



# Michelle Obama as a Feminist

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## Abstract

This paper discusses Michelle Obama as a feminist who broke barriers in the media and in the White House. Her contributions as a Black Feminist and an activist for the global education of young women have propelled her to be one of the most prominent feminist figures of today. From her fashion style to her candor, Obama's unconventional motivation caused her to break through glass ceilings. Because Obama struggled to be truly represented by the media, millions around the world remark black women in a different way. As we know in *Becoming*, Michelle Obama describes how the racism and sexism that she experiences as a black woman in America have shaped her life. Seeing these forms of discrimination both personally and on a larger societal scale allows her to give the reader a full view of how discrimination shapes both individuals and America's institutions. She reveals how racism and sexism affect her everyday life as well as the lives of other black women in America, and she claims that they influence America's entire society as well. In addition, being the wife of one of the most significant political leader in the world, Michelle Obama has led an unmatched career as a politician and lawyer. Her resiliency and determination has shaped her into a woman that I deeply admire and desire to be.

**Keywords:** Feminist, White House, Global Education, Black Feminist, Motivation, Racism, Sexism.

Feminism can be well-defined as a collection of philosophies and movements with the goal of defining, establishing, and obtaining equal rights for men and women in all domains of life, including the social, political, cultural, religious, and economic domains.

First Lady Michelle Obama is a lawyer, writer, and the wife of the 44th President, Barack Obama. She is the first African-American First Lady of the United States. Through her four key initiatives, she became a role model for women and an activist for healthy families, service members and their families, higher education, and international adolescent girls education. Much of Michelle Obama's childhood is spent listening to the sound of "striving". Her family lives in a second-floor flat on the South Side of Chicago, while her great-aunt Robbie and great-uncle Terry live on the floor below. Robbie teaches piano in her home, and Michelle grows up listening to a multitude of students plunk out their songs. The opening passage of *Becoming*

exemplifies one of its key themes: optimism. The word “striving,” as Michelle uses here, highlights a core value that she will carry with her for the rest of her life. Striving implies that someone is working hard and also that they have optimism that the future can be better. This word perfectly fits with Michelle’s ideals. As we know memoir is the distinguished form of literature. It is nothing but the cognizance of the writer with the absolute background. In it, the writer has to introspect and to engrave the contemplative story of the life. In memoir writing, the writer should be the factual sociologist and the considerate spectator of the community around him and evaluating and constructing his postulations with the help of it. A memoir is one of the forms of the literature which spinning around the life of the writer, who used to illustrate the inspirational and conspicuous events from the life which could be the forerunners for the imminent generations. Unlike the other literary genres, a memoir is written with diverse perspectives. The genre memoir attempts to investigate the quest of the self and the human dealings and divergence, underline the existence of vanity of individual aspirations, its invention and the consequences of life.

In 1940, Mary Church Terrell said in the preface of her autobiography, *A Negro Woman Living in A White World*: This is the story of a colored lady living in a white world. It cannot possibly be like a story written by a white woman. A white lady has only one obstacle to overcome—that of sex. I have two—both sex and race. I belong to the only group in this country, which has two such tremendous complications to climb. Colored men have only one—that of race. Black American women autobiographers develop a self that has, as Terrell puts it, two major handicaps—gender and race. This statement from the 20th century reflects the complexity of African American women’s identities. In her memoir *Becoming*, Michelle Obama shows her knowledge of her intersectional identity as she states ‘I have been the only woman, the only African American, in all sorts of rooms’. Hence, the tradition of African American women’s autobiographies requires a relevant theoretical framework when reviewing their texts. Academic Carole Boyce Davies says that ‘the African woman’s autobiography, as African autobiography and as woman’s autobiography has to be understood against the theoretical discourses peculiar to these two’. The tradition by African American women autobiographers is, as Françoise Lionnet claims in her book *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-portraiture*, ‘To read a narrative that describes the journey of a female self-striving to become the subject of her own discourse, the speaker of her own story, is to witness the unfolding of an autobiographical subject’. Obama reveals the malleability of her identity by presenting herself as a "working-class black student", "lawyer" and "First Lady", among other roles. In her autobiography, she is able to give voice to her many guises and discuss how they have shaped her life. Nevertheless, the title might be interpreted otherwise, as Obama's effort to become the ‘subject of her own discourse’, or the claiming of her own tale.

With the help of the book *Becoming*, Obama is able to correct the historical record by telling her own tale. 'If any type of writing is capable of supporting in the Black woman's endeavors to rectify the record, it is autobiography, for nowhere does one find literature as a celebration of life more than here,' writes Mary Burgers. Autobiography writing provides Obama with a unique opportunity to reimagine her life and establish her own unique identity. Obama, writing in her capacity as a former political figure and the First Lady of the United States of America, does not shy away from including details from her own life and a message that is extremely meaningful to her. *Becoming* fits into the category of First Lady memoirs because Obama is a former First Lady.

Since both Black American women's autobiographies and the genre of First Lady memoir have been largely omitted from the literary canon, Obama's autobiography can be understood as an intersection between the two. Because she is the only African American First Lady in the United States, Michelle Obama is a member of a minority within a minority. Obama is also a political observer, and her autobiography is one of the most significant of the twenty-first century because it shows how, despite the exclusion of African Americans from American politics, the country has achieved progress by electing its first African American president. Obama's memoir *Becoming*, I argue, creates a synthesis of the life-writing tradition among African American women with the autobiographical sub-genre of the First Lady memoir.

