

THE PROCESS OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION: A STUDY OF BARACK OBAMA'S *DREAM FROM MY FATHER*

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INTRODUCTION

People issued from miscegenation often involve in a self-questioning process about whether they are white or black. Because of this racial in-betweenness, they feel reluctant to side with one of their two identities, while the policy of identity of the United Nations of America has always obliged them to choose only one part of their double identities. Many Blacks who face this situation are unwilling to choose between the white race and the black race, as they believe that the combination of the two racial categories form their uniqueness. As a result, biracial children often feel a dual sense of self. This situation creates in them a crisis as the duality of their identity excludes one another. African American literary productions often present biracial children as split characters searching for a unite identity.

The present reflection aims at examining in which way the belonging to a family can help a biracial-child to construct a unite sense of identity. The main argument stipulates that in the process of self-construction, the family can help the biracial-child to create a sense of self free from doubt and malaise. In order to show how the process of identity formation exempts a biracial-child from facing crisis, the analysis resorts to Freudian's concept of identification as a theoretical frame to examine the case of Obama as member of a marginalized group and the way he identifies with the black community without being negatively affected as it is traditionally examined in African American literary production.

I. The Construction of a Positive Sense of Self

In most literary productions by African Americans of the twentieth century, be it with DuBois, Alain Locke or Richard Wright, blackness is described as an undesired identity. In these literary productions black identity is rejected not only because of racism, but also because of its internalization. Contrary to the above authors, Barack Obama's *Dream from My Father* presents black people including Obama who identifies as Blacks and does not face a problem of identity because of their blackness. In his autobiography Obama identifies himself as African American. He presents his roots when he writes: "he was an African... a Kenyan of the Luo tribe, born on the shore of Lake Victoria in a place called Alego" (Obama 9). Obama writes that he grows up with no idea of his father's image. Actually, Obama's father, a Kenyan student,

returns to Kenya when he completes his studies. The young Obama stays with his mother, a white woman. *Dream from My Father* reveals that Obama's mother and his maternal grandparents often tell stories about his father. These stories relate the qualities of the father. They opine that Obama's father was confident, bold, intelligent and lovely when he was a student in the United States. Through these stories, the maternal family positively impacts the young Obama who grows up with a positive image of his father.

In "The Reconstitution of Black Families in America During Slavery in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*," Désiré Yssa Koffi established the link between a person's identity formation and the family. His opinion is that "Each individual comes from a family and it is through the family that the individual acquires his sense of being." (Koffi 2016: 229) He highlights the significant role of the family in building a person's sense of identity. He states that families namely the plantation family, the domestic family and monoparental family which were formed during slavery helped to keep unity among Blacks. As a result, though slavery destroyed the Black Americans by depriving them from their sense of belonging, the Blacks still create a family where they are no matter situation and the condition. These families help to unite the Blacks as a community.

In *Dream from My Father*, Obama points out the way the notion of family is perceived in Africa namely in Kenya. When he first arrives in Africa in searching of his roots, he realizes that in Africa the concept of family contrasts the one of America. The book establishes that Obama considers Kenyans' notion of family within circles; the first circle represents family where love is unquestioned, the second circle represents family as a negotiated commitment. Finally, he draws a big circle around the first two circles. It represents family makes of acquaintances (Obama 328). He compares western vision of family to Kenyans' perception of family and concludes that in Kenya the notion of family is extended.

Examining these different opinions of the notion of family, the study purports to point out the common characteristic to all these definitions. Obama insinuates that in this extended family, wherever you go you find a family tie. The notion of family appears as a backbone that maintains together individuals and subsequently leads them to be supportive to each other. He writes that "in Kenya family is everywhere. Whether he was at the post office or the park, his father's name evoked responses and memories. Any need he had would be met by someone at some time no matter what lengths they went through to fulfill them" (Obama 329). The passage reveals that a conception of family such as the one of Kenya, a child always finds belonging in the community. For instance Obama can count on the members of his father's family as well as

the acquaintances to fulfill he needs. The novel implies that a family is set around certain values such as solidarity, love and commitment to each other.

