



# Becoming: The awe- inspiring memoir of evolving through Racism

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## INTRODUCTION

Racism is the result of a complex interplay of individual attitudes, social values and institutional practices. It may be expressed in the actions of individuals and institutions and takes a range of forms. On a structural level, racism serves to perpetuate inequalities in access to power, resources and opportunities across racial and ethnic groups. It often manifest through unconscious bias or prejudice. Unlike discrimination, oppression takes into account power -- who is positioned to hold power and who is positioned not to hold power as a result of the ways society has been set up and functioned for generations. In other words, oppression takes into account agent and target group membership. People who identify as Black, Indigenous and People of Colour are targets of racism.

**INTERPERSONAL RACISM** - Prejudgment, bias or discrimination by a white individual toward a person of colour. **INSTITUTIONAL RACISM** - Policies, practices, procedures and culture of an institution or system that work better for white people and cause harm to people of colour, often inadvertently or unintentionally.

**STRUCTURAL RACISM** - The history, culture and current reality of racism across institutions and/or systems; when the institutional racism of multiple institutions overlaps to form a web of racism impacting people and communities of colour. This includes implicit and explicit social narratives about race, such as those perpetuated by the media. **INTERNALIZED RACISM** - The internalization of the racist stereotypes, values, images and ideologies perpetuated by the white dominant society about one's racial group.

Racism is a topic that often becomes controversial, and the phenomenon strikes some negatively, while some can, in many ways, be said to profit from it. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that there is no unambiguous definition of racism that covers all sorts of racism and excludes everything that should not be labeled racism. Different definitions of racism will therefore be presented and discussed. However, the International Convention on the

Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination [ICERD] defines “racial discrimination” as follows in article 1: ... any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life (International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, 1965)

## RACISM AND BECOMING

Racism and literature and connected to each other since an early time period. Many of the black writers and their perceptions started reaching people through the literature. Starting from slavery to many different kinds of discrimination the blacks have led a life that was not much known to the world. The world of literature reached to us through fictions and non-fictions which made us think and fight for the rights of black people.

Becoming' chronicles the life of Michelle Obama, from her childhood in Chicago town to eight years in the spotlight as the former First Lady of the United States. “Even when it’s not pretty or perfect. Even when it’s more real than you want it to be. Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own.”

It’s one of the questions that define Michelle Obama’s childhood, especially her early years in school, growing up in the South Side of Chicago. “Am I good enough?” It is a question that many of us reading this piece have asked ourselves. It is a question that helps define who we are and separate ourselves from what we feel we aren’t. Michelle Obama displays optimism, self-belief and courage amply as she chronicles her childhood replete with dinner conversations, fights with her brother, and her father’s battle with multiple sclerosis. The initial chapters are detailed and the rambling tone tends to get tiring at times, which may have been fixed with some good editing. However, the book picks up pace once Michelle heads to college. Clearly, Obama’s autobiography, as the very title itself suggests, refers to the self who is perpetually changing and always evolving. Obama writes on the first page of her preface: Now I think it’s one of the most useless questions an adult can ask a child- What do you want to be when you grow up? -As if growing up is finite. As if at some point you become something and that’s the end. Obama expose the fluidity of her identity as she presents herself as ‘working-class black student’, a ‘lawyer’, ‘First Lady’. (Obama, p. ix) Her autobiography provides space for her to articulate these various identities and express how they shape her life. Furthermore, the title can be understood in a different way in that Obama attempts to claim her own story, or in other words she seeks to become the ‘subject of her own discourse’.

One of the remarkable features of Michelle’s upbringing is her area was 96% white in 1950 and then 96% black by 1981. She grew up in the middle of this transition. So, she was surrounded by a mixture of black and white families. But more and more families decided to move away to the suburbs. This movement meant less funding, and the area was deemed a “ghetto.” Michelle and her family still regarded this area as their home. If Obama were British, this would be a class tale. She describes herself in her early years as “the striver”. Later, campaigning for the first time with her husband, she recounts the moment she realised that her task is mainly to share this story with “people who despite the difference in skin colour reminded me of my family – postal workers who had bigger dreams just as [her grandfather] Dandy once had; civic-minded piano teachers like Robbie; stay-at-home moms who were active in the PTA like my mother; blue-collar workers who’d do anything for their families, just like my dad. I didn’t need to practice or use notes. I said only what I sincerely felt.” The writer Ta-Nahesi Coates, present

at one of these events, was so taken aback by her account of an “idyllic youth” that he “almost mistook her for white”, comparing her, he writes in his book *We Were Eight Years in Power*, to “an old stevedore hungering for the long-lost neighbourhood of yore”. “In all my years of watching black public figures,” he said, “I’d never heard one recall such an idyllic youth. “But this protective love of Obama’s childhood did not shut out the communal sense of suffering and injustice that is, for any observer of America, impossible to avoid. The neighbourhood she grew up in was transformed by white flight, and later “deteriorated under the grind of poverty and gang violence”. An early experience with the police via her beloved brother Craig taught her that “the colour of our skin made us vulnerable.” Persistent experiences of discrimination bred in her family “a basic level of resentment and mistrust”.

Most of Obama’s narrative on race, however, comes courtesy not of her own perspective, but that of the many commentators who weaponised her blackness against her. “The rumours and slanted commentary always carried less than subtle messaging about race, meant to stir up the deepest and ugliest kind of fear within the voting public. Don’t let the black folks take over,” she writes. Obama recalls the “angry black woman” messaging, and the time “a sitting US congressman ... made fun of my butt.” 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.”

As the first black first lady, she knew she would be labelled “other” and would have to earn the aura of “grace” given freely to her white predecessors. She found confidence in repeating to herself a favorite chant: “Am I good enough? Yes I am.” But throughout her husband’s life in politics, she fought to balance public and private needs, and to maintain her self-esteem. She agonised over what she feared was a cartoonish, racist image. She remembered being labelled “angry” and, by the Fox network, “Obama’s Baby Mama.”

## CONCLUSION

The book is worth a read because it is a reminder to everyone and not just women that it is important to be who you are and own your story.

In *Becoming*, Obama describes the value of telling one’s story this way: “Even when it’s not pretty or perfect. Even when it’s more real than you want it to be. Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own.” For Obama, a person’s story is an affirmation of their space in the world, the right to be and belong. “In sharing my story,” she says, “I hope to help create space for other stories and other voices, to widen the pathway for who belongs and why. . . . Let’s invite one another in. Maybe then we can begin to fear less, to make fewer wrong assumptions, to let go of biases and stereotypes that unnecessarily divide us.” The root of discrimination, Obama implies, including the ugly discrimination she faced as first lady, is misunderstanding. Sharing personal narratives, then, offers a way for people to fully see each other and to overcome our differences.

## REFERENCES

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