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**Collective Gender Identity in Michelle Obama's *Becoming***

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## Collective Gender Identity in Michelle Obama's *Becoming*

### **Abstract**

*This paper studies collective gender identity in Michelle Obama's *Becoming* implementing Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity, Judith Butler's notion of gender identity, and Linda Anderson's idea of autobiographical subjectivity. The identity of a human represents the self in the social, political, and cultural domains. However, it is not limited merely to the representation but works as a constitutive of that represented self. Being affected by the various instances present around, identity remains in motion. It is multi-dimensional. The identity formed in the past is not left behind, instead, new identities are developed, in addition to the previous ones for the performance of the role. A particular gender body performs as per the circumstances around it. With the presence of multiple identities, Michelle Obama succeeds in positioning herself in variant situations and accepting occurrences in her life. And this clarifies that identity is associated with the roles of an individual in society and the definition produced by the people around. Obama's memoir has melted the absolute self which means her positionality is the major focus here than the standpoint. Her this melted self accommodates the multiple selves which have succeeded to transform different layers of identities in self. And this process of transformation works as two-way traffic: accumulated all identities into one and has presented all as one, because of which even the diverse forms have been the one. This means Obama, in the memoir, is a society and also gender. The 'she' is society itself and sometimes society represents her and this can be viewed in the regime of her gender body.*

Keywords: Obama, Culture, Identity, Memoir, Self, and Gender

The fleeting nature of identity does not have a fixed location associated with a particular gender body. Socio-cultural structure, power-politics, and discursive dimensions of the human domain always intervene in the formation of self. The intricate relationship between innate human identity, which is liquefied by several affecting forces of society, and the identity imposed by the social prevalence consistently evaluates an individual for the solidification of self and others. In these happenstances, the identity of a particular body becomes a byproduct or, in a deep sense, it happens as an outcome of amalgamation between the relative social behavior of an individual and the social arena where a particular body resides. These facts, articulated in Michelle Obama's memoir *Becoming*, are significant aspects to deal with in exploring the text more closely.

The memoir begins with Michelle Obama's childhood experience in Chicago with her parents and her elder brother in South Chicago in the 1970s. She grew up in a two-story home at Marian's aunt and uncle's upper-floor flat which they had rented. Michelle's father was a patient with sclerosis but he never allowed his condition to limit him. Michelle is a sharp young woman who has little patience for chaos. Compared to Craig, her older brother, a talented basketball player with many friends, she is less outgoing. But Michelle gains social confidence over time. Later, she moves to Princeton to live with her brother and joins him for graduation.

A Jamaican girl called Suzanne is one of Michelle's best friends at Princeton; this bond helps Michelle realize that not everyone needs to be as organized and motivated as she is. After graduating, Michelle enrolls at Harvard Law School and begins working at a prestigious Chicago law firm. But, by that time, her interest in law had decreased. Meanwhile, she is asked to mentor a male summer employee named Barack Obama, her life takes an unexpected turn. He also began law school

later and happen to be recognized for his brilliance in the workplace swiftly. By this, Michelle observes that Barack is more tolerant of upheaval and uncertainty than she is when they become acquainted. She also observes his commitment to the advancement of humanity. Meantime, she experiences heartbreaking loss as her father passes away after years of battling to lead a normal life, and her friend Suzanne dies from cancer. Michelle searches for opportunities to leave her law career since she understands how fleeting life is. Barack, on the other hand, works for a national get-out-the-vote organization in the Chicago region. Now, they are engaged and married in 1992.

When the chance to compete for an Illinois state senate seat presents itself, Barack is employed by a law firm that represents the public interest. He wins the election and that makes it clear that he has the temperament and abilities necessary to succeed as a politician. However, he lost a bid for a seat in the US House of Representatives. Following this, their daughter Sasha is born. Barack unexpectedly establishes a commanding lead in his race for the U.S. Senate as his speech at the Democratic National Convention raises his popularity nationally. He wins the Senate election with ease. Michelle and the girls continue to live in Chicago after Barack relocates to Washington. Barack and a group of advisors were planning to run for president in 2008. Although she agrees to help with the campaign, she secretly believes that Barack cannot succeed because he is a Black guy. Despite controversies, following the convention in August, Barack wins the election.

The transfer from the Bush to the Obama administration is clean and cordial. Michelle and Barack want to maintain the daughters' lives as normal as possible while helping them get acclimated to always having Secret Service members with them when they go out. Now, Michelle as the First Lady must also be actively involved in research. Through her several ongoing projects, she also supports education for girls

all around the world including post-secondary education. Finally, she collaborates with Jill Biden, the Second Lady, to advance the Joining Forces initiative's support for military families. Michelle learns about the influence of social media during Barack's successful reelection campaign in 2012. She finds Donald Trump's past and present actions repugnant during the 2016 presidential election. She is startled when Trump defeats Hillary Clinton after trailing in the polls. She finds solace in the accomplishments she and Barack have made over the past eight years and tells herself there is much to be hopeful about.

