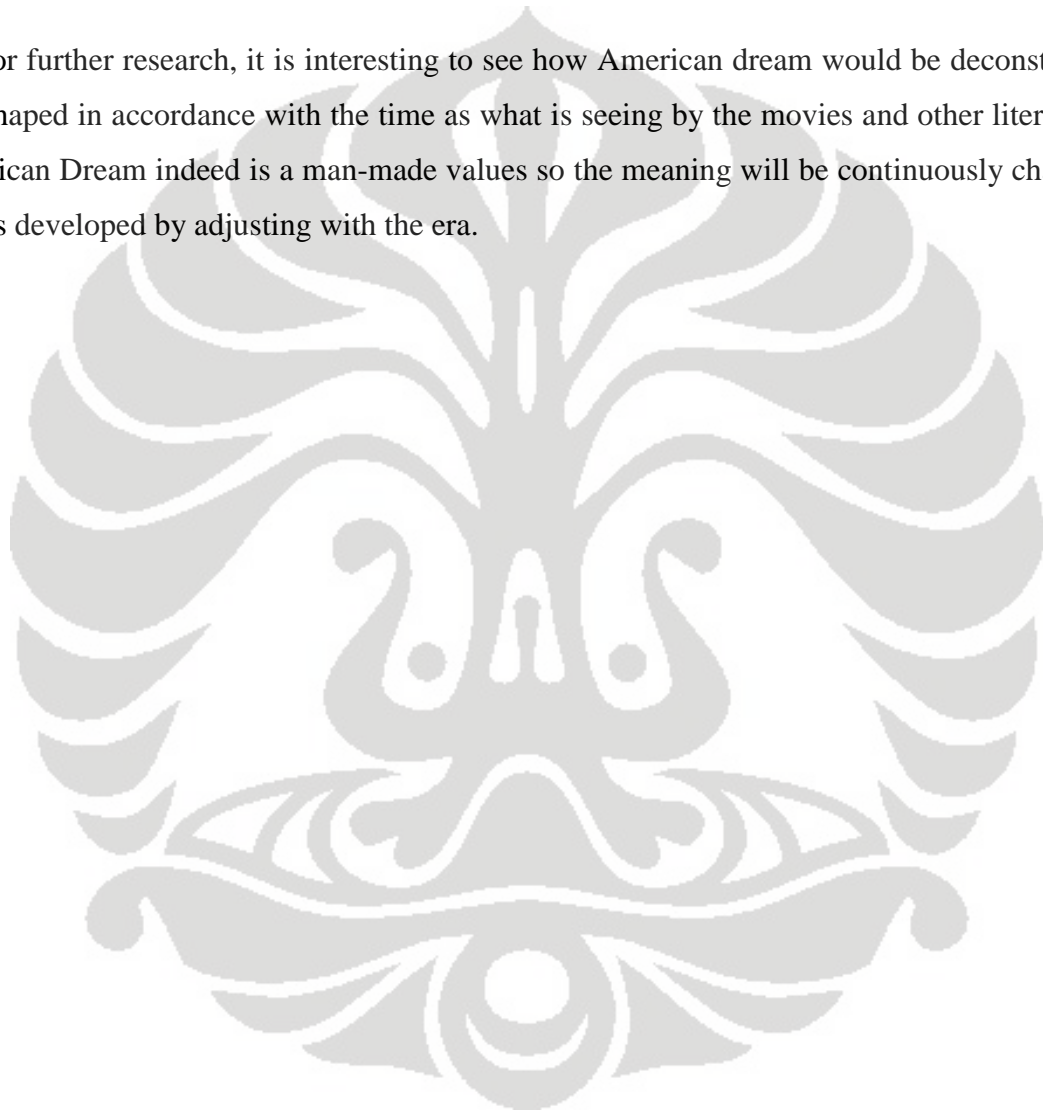
From these two scenes, we can conclude that Chris is not happy with his life right now, and he wants to become a stockbroker because it is his passion. Eventhough the job will risked all of his money, he still determine to do it. Chris is not a college graduate, but when he found out that to be a broker does not require any degree, when he saw an opportunity. Moreover, to become a broker one must be good with numbers. In addition, he feels like it is his call, it is his passion.

Conclusion.

Through the analysis in movie Pursuit of Happyness, it can be assumed that the struggle and individualism elements are still dominated the American dream issue, which has been depicted in the movie. However aside from that, there is an African American Dream, where Chris in the movie are seek for his Reference Group with the white people and tried hard to be adapting and blending with them, as a form of his conformity. African American Dream also seeks for God's help in order to fulfilling his quest, which is to pursuing American Dream.

Compared with another literature, *A Raisin in The Sun*, the issue of African American dream is rather different since there are more of racism issue. Another thing that differ it from *Pursuit of Happyyness* is on how the characters seeing American dream. There is one big difference that distincts Millenials/Generation X and Boomers/Generation Y generation. It can be assumed that people from Generation Y seeks American dream in a more materialist way, where for Generation X, American dream is seeing as the dream to chase our very own passion.

For further research, it is interesting to see how American dream would be deconstructed and shaped in accordance with the time as what is seeing by the movies and other literatures. American Dream indeed is a man-made values so the meaning will be continuously changing as it is developed by adjusting with the era.



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