

Making It in America

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Abstract

The article highlights a second-generation Greek immigrant's obsessive pursuit of the American Dream. It focuses on a dramatic situation during the 1967 Detroit riots that Milton Stephanides takes advantage of in order to make easy money. The article further shows how his family climbs the social ladder, and how Milton succeeds in opening a chain of hot dog restaurants all across America that rival McDonald's. Milton's confrontation with his daughter's alleged kidnapper is argued to reveal his real character, thrown into relief by the very rapacity of the kidnapper. Milton's ensuing death brings about the demise of his empire, which actually restores the balance of things.

Keywords

immigration, greed, money, success, failure.

Middlesex is Jeffrey Eugenides's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel. It is a family saga which spans three generations, an epic narrative of the adaptation and assimilation process of the Greek immigrants in America. Everything started in 1922, when Lefty and Desdemona Stephanides had a narrow escape from their country ravaged by war, and embarked on a ship that took them to the country of freedom in the hope of having a better life. They struggled hard to adapt to a new environment while still preserving core aspects of their culture: the Greek language, traditions, customs and the Orthodox religion. Their American-born son, Milton, was intent on nothing less than achieving the American Dream. The central issue of this article is to follow Milton's path to success and failure in order to prove that it is his obsession with money that brings about the demise of his empire.

Immigrants are generally thought to be vulnerable people since they find themselves amidst clashes of cultures, identities and religions. P. Kasinitz (2009: 5) et al., argue that the paradox of the immigrant experience lies in the fact that immigrants go to America in pursuit of a better life for them and their children, and while “they overcome hardships and obstacles to give their children the chance to become Americans” (5), they often become “uncomfortable with and anxious about the future of the new Americans they have created” (5). The second generation of young people “may see themselves very ‘American’ compared to their immigrant parents” (15), and are likely to achieve success more easily than their parents.

This is the case of Milton Stephanides. Born and raised in Detroit, Milton was definitely at an advantage in comparison to his parents in the sense that he identified with the culture and institutions of the birth country rather than with his parents'. Not surprisingly, I would argue, Milton possessed a self-assurance that "protected him like a shell from the world's assaults" (174), and made up for the lack of physical beauty. Milton was provided a good education, served the US Navy in World War II and in the Korean War, then returned to his old dream of running his father's restaurant, the Zebra Room. He envisioned a day in which he would own not one restaurant, but a chain of them, a Greek replica of the famous McDonald's restaurants. Due to his drive and intelligence, the family business started to prosper.

A few years later, however, the Stephanides family had to cope with financial difficulties. In 1967, the diner was no longer a profitable business as the neighborhood underwent noticeable changes: white people moved from the area, and black people took their place. The ascent of black people "to the corner soapbox" (229) proved that major changes occurred all across the country. In a study of urban revolutions, Dan Georgakas (1998: 1) and Marvin Surkin depict Detroit as a city of problems. It is against a troubled history of the city that the 1967 riots started and proved to be "the most widespread and costly of hundreds of urban rebellions throughout the United States" (1).

The fires in Detroit seemed to repeat, in American guise, the fires in the Greek town of Smyrna that Left and Desdemona had escaped from 25 years before. Although Milton tried to protect the restaurant, The Zebra Room was set on fire. As he was on the verge of using the fire extinguisher, something dawned on him. The expression on his face was "of a man who could never stop thinking about business" (250), fully aware that success meant "adapting to new situations" (250). Realizing that the three fire insurance policies that his father had entitled him to half a million dollars, Milton looked around "with wild, eager eyes" (250), suggestive of his resolve to take advantage of a unique opportunity, and let his restaurant burn. His decision proved indeed profitable in the aftermath of the riot that he had anticipated. The damaging consequences of the riots are outlined by Arthur L. Johnson (2008: 108): "The exodus of the white from the city accelerated. Most of the businesses destroyed by looting and arson did not come back, and once-vital commercial areas were left moribund." It is obvious that what should normally have been a disaster befalling Milton's family proved the beginning of a new life for them.