There are contestations regarding the interpretation of Obama's memoir. The interpretive differences, under which the methodological and theoretical debates are common, offer multifarious avenues to understand her and the autobiography itself. For instance, Krissah Thompson, in her article "In revealing new memoir, Michelle Obama candidly shares her story" published in *The Washington Post*, exclaims that Obama succeeded in strengthening her identity, being apart from the political regime. Moreover, she contends:

[T]he former first lady is occupying a space in the culture beyond politics . . .  
 "Becoming" takes her historic status as the first black woman to serve as first lady and melds it deftly into the American narrative. She writes of the common aspects of her story and — as the only White House resident to count an enslaved great-great-grandfather as an ancestor — of its singular sweep.  
 (20)

Thompson reflects that the memoir is a narrativization of her personal story from the subordinated position to the first lady. But she also says how Obama triumphed in blending her blackness with whiteness in the white society. Indeed, in a deep sense, Obama's swift transition and sweepy performances seem to be criticized by

Thompson, accusing her of forgetting her past's significance. However, critics like Lt Col Sue Pope RAMC enormously praise her transmogrification from countless beings to a representative of the nation. To quote Sue Pope, "'Becoming' is an autobiography detailing the highs and lows of Michelle Obama's incredible journey from humble beginnings in the less glamorous South Side of Chicago, to the grandeur of the White House and life as America's first African-American First Lady" (1). Sue Pope finds the memoir an incredible journey of a common individual that started with generous attributes and hyped up to an intimidating success. As she further mentions, "It takes the reader seamlessly through three distinct phases of her life, "Becoming me, becoming us and becoming more." It is not meant as an overt leadership text, but her memoirs are packed with parallels for leading in everyday situations and not just for those in assigned leadership roles" (1), the interpretation excels the parameter of expectations. To be more precise, she illuminates that categorical division of the memoir. She argues that the text is more concerned about how to cope with everyday life rather than how to master leadership qualities for public strata. It will be more palpable if we understand Sue Pope's proposition as *Becoming* is a text that teaches an individual to exist in society rather than lead it.

In a similar light, another writer Candace Howze puts forth, "*Becoming* is a story that focuses more on hard work and sacrifice than a privilege; it grapples with the nuances of understanding identity, and it overflows with an emotional call to perseverance" (42). Howze's point exemplifies the priority of Obama to get success in her life. The constant effort, emphasizing her toil and understanding of the discrepancies between racial identity, was her key to excel the limitless boundaries of constraint derailed. Apart from this, Shalon van Tine picks up distorted images of society where women have to confront countless burdens on their way to go. In these

backdrops, Shalon claims, “Obama’s story shows how the cards are already stacked against women in the first place, so to be successful requires a collection of built-in advantages—advantages that most women would never have access to regardless of how much they overperform” (2). In a critical sense, Shalon seems slightly reluctant, if not entirely, to Obama’s success because society has preconceived modalities and fundamental grammar for women to adhere to; however, Obama resulted in a terrific victory against the hindrances. She triumphed because she was accessible and had unquestionable agency through which she could dismantle the obstacles.

The journey through which Obama passed, however, was not easy to walk on. Her vulnerable lifestyle and fragile status as a woman were always behind her, following her wherever she went. The nullness of her destiny, the hardship in becoming herself, and the indisputable discomforts after being the first lady were undoubtedly hardships to carry on. Indeed, these details are, however, portrayed in the novel unfathomably. Perhaps, this is the reason why Ágnes Zsófia Kovács describes *Becoming* as: “. . . finding one’s voice, opting to work for the community, and choosing hope over despair as not so much a personal but rather as a communal story of a not so well definable group” (1). How indifferent it is to hear own voice; how strenuous it is to say helping others and to really help others, finding a better way out with hope in hopelessness, these are the dreadful picture presented in the memoir.

The American society, which has a dreadful history of racial discrimination and capitalist tendencies, is also one of the significant aspects of the memoir that has been studied by Tara Lal Shrestha. How the layers of prejudicial practices prevail to date and how the notions are creating minorities, lessening their autonomy and liberation have been the major focus of Shrestha. As he opines:

She presents dynamics of dehumanization and racialization being continued in



America to impact global black experience and condition of minorities. The bildungsroman story of Michelle Obama, which presents her development of various aspects of life, helps to understand persisting dynamics of dehumanization of minorities in America and beyond. (45)

Shrestha's assessment negotiates with Obama's circumstances which played a pivotal role in constructing her identity in the memoir. Criticizing the dark side of American society, Shrestha amply admires Obama's guts and her audacious nature through which she could restlessly augment her position.

Similarly, defining the American position and the perspective that the society encapsulates, Afua Hirsch quotes the thought of the academic Ula Y Taylor, in *Guardian*, that says: "the idea that a woman would have a 'radical' disposition simply by being a thoughtful working black mother says a lot about Americans perceptions of political spouses, and it helps us to better understand why Michelle Obama is perceived as too strong to be first lady." The social conception regarding the counterpart of a political leader and her indubitable ability in her leadership traits are magnanimous forces that confirmed her into the position of the first lady. However, it is not to say that her ways were full of roses.

