

## Barack Obama: Negotiating Blackness, Race, and Colour in a White America

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### ABSTRACT

The research paper analyses Barack Obama's relationship with race, blackness, and hybridity masked within his writings and speeches. The paper delves through Obama's perception of racism, blackness, his received identity and perceived identity, his efforts to position himself within the lineage of black leaders, and his message to the African American society to hope for change. Buried underneath the eloquent verbosity is the message of hope to alleviate people from poverty that racism has brought upon black souls. Racism has tormented the lives of many black souls through its various ugly manifestations and rendered many homeless and unemployed. Obama being an outsider unknown to many within political circles in Washington DC was able to make a dent in the imaginations of people around the world. His election as the president of the United States signaled to the world that the American dream is still possible. This paper analyzes Obama's non-conformity with a typical black man lacking agency and his efforts to break the stereotypes that define a black man. This paper examines how a black man whose lived experience is denied tried to assert himself and change the course of history by making himself known to the world through his engrossing memoirs and political speeches.

**Keywords:** *Race, Racial segregation, racial identity, Black man, African American identity, hybridity*

### Introduction

Barack Obama's multicultural upbringing and his extended family members living on various continents made him different from his bi-chromatic racial identity. Until 1967 marriages across races were prohibited even today some view interracial marriages as taboo. Obama's father was an immigrant African who came to study at the University of Hawaii and his mother was white with mid-western American European lineage. Barack Obama was an outsider with

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no real connection with the black race, he was of biracial and cross-cultural lineage transcending continents. Obama does not share many similarities with true African American culture as most African-Americans have a shared history of chattel slavery in the American South. Obama was born to an immigrant Kenyan father who left his mother. Obama spent his early childhood in Indonesia along with his mother and an Indonesian stepfather. He then moved to Hawaii at the age of ten to be with his white grandparents. He was brought up with strong mid-western American values by his mother and his maternal grandparents. Obama studied in Punahou an elite school with children from multiple races and ethnicities studying with him. Hawaii is populated with Asian Americans, European Americans, and Pacific islanders. African Americans were always a minority in Hawaii. Obama knew the mores and manners of the white American as he was brought up in a white household with white relatives. He spent most of his time playing, surfing, and hiking with other kids in the neighborhood. He knew that he looked different from his grandparents and his white relatives. Obama learned more about race through his African American friends.

“Moreover, while my own upbringing hardly typifies the African American experience—and although, largely through luck and circumstance, I now occupy a position that insulates me from most of the bumps and bruises that the average black man must endure” (Obama, Audacity 233)

Many regard Obama's win in the election as proof that we live in a color-blind society where there is no differentiation based on the color of skin. But in reality, Obama's win in elections rekindled the debate on race and ethnicity, and every political move made by Obama and his close aides was viewed through a racial lens. Many argue that Obama was able to garner support from white people because many considered Obama as benign black. He was not associated with certain traits that are stereotypically associated with black men like violent, uneducated, unemployed, hypersexual, dangerous, and aggressive black man but he was associated with the prestigious Harvard Law School. With Obama, it is not easy to answer the question of where he fits within the racial chromatic hierarchy as he has a hybrid identity. He is known for his distance as well as his connectedness to Africa. Most of the time he is known to switch back and forth between cultures. He understood the nuances of different customs and their implied meanings.

Obama tried to build a rapport with an African American who was his grandfather's friend a man named Frank. He ran a bar in Waikiki and was a poet and social activist in his youth. Obama went on a mission to study black leaders and black history and culture as he struggled to come to terms with his blackness. “Over the next few months, I looked to corroborate this

nightmare vision. I gathered up books from the library- Baldwin, Ellison, Hughes, Wright, and Du Bois. At night I would close the door to my room, telling my grandparents I had homework to do.” (Obama, Dreams 85)

Obama was a polarizing figure in American politics. Even before he was nominated as the official candidate of the Democratic Party, during the early stages of primary elections he was given protection by the secret service as he received a lot of threats. Former president Jimmy Carter was of the opinion that most of the threats and personal attacks that were directed towards Obama and his candidacy were due to his skin color and his African-American lineage ("Jimmy Carter: Animosity")

Many people believed that Obama could be the Anti-Christ as the name Barack Hussein Obama has three words with eighteen letters. Eighteen divided by three equals six. 666 is considered as the sign of Anti-Christ. It was reported in one of the surveys conducted by Public Policy Polling that one in four Americans believe that Obama might be the Anti-Christ (One in Four Americans Think Obama May Be the Antichrist). Undoubtedly Obama was considered a Black man but this is a part of external racialization. This external racialization can be termed racism. Obama was believed to be anti-Christ because of his race. Some racists believed that his presidency would result in the end of the world and Christians would be tortured and killed. Many white racists announced that tribulations and trials for all Christianity had already begun when Barack Obama confirmed his candidacy to run for president.

