THE POLITICS OF CLASS: EXPLORING ECONOMIC INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN *BEHOLD THE DREAMERS* BY IMBOLO MBUE

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Abstract
Imbolo Mbue's Behold the Dreamers, published in 2016, uses the story of a Cameroonian immigrant family in New York City to examine how class, race, and immigration status interact to shape economic outcomes in America. Set against the 2008 collapse of Lehman Brothers, the novel follows Jende and Neni Jonga as they pursue stability and opportunity while working for Clark and Cindy Edwards, a wealthy family whose position exposes the distance between American promise and American structure. This article argues that Mbue constructs class not as a personal condition but as a structural one, produced and maintained by economic systems, racial hierarchies, and immigration law. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital, Thomas Piketty's analysis of wealth concentration, Kimberlé Crenshaw's framework of inter-sectionality, and empirical research on racial wealth gaps and immigrant economic mobility, this piece reads the novel as a precise literary account of how inequality operates at the interpersonal level. The analysis moves through five areas: class structure and economic hierarchy in the novel, the ideology of the American Dream and its limits, the mechanisms and boundaries of social mobility, and the intersection of race and immigration with class disadvantage. Each section grounds its reading in both textual evidence from the novel and scholarship from sociology, economics, and critical theory. The article finds that Mbue's novel resists sentimentality and ideology equally. It does not present poverty as ennobling or wealth as villainous. It presents both as positions within a system that rewards accumulation and penalizes vulnerability. The Jongas' eventual return to Cameroon is read not as defeat but as a rational response to structural reality. Behold the Dreamers contributes to African diaspora literature and American social fiction by making inequality visible through specific, human, and verifiable terms.
Keywords: Immigration, Intersectionality, Inequality, Diaspora

INTRODUCTION

Imbolo Mbue's debut novel, *Behold the Dreamers*, published in 2016, enters a conversation that America has long avoided with honesty: who gets to succeed, and why. Set against the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008, the novel follows Jende Jonga, a Cameroonian immigrant, and his wife Neni, as they build a life in New York City while working for Clark Edwards, a senior executive at the failing investment bank. The Edwards family represents old American wealth. The Jongas represent the millions who arrive in America carrying ambition but no guarantee. Mbue uses this contrast deliberately. She places two families, separated by race, nationality, and economic class, in close physical proximity. Jende drives Clark to work. Neni cares for Clark's wife, Cindy. The closeness is domestic, even intimate. Yet the class distance between them never closes. This tension forms the backbone of the novel.

Class in *Behold the Dreamers* is not a background detail. Mbue builds it into every interaction, every decision, and every consequence her characters face. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social capital is useful here. Bourdieu (1986) argues that class position is reproduced not only through economic resources but through social networks, cultural knowledge, and institutional access. The Jongas arrive in America with ambition but without the social capital that converts ambition into stable upward mobility. The 2008 financial crisis does not erase class divisions in the novel. It reshapes them. As Piketty (2014) documents in Capital in the Twenty-First Century, economic shocks historically widen inequality rather than flatten it, because those with accumulated wealth absorb loss while those without it bear the full weight of economic collapse. Clark Edwards loses his job but retains his safety net. Jende Jonga loses his job and loses nearly everything else. The same economic event produces radically different outcomes depending on where you start.

This article examines how Mbue constructs class in the novel, how she presents economic inequality as a structural condition rather than a personal failing, and what the novel says about social mobility as a lived experience for immigrant families in America. The analysis draws on the text itself, alongside scholarship on class theory,

immigrant economic experience, and African diaspora literature. *Behold the Dreamers* is a social novel. It asks you to look at who bears the cost of economic failure and who gets protected from it. The answer it offers is uncomfortable, specific, and worth examining closely.

Class Structure and Economic Hierarchy in The Novel

Imbolo Mbue does not describe class in abstract terms. She shows it through the physical spaces her characters occupy, the language they use, and the choices available to them. From the first pages of *Behold the Dreamers*, the distance between the Jongas and the Edwards' is not just economic. It is structural, spatial, and social.