Indeed, the insurance money enabled Milton's family to climb the social ladder. While until then they had struggled to stay in the middle class, now they had hopes "of sneaking into the upper, or at least the upper-middle" (252). Milton was thus in the long-awaited position to fulfill his dreams, and, like all well-off Americans, the first thing to buy was a car. Unlike his father who had never afforded an expensive automobile, he purchased a 1967 Cadillac Fleetwood whose unexpected, dazzling appearance in the Greek family's driveway made it resemble a spaceship "as black as space itself" (252), or an "intergalactic" (252) car. I would say that "the long, beautiful, ominously perfect shape" (253) of the car foreshadows Milton's last ride.

Looking for a house in the suburbs was the next thing Milton did. Being shown a rather eccentric house in Grosse Pointe, "the affluent lakefront district of the auto magnates" (254), he was well aware that his obvious ethnic and social background made him an unwelcome member of that exclusive neighborhood. I find it important to mention that he denied his Greek origin by stating that he was a Detroiter, and so was his wife. Intrigued by the strange peculiarity of the house which was in stark contrast to the Old World style that the estate agent reckoned the Greek would prefer, Milton decided to buy it. And, much to the shock of the estate agent who expected the purchase of the house to be contingent on a loan, he said self-assuredly that he would pay cash while taking much delight in his own "grand gesture" (257).

Milton had a new vision of achieving his American dream. He came up with the logo for the Hot Dog Restaurants, namely the Pillars of Hercules. Significantly, he settled on an architectural element that would betoken his Greek-American heritage. Thus, "Milton's pillars were the Parthenon and the Supreme Court Building; they were the Herakles of myth as well as the Hercules of Hollywood movies" (275). It is sharply evident that the Greek elements are related to myth, while the American ones are associated with matter-of-fact, crucial issues like justice, on the one hand, and mass entertainment, on the other. While the Supreme Court Building is a symbol of justice that all American citizens are entitled to, Hollywood stands for "historically the most powerful, visible and influential sector of popular culture" (361) as Robert B. Ray (1985: 15) puts it.

Milton's flair for business bore fruit. The Pillars of Hercules did attract people's attention, and rivalled McDonald's Golden Arches. Lane Crothers (2010: 130) argues that McDonald's is "a powerful symbol of American cultural globalization", and its golden arches logo is "as distinctive as the American flag" (130). Moreover, Crothers maintains that McDonald's expansion is connected with

the development of the automobile industry, and rhetorically asks: “What could be more American than to not have to go out of one’s car even to eat? (130). Accordingly, I would suggest that Milton’s desire to compete with McDonald’s is inextricably interwoven with his love for cars.

Significantly enough, Lefty’s first job in America had been in the automobile industry. While he had worked on Henry Ford’s assembly line, now his son considered employing the principles of production line for the future expansion of his business. In an article entitled “Ray Kroc, McDonald’s, and Fast-Food Industry,” Daniel Gross (<http://www.stephenhicks.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/forbes-kroc.pdf>) considers the founder and builder of McDonald’s Corporation “an industrial pioneer no less capable than Henry Ford.” According to Gross, Ray Kroc was aware that, in order to build a chain, he had to employ discipline on a rather unsystematically run restaurant industry; “Forty years earlier, Henry Ford had realized that the mass production of automobiles required the marriage of precision parts to an efficient assembly process. Kroc’s insight was to apply the same rigour to the construction of sandwiches.” I would argue that just as Kroc had put his vision into practice, so did Milton with his Herculean frankfurters.

While Milton’s business expanded all across America, he had to face a most unfortunate situation. His younger child, Callie, was identified with a hermaphroditic condition, and ran away from home, unwilling to undergo an operation that would rectify his/her genetic make-up against. Having been told on the phone that his child was held for ransom, Milton decided that he should solve the situation alone. His decision was consistent with his typical American attitude of doing “whatever he wanted, confident that he knew best” (500), and thus he set about rescuing his daughter in his Cadillac Eldorado. What I find meaningful here is that the very name of the car model symbolically evokes not only the kidnapper’s avid desire to make easy money, but also Milton’s rapacity on which he had actually built his empire.