Racialization can also be an internal, intra-racial process, commonly considered identity politics. Internal racialization is usually used for identity politics and political mobilization. Obama grew up with white grandparents he was more aware of the white culture and tradition than the black culture which he learned through his friends and acquaintances. Obama accepted his blackness and his ethnicity though he is disoriented and incapable of defending himself against the other (the whites) who have no scruples about making fun of him. Obama experienced racism outside the confines of his house.

Obama's race is a hybrid in its very sense, he doesn't align with the bi-chromatic racial groups (whites and blacks). He is a second-generation immigrant and his blackness is derived through his diaspora. He is a hybrid of immigrant and non-immigrant. Obama's social conditioning is of a white. His maternal grandparents who raised him were whites from Kansas. Obama knew nothing about the stereotypes associated with the black. He was unaware that blackness was

associated with sexual deviance, violence, and criminality. He was unaware of his received identity how people would perceive him and what they talk behind his back. He wanted to adapt his behaviors to a typical black man but he has no black man living in his house to learn from. Once Obama's friend Ray remarked "I don't need no books to tell me how to be black" (Obama, Dreams 87)

Obama states "I was trying to raise myself to be a black man in America, and beyond the given of my appearance, no one around me seemed to know exactly what that meant" (76). Obama felt that he was being understood as a black by others. He experienced the usual racial priming that every black man undergoes. The commonly associated stereotypes like black men are good at sports like basketball, everyone felt that since he is black he would make up a good basketball player. He was once asked by an unknown woman at a supermarket about his basketball skills. Obama felt that he needed to be in a community to understand the sufferings of the African American community as Honolulu in Hawaii where Obama grew up had only a few African Americans living in it.

Obama received a lot of hatred when he declared that he was going to run for the presidency. He was hated not just by someone around his neighborhood or not by some political rivals but by a part of an entire race. He did not receive death threats for his misdeeds but the very thought that a black man was running for presidency pushed him to the receiving end of many racial slanders and abuse. They were shocked by the audacity of a black man to run for the presidency. They believed that his promiscuousness should be punished.

During his presidential campaign when questioned how would he identified himself racially? He replied that he self-identified himself as an African American. He believed that's how is viewed and treated by the people around him. Obama willingly accepted himself as a black man. As opposed to a typical black man who would try to distance himself from both blackness and bush. He was proud that his father was a black man who readily left the African bushes with hopes and dreams of pulling his family out of poverty. His father who was herding his father's goats in Africa believed that he had an opportunity in this world so he left the bush and marched forward for a better future.

Barack Obama's interviews and writings indicate that he wants to portray himself as a black man. Many cry foul with the idea of summing up Obama as a black man while he is a man of mixed race and heritage. Rev. Jesse Jackson a black priest accused Obama of acting white

(Jesse Jackson Says Obama ‘Acting White’ : NPR). Some political commentators discarded him as too black while some discarded him as white enough

Obama’s identity can be summed up using words like mixed race, diaspora, blackness, and second-generation immigrant identities. The victory of Barack Obama signifies a breakthrough event as we are moving into an era beyond bi-chromatic racialization and similar claims of racial authenticity. In the works of Obama, the fluidity of race is explicit as some consider Obama as black, some state that he acts as a white man, and others call him he is of a mixed race. Anyway since the one-drop rule of hypo descent has stated that anybody who is of mixed race or has biracial parents would always be considered as black. Obama did confirm this theory and pledged affiliation with black people.

Barack Obama had first-hand experience of Asia, Africa, and American cultures. Obama met his Kenyan half-sister Auma in his twenties and traveled to Kenya with her. Most of the stories about his father and his African lineage came to him as anecdotes and stories through his sister. The exposure to different cultures, ethnicities, and religions helped Barack Obama appreciate diversity.

Obama’s step-father was an Indonesian who followed Islam he spent two years at a Muslim school, and two years at a Catholic school. Some even believe that Obama's politeness, calmness, and empathy were a result of his Indonesian upbringing. His Indonesian relatives and friends believe that Obama still has Indonesian hospitality in him. Though Obama is perceived as a black man with an African demeanor his identity is fluid. He knew the Indonesian tradition like the white tradition and the African American tradition. He can never be summarized as belonging to a single race, religion, or ethnicity. Since Obama grew up in a white household he was very loosely connected to race. In order to understand the social psychology of the indigenous African Americans with their ancestry in slavery and their legacy of chattel slaves and all the historical injustice meted out to them Obama wanted to work closer to the streets.