The Jonga family lives in Harlem. They share a small apartment and count every dollar. Jende works long hours as a chauffeur. Neni juggles domestic work and nursing school. Their lives run on tight margins. The Edwards family lives on the Upper West Side in a home that reflects generations of accumulated wealth. Clark works at Lehman Brothers. His wife Cindy manages a life of comfort supported by domestic staff, social engagements, and consumption that the Jongas observe but never access. Mbue places these two families in the same city, even in the same car, but the world each inhabits follows entirely different rules. This is a deliberate construction. Sociologist C. Wright Mills (1956) argued in The Power Elite that American society organizes itself around a concentration of power and wealth at the top, with limited channels for those below to move upward. The relationship between Jende and Clark in the novel reflects this structure precisely. Jende is physically close to Clark every day. He hears his phone calls, observes his stress, and learns the texture of his private life. Yet this proximity produces no economic leveling. Closeness to wealth is not the same as access to it.

Bourdieu's (1986) framework of capital is again relevant here. He identifies three forms of capital: economic, social, and cultural. The Edwards family holds all three. Clark's position at Lehman Brothers gives him economic capital. His networks, education, and institutional connections give him social and cultural capital. The Jongas enter America with none of these forms of capital recognized by American institutions. Jende's Cameroonian education, work history, and community connections do not convert into American social currency. Neni's intelligence and academic ambition are real, but the system processes her slowly and conditionally, always reminding her of her immigration status.

Immigration status functions as a class mechanism in the novel. Jende's undocumented status limits where he works, how he negotiates, and what risks he takes. He cannot demand better pay or conditions without risking deportation. This is not a personal weakness. It is a structural trap. Portes and Rumbaut (2001), in Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation, show that immigration status directly shapes economic outcomes for immigrant families, creating ceilings that education and hard work alone cannot break through. Mbue translates this finding into lived narrative. Jende's legal vulnerability is a class position, not just a legal one.

Race compounds this further. The Jongas are Black African immigrants in a society where race shapes economic opportunity in documented ways. Hamilton and Darity Jr. (2010) have shown through their research on the racial wealth gap that Black Americans, and by extension Black immigrants, face systemic barriers to wealth accumulation that persist across generations. In the novel, Jende and Neni are not just poor relative to the Edwardses. They are poor in ways that the American system actively maintains through immigration law, labor markets, and racial stratification.

The 2008 financial crisis is the novel's central pressure point. Lehman Brothers collapses. Clark loses his job. For a brief moment, the reader watches wealth become unstable. Yet Mbue is careful here. Clark Edwards does not become poor. He loses his position, not his foundation. He has savings, property, and a network that cushions his fall. His class position absorbs the shock. Jende Jonga, by contrast, loses his job and faces immediate crisis. There is no cushion. There is no network to call. The crisis does not make the two men equal. It reveals how unequal they already were. This is what Piketty (2014) means when he writes about the compounding nature of capital. Those who already hold wealth use it to survive economic shocks. Those without it are exposed directly to the consequences. Mbue dramatizes this economic principle through two families sitting on opposite sides of a car window, watching the same city from entirely different positions.

Economic Inequality and the American Dream

The American Dream is a promise. It tells you that hard work, determination, and ambition are enough to move from poverty to prosperity regardless of where you start. *Behold the Dreamers* takes this promise seriously enough to test it. Mbue does not dismiss the dream outright. She follows two people who believe in it completely and shows you what happens when the system behind the promise does not match the promise itself.

Jende and Neni Jonga arrive in America with this belief intact. Jende works long hours without complaint. Neni pursues a nursing degree while raising a child and managing a household. They save carefully, plan seriously, and invest in their future with discipline. By every measure the American Dream demands, they qualify. Yet the novel

shows that qualification and reward do not operate on the same logic. The dream asks for effort. The system responds with documentation, legal status, race, and origin.

The American Dream as a cultural ideology has been extensively examined in scholarship. Jennifer Hochschild (1995), in Facing Up to the American Dream, argues that the belief in meritocracy is strongest among those who benefit least from it. She finds that poor Americans and immigrants often hold the dream more fervently than wealthy Americans, even as structural barriers make upward mobility significantly harder for them. This is precisely the dynamic Mbue builds into her characters. Jende and Neni believe deeply. The system rewards that belief selectively.