Milton went to his daughter’s rescue on one of Detroit’s pink nights when darkness and light merged, a basically unnatural phenomenon that Detroiters considered, out of mere habit, natural. It was, in my opinion, a paradoxical night that was to conceal and reveal essential truths. Arriving at the desolate, dilapidated Grand Trunk Station, Milton “met” his own history, albeit unaware of it. Here he was, at the very station Lefty and Desdemona had got off the train half a century before. It was “the chemical brightness” (504) that revealed the true identity of the kidnapper in the person of nobody else but Father Mike, Milton’s brother-in-law. What followed was a car chase that brought about Milton’s end.

In the beginning, it was hardly a car chase at all. Without the typical swerves and near collisions in a movie action scene, this was rather a four-wheeled ride “between a Greek Orthodox priest and a middle-aged Republican” (505), which amusingly suggests, in my view, two different aspects of cautiousness. Nevertheless, the chase took on a science-fiction aspect as if the Joker’s car sped up away from the Batmobile, which emphasizes Milton’s shock that his brother-in-law had come up, for the first time in his life, with an effective solution to a problem. I believe that Father Mike’s description as a man “who spent his life in the fairy tale world of the Church, dressed up like Liberace” (506) is again meant to underline Milton’s condescending, even repulsive attitude to an institution that promoted, in his opinion, a happy illusion, and whose representatives wore weird, outrageous clothes.

However, Milton’s confidence presently turned into panic. His fear that Father Mike could go unpunished somewhere in Canada is relevant, I think, for his trust and admiration for his country, on the one hand, and his skeptical, even contemptuous perspective on the neighboring, foreign country, on the other. Milton’s version of Canada “with its pacifism and socialized medicine! (...) with its millions of French speakers!” (507) took on humorous features as he imagined his brother-in-law disappearing somewhere in a prairie province and roaming with the moose. Nevertheless, as extreme pressure reveals people’s true character, the wild car chase betrayed Father Mike’s. What he had succeeded in hiding behind priestly robes and serene smiles for years was his actual lack of faith and unhappiness in his own marriage. Not surprisingly, he had taken full advantage of the opportunity to kill two birds with one stone. The confrontation was, in fact, between two equally rapacious men. I therefore find Dumitru Stăniloae’s (2000: 42) comment on greed a brilliant example of what Milton, but especially Father Mike, more than anybody else, should have been aware of:

Greed is responsible for conflict and imbalance in the relations among humans as also for their alienation from God. As images of the divine reasons, created things must not be degraded through base use and misunderstanding that gives rise to dissention. And we do avoid this degradation when we are not led by the passions to become the slaves of created things, but see within them that divine meaning by which they foster communion.

In a matter of seconds, Father Mike’s car turned into a kind of a ramp for the Eldorado, and “Milton realized he was airborne” (59). In the magical realist

mode, the reader witnesses how Milton steered his flying car to hover over familiar places, and finally looked not for his present house, but for the Zebra Room, obviously the most important place in his life. His burst into tears revealed his love for his daughter that he had not been able to find, despite all his efforts. But, most importantly, the last thought that crossed his mind was the sudden awareness of having done “the stupidest thing ever” (511) although he had always taken the best decisions, and taught everybody how they should do things right: “His last word, therefore, was spoken softly, without anger or fear, only with bewilderment and a measure of bravery. ‘Birdbrain,’ Milton said, to himself, in his last Cadillac” (511). It was, in my opinion, a tardy moment of sincerity. Milton’s abrupt death, however, proved to have occurred at the right time as he did not live to see how his elder son would ruin his empire.

In conclusion, Milton’s initially justified desire for a better life proved to be a consuming preoccupation as he came to conceive happiness only in terms of financial success. He resorted unhesitatingly to a dishonest gesture that ensured his family a life of luxury, which proved, however, temporary. I believe that *Middlesex* highlights man’s obsession with money and proves that it brings about disastrous consequences. The novel draws attention to today’s secularized world in which moral values are increasingly considered either futile or ridiculous. In so doing, we refuse to take responsibility for our actions.

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