Obama pinpoints his perception of the notion of family when he accounts for the history of the Robinsons family. In the process of his identity construction, Obama meets Michelle's family which gives him a real sense of family. He describes the Robison's family as an example of family which guarantees stability and self-confidence to it members. Throughout his novel, *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama shows his admiration for his wife Michelle who seems to be a puzzle due to her commitment to certain values which specify her family. He writes "it wasn't until I met Michelle's family that I began to understand her." (Obama's *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* 389) The family, as described by Obama appears to be a well-organized, lovable and prosper place to bring up the children. He states,

There was Frasier, the kindly, good-humored father, who never missed a day of work or any of his son's ball games. There was Marian, the pretty, sensible mother who baked birthday cake, kept order in the house, and had volunteered at school to make sure her children were behaving and that the teachers were doing what they were supposed to be doing. There was Craig, the basketball-star brother, tall and friendly and courteous and funny, working as an investment banker but dreaming of going into coaching someday. And there were uncles and aunts and cousins everywhere, stopping by to sit around the kitchen table and eat until they burst and tell wild stories and listen to Grandpa's old jazz collection and laugh deep into the night. (Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, 389)

The Robinsons were loveable to each other. The family keeps the traditional structure of a family. The father plays the role of the provider and finds time to watch the game of his son. The mother keeps the house and make sure that the children work hard at school. The description of the family stresses the sense of unity. Though the father and the mother have separated roles, both also show their commitments to the activities of the children. In this condition, the children might feel at ease, because they appear to be loved by the father as well as the mother. Obama puts:

What made this vision of domestic bliss all the more impressive was the fact that the Robinsons had had to overcome hardships that one rarely saw on prime-time TV. There were the usual issues of race, of course: the limited opportunities available to Michelle's parents growing up in Chicago during the fifties and sixties; the racial steering and panic peddling that had driven white families away from their neighborhood; the extra energy required from black parents to compensate for smaller incomes and more violent streets and underfunded playgrounds and indifferent school. (Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, 390)

In this passage, Obama shows that when the family is united, it can overcome any difficulties due to racism, social or economic hardships. In the Robinson family, the children rarely suffer from identity crisis even in time of hardship. This particular characteristic of the children is due

to the unity in the family. Despite hardships, and despite the fact that the father's health has deteriorated,

he had carried out his responsibilities to his family without a trace of self-pity giving himself an extra hour every morning to get to work, struggling with every physical act from driving a car to buttoning his shirt, smiling and joking as he labored, at first with a limp and eventually with aid of two canes, his balding head beading with sweat, a cross a field to watch his son play, or across the living room to give his daughter a kiss. (Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, 390)

This author's description insists on the responsibility of the parents to protect and cater for the need of the children without showing any signs of sadness. The Robisons seem to indicate that despite hardship when a family is bound by love and mutual help, it resists the difficulties and raises its children in a good condition.

It can be noted that in most African American literary production, specifically those that deal with biracial children issue, the values describe in Kenyan's notion of family or the Robison family are often, absent. For instance, in the Taylor family in Chester Himes's *The Third Generation*, Chester Himes presents the Taylor family as being a dysfunctional one: the mother and the father have opposite opinions about what the family should be. When the father wants the children to identify with Blacks, the mother urges them to consider themselves as Whites. Because they are unable to define themselves according to any of the parents' recommended identity, the children grow without a proper sense of self. This inability to make the choice between the two racial groups results in identity crisis. Himes's novel insinuates that the opposition between the father and the mother is the main reason for the family's failure. In the novel, Mrs. Taylors expresses her hatred to black people including her husband. Because of the opposition between the parents concerning the children identity, they seem to be incapable of constructing a sense of self free from crisis. As a result, Charles goes through an identity crisis as he cannot adapt the white community as well as the black one.

In *Dream from My Father*, it is observable that Obama mother as well as his father urges him to accept the black identity. The novel indicates that the mother has a good opinion of the father, especially when she tells Obama that his father is intelligent and self-confidant and despite difficulties, he has faced racism with no self-pity. Throughout the novel she insists on the positive aspect of Obama's father personality. Her arguments lead the boy to idealize the father. Consequently, Obama succeeds in constructing his own identity based on the one of his father.