In Chicago, during his tenure as a community organizer, he worked with industry workers, churches, schools, youths, and residents of housing communities. Obama’s job as a community organizer helped him understand the performance of racial segregation and discrimination at all levels of society. Though Obama clearly understood the disadvantage of blackness he believed that race can never be used as a political tool as it is divisive. Since Obama never used

race as a political weapon to garner votes he was Obama was able to secure a win even in a state like South Carolina which has a large white majority. Obama believed that economic class and not race is the cause of social inequality. He believed that blacks who have escaped poverty and poor neighborhoods live a better life.

Barack Obama believed that one's worth should never be determined by race. Obama's received racial identity is of a black man and his own perceived identity is also of a black man. African Americans a people whose ancestors were forcefully brought into America and made to work as slaves in plantations. An American African is someone who willfully migrated to America in search of better opportunities in education and employment or to escape conflict and war. Barack Obama's father was chosen by Kenyan authorities and American sponsors to study at the University of Hawaii. Obama's father later left for Harvard University leaving him and his mother in Hawaii. What Obama learned about race, color, and creed are in the form of stories and anecdotes from friends, family, and relatives. Obama's mother and his maternal grandparents had no animosity and were friendly and open to engaging with people of other races. Stanley Ann, Obama's mother once when she was a kid, played with a black girl and was teased as Nigger lover and dirty Yankee. Her father was advised by the locals "You best talk to your daughter, Mr Dunham. White girls don't play with coloreds in this town." (Obama, *Dreams* 20)

Obama's social psychology is different from that of other African American boys who grew up with him in Hawaii. Obama's upbringing differed in totality from all the other black kids whom he played with. His understanding and attitude towards race are totally different from others around him. When in an argument with his friend about how they were unsuccessful with girls his friend stated it is due to race. Obama disagreed with it "But that don't make the girls that are here all racist. Maybe they just want somebody that looks like their daddy, or their brother, or whatever, and we ain't it (Obama, *Dreams* 74)

The subtitle of his memoir *Dreams From My Father* is "The Story of Race and Inheritance." Obama's inheritance played a crucial role in his opinion about race. Obama discussed and experienced racism outside while he was treated like a white within his house. His maternal grandparents dreamed of their grandson being part of a white society. He never felt comfortable criticizing the white folks

"White folks. The term itself was uncomfortable in my mouth at first; I felt like a non-native speaker tripping over a difficult phrase. Sometimes I would find myself talking to Ray about white folks this or

white folks that, and I would suddenly remember my mother's smile and the words that I spoke would seem awkward and false. .... It was obvious that certain whites could be exempt from the general category of distrust.” (Obama, Dreams 80, 81)

Obama's understanding of race began during his college days at Occidental College, in Los Angeles. He joined with other black students from other parts of the United States of America. They lived together as a tribe. Obama was interested in listening to stories of his black friends the hardships they endured and how they survived and struggled under the scourge of racism. He once remarked that he wished he was born in Compton or Watts. Obama resembled more like a suburban black kid whose parents have decent jobs and have escaped poor neighborhoods.

Though his socioeconomic conditions helped him to escape the wrath of discrimination and violence He never escaped the inherited or the received racial identity. He wished to be born in a black neighborhood growing up with a lot of black kids while his friends wished they grew up in Hawaii. He never escaped his inherited race. He wanted to get closer to the black sufferings and become a part of the struggle. It was in Chicago he was working with indigenous African Americans who have tasted the wrath of institutional racism.

When Obama was offered a job that involved organizing conferences on drugs, unemployment, and housing he declined the offer as he wanted to work closer to the streets. When Marty Kaufman offered him a job that needed him to work with urban blacks and suburban whites to save manufacturing jobs in Chicago (The old Wisconsin steel plant) he readily accepted the offer.