Michelle Obama had, indeed, confronted hardships in her life which were the primary steps to her success. Her purposeful projects through which she solidified her stability are genuine examples that express her positive sides in which she is more concerned about the collective whole rather than the individual self. As Emily Lordi, in *The New Yorker*, writes, "Obama exposes the particular pressures and thrills of black women's self-creation. But she also details the rather more modest creation of a stable domestic life. By bringing motherhood, marriage, and self-making together in "Becoming," she combines the possibilities that Sula and Nel represent." Lordi

assures that Obama dealt with both creations of the self as a minority woman and the collective renunciation of the community for creating a communal whole simultaneously.

From these reviews, an out-glowing dynamic picture of Michelle Obama ostensibly flashes being embodied with the domain of her autobiography. The variegated description and analytical nuances are scattered to palpably experience her life story through the text. Nevertheless, besides these facets, a subtle analysis is equally significant to observe her memoir from the location of cultural and gender identity. The incredible metamorphosis of her life schedule and the manifestation of astoundingly unbelievable results are not merely the replication of her personal and American identity, instead, these results are the outcome of her crucible stages in which she consistently fought against the diabolical hindrances from a supple position, being women from subordinated cultural strata. Her spirited life story has layers of resistance, different textures of conflicts, and disorientation of selflessness which paved the way to her success.

This research, therefore, explores these facets of the memoir from layers of theoretical approaches, putting Michelle Obama at the center of concern. Firstly, the research deals with the autobiographical motives of the author and try to calculate her point of view, and gradually analyzes the shift of self in the memoir. Secondly, the research discloses the cultural embeddedness with the self because she is the first black first lady. And thirdly, the research will unfold the performance of Obama with her gender identity and reveals the heroic emblem of her reality. In doing so, the research more importantly deals with the collective gender identity that Obama embodies. To be more precise, the study exposes the multiple selves of the author and highlights how the author has succeeded in underpinning collective gender identity

while reflecting on herself.

Autobiographical depictions have been always in transition over the ages, with the changes in personal thought and historical authors. However, “. . . at the beginning of the twenty-first century, some of them have created a new form of academic life-writing that has challenged established conventions and resisted generic classification” (Aurell 244-245). Blurring the demarcation between high and low literature, and fraternizing categorical division between the work of arts, these leading writers have flourished in booming the new dimension of autobiographical spaces where it celebrates multiple aspects of self in one text.

To put Jaume Aurell’s words more subtly, “These historians have chosen *life-writing* not only to tell personal or academic stories . . . but also, and more significantly, to make history by revealing their epistemological beliefs and commitments. Thus these personal testimonies become not only conventional autobiographies but also valid history, the historical artifacts that they really are” (246). In this sense, autobiography has a certain level of facts and is capable of rendering the historical events that really happened.

However, undoubtedly there are some critics who defy Aurell’s argument and define autobiographical writing in a different realm. For instance, Linda Anderson argues, “. . . much of what we think of as ‘true’ or historically given, is really an ideological construct; in other words, a fiction” (96). Anderson is reluctant in accepting the truthfulness of the history presented in the text because she believes those historical data are loaded with ideological aspects that sufficiently bypass the fact; the domination of ideological elements ultimately changes the historical part of literature and fiction.

Anderson is right, in a sense, that historical fact are diluted and manipulated

by ideological doctrine. There are chances in which fictional precision works as historical truth. Nevertheless, the subtlety of ideology or the dominant ideology prevalent during the production itself is a fact. In this sense, the production of history as an ideological outcome itself defines what ideological guidance was prevalent during the procurement of the particular literature. To be more precise, the representation of fact can be fictional but the approaches adopted by the writer edifices the dominant tendencies of the time. Therefore, autobiography should not be taken merely as a fictional narration of a personal story but instead as evidence or fact of the dominant ideology. And the necessary elements have a certain purpose to imply, directing to a certain audience. As Patricia Meyer Spacksopnies:

Autobiography, like other literary forms, constitutes an "illocutionary act," the special features of which can be distinguished through generalizations about "the dimensions of action . . . common to . . . autobiographies." The "rules" thus implied define proper expectations of readers as well as responsibilities of authors. Various linguistic markers — choices of person, of tense, of modality; forms of reported speech; directions of focus — can help the critic to locate diverse autobiographical modes within a common system of assumptions and to define specific literary accomplishments. (398)

The messages conveyed by the autobiography are expressive with the function to make the reader comprehend the motive delivered by the writer. Instead of diversion of their ideas, writers present their perspectives within their ethics. Because of this, there is a reduction in the fallacious details. They tend to establish creative ideas with the presentation of historical, social, and cultural facts.

These facts are the diligent elements of human society that extensively articulate the human dimension and urges for social recognition. The self, more

importantly, created by these historical factors has cultural permanency and temporality. In the words of Stuart Hall: “Culture is for ever. Thus, for me, the difference between one cultural formation and another cannot be conceptualized in terms of the distinction between ideology and science where the latter stands for truth ; it cannot be thought in terms of mystification in the straightforward sense of mystification versus enlightenment ” (30). There should not be a constant and absolute distinction, to clarify Hall, between the scientific data and the mysterious self but rather, “It may be thought in terms of relative degrees of mystification or misunderstanding, but all culture is a misunderstanding, in the sense that all culture imposes particular maps on everything. Everybody is not constantly mystified in the same way or to the same degree” (30). The level of delusion or the threshold of one culture has no equivalence to other. It is, therefore, significant to comprehend that the self-created by the cultural difference is tremendously different because they are mystified by different levels of mystification. Indeed, the different cultural self needs separate apparatus to unfold one's identity or demystify the value of self, the signification varies across cultural dimensions.