This present study examines the ways in which African American women construct their identities in their autobiographies. An early theocratic framework is provided by Patricia Collins's *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Collins argues that the process of defining oneself is integral to the black female communal consciousness. Women of color can fight back against being objectified and labelled "Other" if they take control of their own identities. These actions help black women overcome the biases and misrepresentations of their identity that are perpetuated by dominant culture. Collins writes about how one defines oneself: By insisting on defining themselves, Black women cast doubt on the veracity and motivations of those with the authority to define them as well as on what has been stated about African-American women. When we, as Black women, define ourselves, we explicitly reject the idea that people in power have a right to make decisions about our lived experience on their behalf. Black women's power as human beings is validated by the very act of insisting for Black female self definitions, regardless of what those definitions might actually be.

Michelle Obama's memoir, *Becoming* explores the concept of identity as relational. The memoir deals with the struggle of an African American girl from working class for her space in American society where black women are taken as submissive, passive, nurturing and defined in relation to white American women. Obama establishes her identity as the First Lady in relation to particular society, geography, temporality, politics, and different psychological aspects. Her identity has been changed when she moves from Chicago to White House. Being a woman from the black community, she encounters with the people from diverse culture. However, Obama explores her upbringing in Chicago, her career, her relationship with Barack Obama and finally her years living in the White House as First Lady. Thus, this paper probes into how Michelle Obama's identity is formed and reformed when she shifts from one place to another place, one social engagement to another engagement. *Becoming* incorporates Obama's struggles, hardships, challenges and complex conditions that eventually transforms her as an agent of peace, justice and empowerment. It reflects her role and devotion in her mission to empower the women and children from the backward community whose lives are characterized by deprivation, scarcity, illiteracy, poor infrastructure and lack of basic requirements for living. In her memoir, Obama as a main character forms multiple identity. By birth, she represents as typical African girl who gets born in a small traditional African society. According to her culture, she gets a name Michelle Robinson. She married to Barak Obama. When she married to Barak her identity formed as Michelle Obama. Later on, she moves from Chicago to Washington, where she finds a completely new situation. She changes her psychological thinking. And she is known by a new name called First Lady. In this way she adjusts in such multi-dimensional world. Likewise, it

further explores how Michelle Obama's multiple identities contradict the conventional notion of singular identity which dissolved owing to the globalized nature of the world intensified by the physical means such as transportation and the virtual means such as internet through which people have multiple identities in different places at the same time.

Different critics and reviewers have their explanation regarding *Becoming*. Some of them are concerned with her struggle as race woman while other talk about feminist attitude. Some of them also declare that political questions can be seen. Candace Howze in Women of Color Magazine claims:

*Becoming* is a story that focuses more on hard work and sacrifice than privilege; it grapples with the nuances of understanding identity, and it overflows with an emotional call to perseverance. The memoir is written like the words of a trusted girlfriend and less like sound bites of a public figure handing down golden nuggets of advice (Howze 2019: 42-44).

Howze has focused Obama's hard work and sacrifice in order to establish her distinct uniqueness. As a career woman, this memoir is relatable because of its vulnerability. So, Obama does not only talk about her personal struggle rather includes the entire women from black community. Despite the racial discrimination, she starts an initiative for children. Which helps spark her children's health initiative, called Let's Move! Michelle accomplishes a lot of her goals with Let's Move! And also works on other initiatives like Joining Forces (which focuses on supporting military families), Reach Higher (which helps kids get to and stay in college) and Let Girls Learn (which supports girls' education global). In her study Obama managed to spread her message across the country and reach people across a wide age range using a platform she loved popular culture. This was the aspect that distinguished her from the other first ladies. There was always a refreshing air about her that was able to attract and captivate her audience. And again, she succeeded. She finishes her service as first lady with beauty and as her own person.

*Becoming* incorporates the idea of relational identity as Obama's memoir focuses not only on events from her lifetime, but also on the historical events that shaped her relatives' lives and the lives of other African Americans over the time. Obama shows her relationship with Barak Obama and her role as First Lady of America. The book talks about her roots and how she found her voice, as well as her time in the White House, her public health campaign, and her role as a mother. The entire above incident which was inscribed by Obama in her life narratives carries her personal history in relation to the public history at the same time. Her, Experience, Memory, Embodiment, Identity and through the Agency, she made her subject of self-hood. Her self-hood is not only Michelle Obama's self-hood, but that is linked with large portion of the African American people. She was not only known in the America but she is encouragement for the world. In her autobiography Michelle makes her voice aloud and gives a essential example for future generations, particularly of black girls. This kind of writing lets us discover the truthful side of women like suffer from discrimination but never stop learning, discovering and rational thinking. Connections are everywhere and help us build ourselves individually and socially. Obama's identity represents relational identity based on the concept of relational-self. The identity of Obama is based on the interconnectedness among the different social aspects. Obama's identity is formed on the concept of relational self. The identity of Obama does not exist if she is separated from society. It means her

life is possible due to the presence of different social phenomena. Thus, identity based on relational self that shows interdependence between the Obama and the then social, political, cultural, geographical and racial atmosphere in African American context.

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