Obama's real encounter with black tradition and culture happened when he started to work as a community organizer in Chicago. The work required him to work with different churches. Obama started to work with the Calumet Community Religious Conference (CCRC) a group of twenty suburban churches it was later renamed as Developing Communities Project (DCP) when another eight churches joined it. He was able to understand racial tensions, he worked among the poorest of the poor in South Chicago who were subjected to racial profiling and segregation. He witnessed stone pelting and heard anxious parents accosting their children to come indoors. Everyone there knew that whenever black and white children played together it ended in anger and grief (Obama, Dreams 156)

Obama was able to understand the racial dynamics that was in play. He was able to identify himself with the people who suffered de facto and de jure segregation. When Obama started

off as a community organized he was looked down upon by some of the priests like Rev. Smalls who remarked “White folks come in here thinking they know what’s best for us, hiring a buncha high-talking college-educated brothers like yourself who don’t know no better, and all they want to do is take over.” (Obama, Dreams 161)

Obama started to engage with the community he interviewed a lot of black people and tried to understand their difficulties. Obama's hybridity made him differ from other African American communities. Within the black community people from the West Indies don’t identify themselves with African Americans in the United States of America. The term African American experience is an umbrella term that inaccurately summarizes all the experiences of black people in America. In reality, different individuals from different countries in Africa who immigrated on different occasions over the past few centuries have differing experiences. Obama was an embodiment of what a black man should be and could be.

In one of his speeches at Selma Obama talks about his father's family's experience with slavery. His grandfather was a cook and a house boy to the British in Kenya. The colonialists even at the age of sixty called his grandfather a houseboy they never addressed him using his name. They never missed an opportunity to humiliate him. Obama stressed the tyranny of the British colonial regime by narrating the stories of his paternal grandfather in Kenya. Though the land belonged to the Kenyans they were forced to carry a passbook with them if they wished to travel from one place to the other. The hapless Kenyans should go to places only where they were allowed to go and do only those works which are permitted by their colonial masters. He tried to draw parallels between Kenyan colonialism and the persecution felt by African Americans in the United States of America. (Remarks at the Selma Voting Rights March)

Barack Obama was never shy about his identity. When asked whether he was Barack or Barry he always replied that he was Barack and in Arabic, it means blessed. He mentioned that his paternal grandfather was a Muslim. He never tried to pass for a White, he embraced diverse cultures and was sympathetic towards the cause of the downtrodden.

He always believed that acknowledging that you are black doesn't mean that you are acknowledging your powerlessness and accepting your defeat. Obama believes that race should not determine one's destiny and one's color should not define one's economic status. Obama witnessed neo-colonial exploitations in his family and the people around him. His father was



separated from them, and his friends trying to get into higher education that offered a chance to escape the violence, poverty, and unemployment commonly associated with blackness.

The identity he received from his father the blackness that he inherited changed the way people looked at him and also offered him a different experience in life. He had a different life experience from his mother's race and also of the other African Americans who lived around him.

During one of his speeches on March 4, 2007, in Selma, Alabama. Obama met Reverend Otis Moss Jr. who referred to great black leaders like C.T. Vivian, Reverend Lowery, John Lewis, Anna Cooper Marie Foster Jimmy Lee Jackson, and Maurice Olette who were gathered there as the Moses generation. They fought the Pharaoh and led the chosen people out of bondage, slavery, and racial oppression. He referred to Obama and his younger generation around him as the Joshua generation. It was Joshua who helped them settle in Canaan where the whites and blacks, Canaanites, Jebusites, Amorites, Hittites, and Perizzites, and people of all other races lived together with the Jews. Obama believed that the Joshua generation needed to transcend their thoughts beyond race, religion, and ethnicity.

Obama believed that he was part of the lineage of black leaders. He mentions that it is because they fought racial segregation and institutionalized racism that he was able to get a seat in a University that eventually helped him to get a seat in the Senate of Illinois which in turn helped him to run for the presidency. He states that the bloods of the chattel slaves and slave owners run in the blood of his wife which they wish to pass on as an inheritance to his daughters.

Obama knew that race played a huge role in determining one's experience. He acknowledged the pain, anguish, and haplessness of the blacks. In his "perfect union speech Obama states that we can work together and move beyond our old racial wounds and that there is no other option except to continue on the road towards a more perfect union (Eidenmuller, "A More Perfect Union")

Obama argues that man is made in the image of God and the blacks too are made in the image of God they should never confine themselves to their inferior station but rather they should express their talents and aspire to achieve success in their life.

As Fanon points out the basis of Hegelian dialectic is absolute reciprocity. The whites recognized the black slaves without conflict but racial tensions loom large when the black

wants himself to be recognized. Historically people believe that anyone who fails to recognize them is their enemy “In order to achieve certainty of oneself, one has to integrate the concept of recognition. Likewise, the other is waiting for our recognition so as to blossom into the universal self-consciousness.” (Fanon)

The African Americans have never been recognized. They were prey to fire hoses, billy clubs, tear gas, and police dogs. They marched through Edmund Pettus Bridge unarmed and unafraid with burning eyes, injured bodies with some of their children lying soaked in blood on the roadside. On Sunday they were beaten, battered, thrashed, and brought close to death but on Monday they still longed to march again. They believed that they deserved equal opportunities, they didn't want to be defined by their skin color. It was because of those marches defying state troopers and authorities that blacks could elect councilmen and congressmen. (Remarks at the Selma Voting Rights March)