An individual’s location of culture determines the position of one’s identity. To recall Hall: “Positionalities may begin individually, in the sense that there is a psychic investment in them, but they become positions of enunciation and agency. If the agency includes the building and developing of a common programme around some collective political identity, then they acquire exactly the institutional historical inertia . . .” (35). Hall’s proposition clarifies the initiation of positionalities when the self becomes the agency.

Historical facts should work as a defending element that serves the development of a particular one. However, this ‘self’ does not imply a particular

individual but rather a shared cultural group or bunch of collective selves. To reflect upon Hall: “The past narrows the field of contingency. There are collective projects and there are therefore collective identities. Those identities are not given for ever, but they re hard to shift. The longer you live them, the more historical weight they have” (35). The sustaining capability of the collective whole creates the possibility of elongating the recognition of a cultural group. In a deep sense, there are possibilities that if the cultural group failed to gravitate to its position it may become extinct. The cultural weight determines the portion of its recognition. In this sense, he answers, “I think of politics as the mobilization of social identities for particular purposes, rather than in terms of political identities as things in their own right” (36). Hall’s way of interpretation highlights the concept of inner engineering of social and cultural identities rather than politicizing the facts because the political transcendence possibly misrepresents, if not ruptures, the essence of culture.

Cultural identity refers to the sense of belonging to particular groups based on cultural categories that have specific traits and their own system of recognition. In the words of Stuart Hall:

Cultural identity . . . is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. (70)

The cultural elements provide a certain code that defines the material form of cultural identity. Moreover, these traits are so flexible that they keep on changing. Neither it is fixed nor is it totally solid; the continuous transformation, proliferation, partition, and promulgation irresistibly change its dynamics.

Cultural identities are subject to recognition because they are always in a form of flux, though they are autonomous. The political status and the situational dependence transcend the existence of a cultural tribe that problematizes the essence of their culture. Therefore, these happenstances are expected to represent themselves for the consolidation of their position. The social dominant forces subdue the heterogeneity of culture and merely try to mold it into a homogenous form of cultural unity. However, these cultural differences are a matter of identifying something and according to Hall, “. . . 'difference' matters because it is essential to meaning; without it, meaning could not exist” (234). The difference is the key element to recognizing the meaning of particular cultural values and these cultural differences are a matter of performance. Illustrating the several cultural functions, the cultural entity represents itself. Through attire, language, norms, values, and rituals, culture segregates itself from the chunk of cultural wholeness. As Hall opines, “Representation is a complex business and, especially when dealing with 'difference', it engages feelings, attitudes, and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer, at deeper levels than we can explain in a simple, common-sense way” (226). The difference is not merely a matter of distancing oneself from others but also showing uniqueness, identifying one in a different way, and recognizing otherness.

The cultural practices construct the social structure where the cultural ideology performs as the mantra to govern social phenomena. And these rituals and strictures are different in terms of gender. The disparity between the gender roles ardently renounces the equivalence between males and females. Therefore the rigid demarcation between these two genders becomes the structural frame of society that describes the social domain of particular gender. In this relevance, Judith Butler argues, “[G]ender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then

the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (520). Butler opines that gender is not an innate attribute of human society but rather a matter of social phenomena and in these instances, performance plays the determinant role in defining it.

These apparatus are commonly grounded in Michelle Obama’s memoir that ultimately leads toward the construction of collective identity as a whole. In her memoir, Michelle Obama does not merely represent herself, but she talks about the inclusive self in every instance. As Obama writes, “There were so few of us minority kids at Princeton, I suppose, that our presence was always conspicuous. I mainly took this as a mandate to overperform, to do everything I possibly could to keep up with or even plow past the more privileged people around me (69). These lines exemplify that her ‘self’ as a whole is a part of ‘us’. The uncommonly different individuals are being represented by her and she is narrating the story of the common ‘self’.

As she narrates her story, since the narrator's point of view is in the first person narration, this ‘I’ actually is not merely her personal self but rather the representation of some categories of people. The identity of ‘I’, in the memoir, refers to the communal identity. It does not merely represent the self she has but rather the community she belongs to. To quote the words of Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, they write, “Having a particular social identity means being at one with a certain group, being like others in the group, and seeing things from the group’s perspective” (226). Social identity refers to the group to which they belong and through which the perceptions of an individual are built. It, in addition, shapes the definition of the physical and mental characteristics of the person. It is, according to them, “In contrast, having a particular role identity means acting to fulfill the expectations of the



role, coordinating and negotiating interaction with role partners, and manipulating the environment to control the resources for which the role has responsibility” (226). In this process, people invest themselves to work according to the values to which the group they belong works.