The 2008 financial crisis strips away the surface of this ideology. When Lehman Brothers collapses, the novel shows you two types of loss. Clark Edwards loses his prestigious job. He experiences stress, identity crisis, and marital strain. These are real losses. But he does not lose his home, his children's education, or his ability to plan next year. Jende loses his job and immediately faces the possibility of losing everything else, his apartment, his legal case, his family's stability in America. The crisis does not treat them equally because the system never did. Mbue uses specific scenes to make this concrete. When Neni discovers information about Clark's personal life and attempts to use it as leverage to protect Jende's job, the move fails. The power she thinks she holds dissolves on contact with actual institutional power. Cindy Edwards responds not with negotiation but with money, offering Neni a sum to leave America quietly. The transaction is revealing. Wealth does not just buy comfort in the novel. It buys silence, exit, and control over those with less. This is what economic inequality looks like at the interpersonal level. Robert Reich (2010), in Aftershock: The Next Economy and America's Future, argues that the concentration of income at the top of American society directly weakens the economic foundation for everyone else. He shows that as the wealthy accumulate more, the middle and working classes rely increasingly on debt to maintain living standards, leaving them exposed when economic shocks arrive. The Jongas carry no such debt buffer. They live close to the edge by necessity, not by choice. When the edge moves, they fall.

The novel also interrogates what success looks like for immigrant families specifically. Neni's ambition to become a pharmacist is not small. It is a specific, professional, and achievable goal by the standards the American Dream sets. Yet her immigration status, her financial constraints, and the emotional toll of their legal battles slow and eventually derail her progress. Mbue shows that the timeline the American Dream offers immigrants is not neutral. It assumes a stability that undocumented families do not have. What makes Mbue's treatment of this theme effective is her refusal to make it didactic. She does not write characters who exist to prove a political point. Jende and Neni are fully realized people with contradictions, desires, and agency. Their failure to achieve the dream is not a moral lesson. It is a structural outcome. The system produces this result with or without bad intentions from any individual character. That is precisely what makes economic inequality difficult to confront and easy to ignore.

Social Mobility: Possibility, Limits, and Illusion

Social mobility is the idea that your starting point does not have to be your ending point. It is the mechanism the American Dream depends on. Without mobility, the dream is inheritance, not opportunity. *Behold the Dreamers* examines this mechanism closely and finds it working unevenly, available to some characters in limited doses and entirely out of reach for others depending on factors they did not choose.

The sociological literature on social mobility in America presents a sobering picture. Raj Chetty and colleagues (2014), in a large-scale study published through the National Bureau of Economic Research, found that absolute mobility, the likelihood that a child will earn more than their parents, has fallen from approximately 90 percent for children born in 1940 to around 50 percent for children born in the 1980s. Geographic location, race, and parental income are among the strongest predictors of whether mobility occurs. These are not personal variables. They are structural ones. Mbue's novel gives these statistics a human face.

Jende Jonga's trajectory in the novel is the clearest study in the limits of mobility. He arrives in America and secures a position as a chauffeur for a Lehman Brothers executive. By the standards of his origin, this is progress. He earns more than he did in Cameroon. He lives in New York City. He is building something. But the ceiling above him is low and fixed. His immigration status prevents him from moving into better-paying or more stable work. His lack of American educational credentials closes professional doors. His race and accent mark him in a labor market that rewards familiarity. The progress he makes is real but bounded.

Neni's situation adds another layer. She pursues formal education, which is the route the American mobility narrative most reliably endorses. Education is supposed to be the great equalizer. Yet for Neni, education operates within the same constraints as everything else. Her immigration status creates constant uncertainty about whether her degree will translate into legal work. The financial pressure of tuition, childcare, and legal fees competes

directly with her academic progress. She is doing everything right by the system's own instructions, and the system still does not deliver on its side of the arrangement.