The colonialist refused the lived experience of a black man. Lived experience describes the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of an individual about the world around him. The lived experience is the interpretation of an individual about the happening around him which is often subjective in nature. The colonial racists often view the blacks as commodities with no lived experience. Their values are defined by their skin color and they disregard their feelings, thoughts, and agency. Their unique experience and identity are often ignored and they are viewed through the lens of prejudice. The blacks were objectified and dehumanized they were objects with no identity and agency. Color prejudice is easy as it is an easily recognizable phenotype and men are judged based on their skin color and are frowned upon irrespective of their educational and other attainments.

Fanon points out racism happens when the black man is locked in his blackness and the white man in his whiteness. Obama desires a color-blind society where people of both races would give up their double narcissism. The alienation of black men from society is accelerated when the black man protests. The white man rationalizes his decision to alienate the black man. The reasoning of the white man was backed by legislation and court of law but the reasoning and rationalization of the black man often go unheard. Racial tension and riots happen due to irrational alienation and unreasonable hatred. The desire for recognition the denial of recognition and the fight for the superiority of race and religion have made many paranoid and violent. (Fanon)

Though many regressive laws were repealed and many civil rights were granted to this generation still many are denied education employment and other equal opportunities because of their skin tone. Obama wants the racially segregated people to hope for a change. Obama did not want the black people to give up on their lives. He urged them to have hope he believed in a hope that is not ignorant of the hazards and barriers that are ahead for the black community. He believed that hope is not wishful thinking or optimism. It is through hope that the great patriots of America took on the British Empire, it is through hope that women went to vote, and it is through hope that black forefathers fought against the scourge of racism.

Imagine if John F. Kennedy had looked up at the moon and said, "Well, that's too far." False hopes, we can't go there. If Dr. King had stood on the Lincoln Memorial and said, "Y'all go home; we can't overcome." There's no such thing as false hopes, but what I know deep in my heart is that we cannot bring about change unless we are unified, unless we do it together. Change does not happen from the top down -- in America or anywhere else. It happens from the bottom up (Eidenmuller, "Address at Ebenezer").

Obama believed that all social changes were made possible because men and women chose to die for a change that seemed impossible to happen. The white man's hatred towards the blacks is still a reality and the scourge of racism does exist but a lot has changed. Frantz Fanon in his *Black skin and white masks* states that a Black man is allowed only to assume a master's attitude but can never become a master. But due to the sacrifices and struggles many black people have become elected representatives, and hold high offices in the federal government of the United States

Obama's dream to remove disparities in how people are treated, the disparities within the criminal justice system, and discrimination in education employment, and other opportunities is still a distant dream. Obama wished for a society that is devoid of racial enmity a society that is color blind a society that recognizes the other and mutually recognizes each other's aspirations.

Obama believed that we have to take control of our lives. We should not be mere agents but become main actors in our lives and in the lives of people around us. Our lives should never be dictated by the dominant culture. The perception of racism should never become one's reality. He wanted the black to forget their inflicted inferiority and strive for socioeconomic growth. He wanted black youths not to get enraged at the historical injustices meted out to them but

rather focus on a change and hope for a color-blind society. Obama wanted the blacks to change their attitude towards life he accosted them saying don't say I can't go to college or start a business. If you say you can't people around you would say that you can't do anything that becomes your reality. Obama in his memoir *Dreams from My Father* gives a clarion call to the black society. Rise up, ye mighty race! (199). Rather than expecting and fighting with the whites or the dominant class to accept and recognize the blacks, it is time for the blacks to recognize that they need to transform themselves:

"Part of what the civil rights movement was about was recognizing that we have to transform ourselves in order to transform the world. Mahatma Gandhi, a great hero of Dr. King and the person who helped create the nonviolent movement around the world; once said that you can't change the world if you haven't changed" (Remarks at the Selma Voting Rights March Commemoration in Selma)

There are overt and covert segregations of black people in white neighborhoods. The black population sometimes are forced to evict the white neighborhood. There is another problem of self-segregation where the blacks withdraw themselves from any association with the whites. They feel in control and comfortable living in a black neighborhood. They feel hostile towards the white people and they boast about the black pride.

For a color-blind society with no segregation based on color and race both the blacks and the whites and people of mixed race, and all other people with different nationalities and ethnicities should mutually recognize each other's aspirations. Racism is exhibited not only by the white majority but also by the blacks and all other people of mixed race and heritage.

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