The generic description of autobiography itself remarks on its quality of narrating self of the process of writing the life story of a particular self. Joan Armon and Tony Ortega write, “We explained . . . that *autos* in Greek means "self," *bios* refers to "life," and *graphe* is "writing," making "autobiography" "self-life writing” (109). However, Obama’s ‘self’ is an inclusive one in the memoir. She prioritizes the entire community and women while performing the actions. This practice of her reflects her inclusive self. For instance:

The deeper I got into the experience of being First Lady, the more emboldened I felt to speak honestly and directly about what it meant to be marginalized by race and gender. My intention was to give younger people a context for the hate surfacing in the news and in political discourse and to give them a reason to hope. I tried to communicate the one message about myself and my station in the world that I felt might really mean something. Which was that I knew invisibility. I’d lived invisibility. I came from a history of invisibility. (324)

Belonging to the marginalized group and experiencing how it feels to be treated as an invisible self, unwanted, and discriminated her prioritization was to eradicate that practice that would turn down the self-esteem of the struggling young generations. She represents them, therefore, she chose to speak up about the humiliation for arousing hope among them that they are no more alone now.

The narration of the story, dealing with the socio-political environment, justly exemplifies that her story is not an ideal self but rather an identity infused with the

practical domain of society. As she writes, “Slowly, I was becoming more outward and social, more willing to open myself up to the messes of the wider world” (40). In these expositions, Obama is trying to relate herself to the entanglement of social phenomenon. This process also describes the steps through which she began to establish her inclusive identity of herself. The result of her exposure she describes as follows:

My natural resistance to chaos and spontaneity had been worn down somewhat through all the hours I’d spent trailing my father through his precinct visits, plus all the other weekend outings we made, dropping in on our dozens of aunts, uncles, and cousins, sitting in thick clouds of barbecue smoke in someone’s backyard or running around with neighborhood kids in a neighborhood that wasn’t ours. (40)

She narrates the moments that she considers special but does not leave her family, relatives, and neighbors behind while expressing her happiness. For her, the people around her matter. Her act of incorporating people in her narration regards the inclusive, communal feeling she has within her.

Obama acknowledges every miniature personality who has crossed her path. She narrates her story by incorporating people instead of presenting merely her sole experiences. Among all the enrollment of women has always been a sense of motivation and enthusiasm for her. As she writes, “I’ve been lucky enough now in my life to meet all sorts of extraordinary and accomplished people—world leaders, inventors, musicians, astronauts, athletes, professors, entrepreneurs, artists and writers, pioneering doctors and researchers. Some (though not enough) of them are women” (60). She knows the feeling of being dominated on a basis of gender. Therefore, she considers the participation of women and their accomplishments as her

achievement. In a similar instance, the hierarchy on the basis of the economy and race has led people to be frustrated and also visage the policymaker with loathsome attitudes. “Some (though not enough) are black or of color. Some were born poor or have lived lives that to many of us would appear to have been unfairly heaped with adversity, and yet still they seem to operate as if they’ve had every advantage in the world” (Obama 60). Through this, she addresses the people, who are compelled to accept domination because of their color with the thought that they were slaves in historic days. She had also witnessed people who comprehend themselves in a way that “if you were black, the overwhelming odds were that you weren’t going to get one. This particular form of discrimination altered the destinies of generations of African Americans. . . .”(Obama 42). Discrimination is an act of humiliation, it has no connection with the destiny of a people, we must fight back if anyone tends to devalorize your existence is the message that Obama delivers to her people. And also she has a voice for the rectification of such established perceptions that black people deserve disgrace. Her benevolent effort, in support of African Americans, indicates she practices inclusiveness. In this process, she represents the collective identity of different groups, race caste, and ethnicity as well. Critically, Marilynn B. Brewer discusses collective identity in the following ways:

Like group-based social identities, the concept of collective identity involves share representations of the group based on common interests and experiences, but it also refers to an active process of shaping and forging an image of what the group stands for and how it wishes to be viewed by others. Thus, collective identities represent an *achievement* of collective efforts, above and beyond what category members have in common to begin with. (119)

An individual that voices the narration of the unheard or the voice that

unconditionally advocates for the identities of others is in a sense collective identity. The identity has no particular ground to represent or share identity more than one without any personal interest can be considered as collective identity. These happenstances are implicitly reflected in Obama's memoir. Furthermore, her initiation to shape an image of the group that represents collective efforts and her enthusiasm is equivalent to what collective identity actually stands for.

Her consciousness of the particular group, traits, values, and attitudes allows us to assume that Obama inherits identities that view the self as multifaceted; a person composed of a set of identities. Through this, she performs with collective traits that are with no prioritization of self. She practices inclusiveness as per the situation in the community, this attitude marks that she has a spatial-temporal self. Obama mentions, "If in high school I'd felt as if I were representing my neighborhood, now at Princeton I was representing my race. Anytime I found my voice in class or nailed an exam, I quietly hoped it helped make a larger point" (69). The location of her identity changes the location itself changes. The fleeting identity is also reflecting the transient identity of the cultural self. Moreover, "The phenomena covered by the notion of identity also include the individual and the group, psychological and social, rational and irrational, innate or acquired, judicious and intuitional" (Paleczny and Zieli ski 353-354). The point is identity is never an absolute term that can sustain its existence in isolation rather it is always in amalgamation with other cultural facets. In a similar instance, Obama's identity is dependent on the socio-temporal spaces occupied by her body.