This gap between effort and outcome is what Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) documents in "Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting By in America". Ehrenreich's research shows that low-wage workers in America often work multiple jobs with full effort and still cannot achieve financial stability because wages, housing costs, and systemic barriers are structurally misaligned. The Jongas are not low-wage workers in the same category Ehrenreich studies, but the structural logic applies. Effort alone does not produce mobility when the structural conditions work against it. The Edwards family presents a different kind of mobility story. Clark and Cindy do not move up during the novel. They move laterally and then downward as the financial crisis hits. But their downward movement has a floor. Their class position, built over generations, absorbs the shock. Their children's futures remain largely intact. This is what sociologists call inter-generational wealth transfer, the mechanism by which class position reproduces itself across generations regardless of individual performance. Dalton Conley (1999), in Being Black, Living in the Red, demonstrates that the racial wealth gap in America is driven significantly by this inter-generational transfer, which means Black families and immigrant families of color begin each generation further from the starting line than white families of comparable income.

Mbue captures the psychological dimension of this too. Jende and Neni do not simply experience material limits. They experience the emotional weight of watching mobility recede. There is a moment in the novel when Jende realizes that the life he is building may not be realistic in America, not because he lacks the will but because the structure will not hold him. That realization is not defeat. It is clarity. He chooses to return to Cameroon with his family. This ending resists the standard immigrant narrative of perseverance leading to reward. Mbue gives her characters dignity by letting them choose reality over illusion. Social mobility in *Behold the Dreamers* is not impossible. It is conditional, uneven, and expensive in ways the official narrative does not account for. The novel does not tell you the system is broken. It shows you how the system works, and for whom.

Race, Immigration, and Class Intersection

Class does not operate alone in *Behold the Dreamers*. Mbue builds her novel on the understanding that race and immigration status do not sit beside class as separate issues. They work through it, shaping who gets access to economic opportunity and who does not. Jende and Neni Jonga are Black African immigrants. Each of these identities carries its own weight in America. Together, they compound. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), in her foundational work on inter-sectionality argues that overlapping identities produce overlapping forms of disadvantage that cannot be understood by examining each identity in isolation. The Jongas do not experience class disadvantage, then racial disadvantage, then immigrant disadvantage separately. They experience all three simultaneously, and the combination is more limiting than any single factor alone.

Race shapes the labor market the Jongas enter. Research by Devah Pager (2003) shows through audit studies that Black job applicants face significant discrimination in hiring, even when their qualifications match or exceed those of white applicants. Jende operates in this market. His Blackness, his accent, and his African origin mark him in ways that close doors before he reaches them.

Immigration status adds a legal dimension to this racial disadvantage. Jende's undocumented position means he absorbs workplace mistreatment without recourse. He cannot report violations, demand rights, or negotiate from strength. Mbue shows this not through dramatic confrontation but through quiet accumulation. Jende accepts what he must accept because the alternative is deportation.

Neni's experience with Cindy Edwards also reflects this intersection. Cindy holds economic and racial power over Neni. Their relationship is framed as employment, but it operates through a hierarchy of race, class, and legal status that Cindy uses, sometimes unconsciously, to maintain distance and control. Mbue does not present Cindy as a villain. She presents her as a product of a system that grants her power she did not have to earn and does not have to question.

Conclusion

Behold the Dreamers is not a novel about failure. It is a novel about structure. Mbue shows you a system that produces specific outcomes for specific people based on race, class, and immigration status. The Jongas work hard, plan carefully, and love their family deeply. None of that is enough to overcome what the structure places in front of them. The novel's value for literary and social scholarship is its precision. Mbue does not generalize. She gives you two families, one city, one economic crisis, and two entirely different experiences of the same event. That specificity is where the argument lives. Economic inequality in the novel is not accidental. Social mobility is not equally available. The American Dream is not a neutral promise. Mbue makes each of these points through character, scene, and consequence rather than argument. For scholars of African diaspora literature,

postcolonial studies, and American social fiction, the novel offers a text that connects lived immigrant experience to documented structural conditions. The Jongas are fictional. The conditions Mbue builds around them are not.

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