Indeed human identity has an intricate definition indulged with relative phenomena that restlessly make identity problematic itself. To recall Paleczny and Zielinski: "This simple, it would seem, play of the words shows the complexity of identity as a way of reflecting the world in human consciousness, the interpretation of

its own condition, the situation and sense of existence in the context of relations between people and their products, things, notions, ideas and values” (354). In that sense they conclude identity in the following ways:

Identity thus means a synthesis of the relations between man and the world, which is determined by a social and cultural – meaning group – context. It is a state of oneness, a process of the conscious adaptation of man to the changing conditions that surround him, as well as the opposite – the adaptation of the natural and social environments to itself. (354)

The impossibility of human identity in isolation is likely the ultimate definition that human society is familiar with. Therefore, “Identity includes the personal, psychological, which is unique for individual elements, which are the effect of biological and heredity factors, appearance, gender, race, ethnicity, age, experience and social position” (354). These multiple elements that shape the identity of humans in society reflect that there are possibilities for multiple identities. These phenomena are the intersecting elements of the memoir where Michelle Obama is ubiquitous in different identities. She narrates her story with an exposition of her middle-class family, later as a student, as a black woman, and finally as the first lady. These layers of identity are scattered, however, these identities are not aloof from the communal representation. This, according to Marilyn B. Brewer can be viewed as, “all social identity theories share the recognition that individuals can — and usually do — derive their identities from more one than one social group. But the different conceptualizations of what social identity is give rise to very different views of what it means to have multiple social identities” (122). Different identities of an individual arouse multiple social identities and Obama adjoining her multiple identities have functioned with a collective approach. My point is whenever she represents herself,

simultaneously she is also representing a particular group to which she is related with. In these representations, she is apart from biases and partiality.

She speaks the voice of Black women and also American women. We find two selves in her autobiography. They are Obama's inclusive self that changes as per the circumstances and the multiple selves she represents to the world. These dual selves extend the essence of collective identity. Moreover, her actions provide importance to a comprehensive collection of people, and this effort also highlights the cultural embeddedness that she prioritizes. She points out, "As minorities across the country were gradually beginning to take on more significant roles in politics, business, and entertainment, our family had become the most prominent example" (319). Obama embraces multiplicity as it ensures the flourishing of human society and stimulates the co-existence of recognition. In the words of Barbara Hobson and Marika Lindholm: ". . . the process of identity formation itself is crucial for understanding the ability of collectivities to articulate claims and exercise power in welfare states" (476). In this connection, she, then First Lady of America, could have addressed the people by differentiating them based on their race, continuing the dichotomy that prevailed in America, but she chose the cultured way.

It indicates that she is, in accordance, aware of the significance that multiplicity contributes to stimulating independence and resolving the fragmentation that has congested developmental works. Her individual self goes beyond and sets the boundaries to concern for others and performs implying other externals to her individual self. Her other externals, here, refer to the collective identities through which she performs to bring positivity to the community. She is a lady with an intention for change which can be comprehended by her statement that interrogates, "Do we settle for the world as it is, or do we work for the world as it should be?"

(118). She believes to make a better place rather than accepting to adjust to the falsities. Instead of marking her adherence to the differentiation, she prioritizes addressing multi-cultures in America using the terms, Black culture and American culture. Her choice of words does not create differences but rather implements pathological differences. We can sense her reluctance to use the word 'white' as it marks the polarity of the 'black.' Obama effortlessly pronounced the words, 'red,' 'green,' 'white,' 'purple,' and 'orange' but she failed to act confidently when she had to pronounce the word 'white', "But it wasn't until the letters W-H-I-T-E came up that I froze altogether, my throat instantly dry, my mouth awkward and unable to shape the sound as my brain glitched madly, trying to dig up a color that resembled "wuh-haaa." It was a straight-up choke (Obama 18). The difficulties that she withstands are a symbolic articulation of the cultural difference between black and white culture. The strangeness is what creates a hardship for Obama, and echoes the hallucinatory effect that persists to date.

The cultural variation, providing shifting of identity, indeed recalls the playfulness of identity. Helena Karjalainen contends: ". . . Cultural identities can be understood as an identity of metamorphosis that continually adapts to new situations" (252). For instance, Michelle Obama's identity shifts as per the situation. However, it has a probability of not having a fixed identity. There might be improvisation in the cultural location to which an individual belongs but the identity that the culture provides remain static. In the word of Stuart Hall: ". . . our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history" (69). People adapt to the culture around them, distinct from the arena they belong to but the

cultural code of the community they belong to cannot be changed. In this regard, Hall defines the fixity of cultural identities in the following ways:

For if signification depends upon endless re-positing of its deferential terms, meaning, in any specific stance, depends on the contingent and arbitrary stop — the necessary and temporary ‘break’ in the infinite semiosis of language.

This does not detract from the original insight. It only threatens to do so if we mistake this ‘cut’ of identity - this *positioning*, which makes meaning possible — as a natural and permanent, rather than arbitrary and contingent ‘ending’.

(74)

Obama, throughout the memoir, introduces different identities that she has to shape as per the circumstances. Those identities, nevertheless, introduce her to the people but at the core, she is represented as the one belonging to the black community. Before, any other identities like daughter, mother, friend, or even the then First Lady of America, she is a woman of the black community. It is the identity that remains for a perennial period of time.

The memoir incorporates the story of a woman who belongs to the black community where even the word ‘black’ was considered a matter of aversion. It is the same country where women had to fight for the right to vote. According to Ellen Carol DuBois, “For three-quarters of a century, beginning in 1848, American women centered their aspirations for freedom and power on the demand for the vote” (15). The roles of women were limited to the sphere of the family. Their life was carried and characterized by the rules that patriarchal society dispersed. Moreover, the nation had to witness the women's suffrage movement for depriving women of education and rejecting work in public places. Ida Husted Harper writes, “In early days, the movement in the United States was handicapped by the customs and prejudice of the



ages and by the inferior position of women in education, business, organization, public work, in every respect” (504). Women were isolated from liberation and restrained from the rights crushing their aspirations.

Obama’s performances are, to a large extent, guided with the intent of bodies rather than the body. However, her position in terms of gender was sociologically lowered than that of men. But the development of the plot itself disrobes the outer fabric of the real dynamics of males. As she writes: “I tried not to feel intimidated when classroom conversation was dominated by male students, which it often was . . . I realized that they weren’t at all smarter than the rest of us. They were simply emboldened, floating on an ancient tide of superiority, buoyed by the fact that history had never told them anything different” (69). She was capable of understanding the incapability of men and was confirmed about the so-called superior gender. Obama’s contestation reflects the necessity of women’s audacious ability to discern the real position, undermining the threatening stereotypical notion prevalent in society regarding gender.

She appreciates those women who speak out against subordination, encourages them to debunk unprogressive concepts, and formulates ideas on to adapt the firm position to reduce oppressive issues. Because there were situations when she was deprived to define herself. For this, she says, “If you don’t get out there and define yourself, you’ll be quickly and inaccurately defined by others” (248). Our society fails to recognize women’s abilities but would never hesitate to question men’s irrelevant dictatorship. The language of men defines women as Vasu Reddy and Judith Butler discuss: “We are interpreted by social means. . . . This means that in the most intimate encounters with ourselves, the most intimate moments of disclosure, we call upon a language that we never made in order to say who we are” (116-117). To

be lived in a world as women where male oppressiveness is at its peak, women are undoubtedly treated as definitionless. Because the majority of people in society believe, the definition of gender is a social construction and “in this sense, we are exposed to the social, impinged upon by the social, in ways that precede my doing, but any doing that might come to be called my own is dependent upon this very unchosen domain” (117). Society creates imperative and throws it upon people, especially women, as the final statement that women have no domain to define themselves.

Obama has battled to define herself and acknowledges the problems induced when the dominant group of society consciously put barriers in the course of women's success by questioning their abilities simply because of their gender. These shreds mark Obama's struggle as unfathomable to make her position among the people of America because she is the woman representative of the black community. And the black community has no contended experiences in the history of America. Instead, black is a terrifically filthy and submissive group of people. In addition, our society hesitates to appreciate women in terms of performance even though their actions, dictions, and thoughts are remarkable. Society would repeatedly want women to accept that they have no right to define themselves and must maintain their lives under the control of social norms and “every woman I know recognized it. Every person who's ever been made to feel “other” recognized it” (Obama 326). Obama does not want the continuation of such filthy conceptions that society has been delivering to the people that women always have to be at a disadvantage since they are different due to their gender. As she writes, “It was precisely what so many of us hoped our own children would never need to experience, and yet probably would” (326). She desires the change despite her knowing there will be hurdles and she would

have to overcome them.

But, with her diligence, devotion, and deliverance performance towards the people of America, Obama has made an influential position. She is an emblem of women. In the words of Sue-Ellen Case, “gender cannot be understood as a *role* which either expresses or disguises an interior 'self,' whether that 'self' is conceived as sexed or not. As performance which is performative, gender is an 'act,' broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority” (279). Obama through her performances has created an identity through which society recognizes her. She breaks perceptions that gender is a social construct and proves it as a performative act. She is aware of the concept that passivity is encouraged in girls in society. As she writes, “Women endure entire lifetimes of these indignities—in the form of catcalls, groping, assault, oppression. These things injure us. They sap our strength. . . . We carry them everywhere, to and from school and work, at home while raising our children, at our places of worship, anytime we try to advance” (326). Obama expresses the feeling that majority of women have to feel. They are often threatened, discriminated and devalorized neglecting the concept that they have emotions and are considered a puppet. And Obama through the deliverance of their emotions is presenting their voice and performing her roles through her gender identity.

Obama is a person of authority who has the power to change the existing situation and establish a new scenario. She writes, “I was the only person in the family to talk back to Dandy when he yelled. . . . because it drove me crazy that my grandmother wouldn't speak up for herself” (42), and this signifies her resistive personality through the pronouncement of the words. Her speech embodies the actions and intentions to crush the oppressive forces. Indeed, Obama's performative actions

resonate with manhood, and in terms of performance she is heroic; however, the social structure of fundamental grammar of society is readily there to critique her. In this relevance, Sue-Ellen Case writes:

gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity, but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control. Performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all. (279)

Society labels the performance of gender in terms of positive and negative aspects. If a male performs the actions of a female and vice versa they are criticized. The behavioral act prescribed by the social phenomenon are inoculated by political doctrine or in a deep sense gender performativity are politicized by the social actors. Whether they perform as a woman or man in both cases they are satirized and sterilized for their action. But women are not in against the dynamic prevalent in society, instead as Rosalind Rosenberg claims, “They demanded political power not on behalf of personal freedom but in the belief that women had special qualities to contribute to the public world-their nurturance, their selflessness, and, most importantly, their social concern” (129). Their fight is against imposing gender performativity. They are more about becoming self rather than benevolent receptors or doers.

The actions embedded within Obama ostensibly project that she was always in the process of being herself, representing a common ground of collective self. As she writes, “Since childhood, I’d believed it was important to speak out against bullies while also not stooping to their level. And to be clear, we were now up against a bully, a man who among other things demeaned minorities and expressed contempt

for prisoners of war, challenging the dignity of our country with practically his every utterance” (326). She has resisted here not just the act of bully but has kept the nation at the focal point. Her political action is not to problematize gender or to form a gender but to become self, primarily, the collective self. As Butler, in *The Guardian*, opines, “My own political view is that identity ought not to be the foundation for politics.” In a similar light, Obama also hints that identity is not the foundation of politics but rather the formation of self because in Judith Kegan Gardiner’s words: “[F]emale identity is a process” (349). Therefore in the entire memoir, Obama struggles to confirm her identity. And in doing so, she manifests herself in multiple identities without privileging self but rather equating self with some particular community in a particular instance.

To sum up, Michelle Obama, in her memoir, *Becoming*, proceeds through variant identities. Her identity, throughout the memoir, is in flux and always in a fleeting position. It transforms from a middle-class girl to the First Lady of America with various other identities. Her multiple identities are in the process of transformation, it consistently changes. It indicates that she is in the state of becoming. The continuous process of inclusiveness and transposing homogeneity to heterogeneity in terms of identity. To be more precise, Obama in the process of transforming herself is molding herself into a collective identity. In the words of Jenny L. Davis, et al.:

Collective group and social identities are neither mutually exclusive nor synonymous. For instance, an individual may be part of a vegan organization and define the self through relationships with other members (group identity), and also enact veganism through personal consumption practices and activist participation outside of organizational contexts (social identity). (258)

The collective articulation of self is always embedded with social status and the memoir while depicting the author is collectively articulating collective genders. She uses 'I' to narrate her life events in the text, but the use of 'I' is not solely to represent her. It incorporates society, community, black women, friends, and America. To be precise, the 'I' she expresses is not personal 'I' but inclusive 'I.'

Autobiography is the genre of writing which narrates the self in the first stance. However, while reflecting on self, Obama has not limited the narration to herself but rather introduces a communal embedded self. Her work presents the blend of social and individual identity that makes her identity plural, and the 'I' she uses defines plurality or the collective identity. As Jenny L. Davis, et al. write, "Collective identity maps closely onto identity theory's group/social identity, which refers to identification with socially situated identity categories" (254). The representation of her identity, simultaneously, embraces the intramural collective form of multiple gender identities that surge for the betterment of identities rather than the mere identity of an individual. In this relevance, instead of portraying her as an isolated lady, she, in each instance, represents her metaphorically. Her 'I' produces the conjuring effect. Because of this, when she defines autobiography as communal, her cultural identity is fixed. She has, nevertheless, adapted variant identities as per the need of the circumstances. She is the representation of a lady from the black community; she was a girl of the middle-class society then; in the same way, she is also the then First Lady of America. She attains multiple identities while crossing the path of her life. But, no other identities are higher than her cultural identity. Despite her variant identities, her cultural identity is more robust.

The culture she represents also incorporates gender identity, and this is another dimension of her through which she performs acts. These acts refer to the

performances that she performed through her different identities. It also clarifies that she should not be recognized merely because of her identity as the First Lady, as it is the identity she obtained because of Barack Obama. If one has their identity to define them, it's reluctant to introduce them to adjoining identities developed through others. Michelle has built her identity from childhood, and she has presented it throughout her memoir. For instance, she talks back to Dandy when he yelled at the grandmother and her comprehension of males that express fake supremacy in her college days indicates she has no fear of being dauntless. Because of this, she has even debunked gender stereotypes. Jeopardizing gender norms is her performance with no other influencing factors. She is performing herself in every stance. And it is through her performance she also reflects America in her 'I' where lies ambivalence. Because doing this, she represents the white community even though she belongs to the black community in the first stance. Here her gender identity blends with her cultural identity. Her 'I' represents even the white. It, therefore, reveals that she is not the lady with the common 'I' that solely represents her; her 'I' also represents the community and gender.

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