II. The Development of the Individual's Identity

In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* Sigmund Freud seemingly ascertains the necessity to present a role model for children when he elaborates some steps to an individual's identity formation. First, he opines that identification is the original form of emotion tie with an object. He writes that "identification is known to psycho-analysis as the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person." (Freud 60) In other words, any individual in society always constructs his personality based on an existing model either in the family or outside it. The theorist of Psychoanalysis adds that "identification Endeavour to mould a person own ego after the fashion of the one that has been taken as a model." (Freud 60) From the lenses of Freud's theory, one can understand why Obama's maternal family endeavors to carve her son's identity out of his father's one by creating an emotional tie between the father and the son. Throughout *Dream from My Father*, it is noticeable that the boy has been educated after his father's image, principles and character. The personality of the father and his character were guidelines for the young Obama to become a man. Recalling the father's qualities, the mother advises the boy by stating: "he had led his life according to principles that demanded a different kind of toughness, principles that promised a higher form of power." (Obama 50) Consequently, she decided that Obama should follow his example. The mother tries to persuade her son when she argues that Obama has no choice for "It was in the genes...your brains, your character, you got from him" (Obama 50) This positive depictions of the father according to the mother are to be the guidelines that Obama has to follow to grow in an environment that regards the black people with contempt.

In addition to the positive image of his father that Obama has to engrain, the mother presents some famous African American who may serve as models for the her son. For example, she encourages him to identify with famous Blacks such as Thurgood Marshall, Sydney Poitier, Fannie Lou Hamer and Lena Home. She makes him believe that "every black man was Thurgood Marshall or Sidney Poitier; every black woman was Fannie Lou Hamer or Lena Horne." (Obama 51) The boy has to know that "to be black was to be beneficiary of a great inheritance, a special destiny, glorious burdens we were to carry with style". (Obama 51) In the above extract, the mother act as a coach for his son in order to instill a positive image of blackness in his mind. The mother suggests his son not regarding blackness as a handicap. Instead, for her, Obama must envisage the opportunity of being Black. That is why, she presents to her son black celebrities as models. Obama confesses: "more than once, my mother would point out; 'Harry Belafonte' is the best-looking man on the planet." (Obama 51). Definitely, on many occasions, the mother intends to prepare her son to face the difficulties that he will be facing as a black person in America. Her words purport to motivate Obama to embrace black

people's struggle for recognition and equality. From his mother motivational speech, he gets awareness that his success is important, and some people have consideration for him and love him as he is.

Comparing his condition to most of black children's conditions, he states that he is "one of the luckier ones, having been given a stretch of childhood free from self-doubt." (Obama 51) when Obama consider himself to be lucky for having parents who care and guide him, the passage insinuates the necessity of a role model for the children in the process of their identity construction. Notably, the person presented as the model must have a good reputation and a positive image since according to Erikson any individual has a positive and negative aspect of identity. Depending on which one an individual develops his identity, he can endure or avoid a crisis of identity. (The Concept of Identity in Race relation 7)

Similarly, the grandfather highlights some positive aspects when he was young and often some stories about Obama's father. It can be noted that the reason why the Grandfather mention these positives qualities is to help the young boy to grow with confidence and accept his black identity. The impact of the discourse of the grandfather is enhanced when one considers Erickson's opinion. He argues that personal identity is developed with the influence from family and personal relationships. (Erikson, *Identity and life cycle* 22) Actually, Obama's family plays a significant role in positively influencing the young boy to construction a secure sense of self. Highlighting the key role of his grandfather in his book, *Dreams from My Father*, Obama states:

Gramps would wander into my room to tell me stories of his youth, a new joke he has read in Readers Digest, or a story about my father. I can still picture Gramps leaning back in his old stuffed chair after dinner, sipping whiskey and cleaning his teeth with the cellophane from his cigarette pack, recounting the time that my father almost threw a man off the Pali Lookout because of a pipe (55).

Obama's idea illustrates Erickson's theory of self-identity when he elaborates that each person has a positive and negative aspects of identity. Put simply, on one hand, when a person develops a positive identity, it can be argued that he is less likely to develop a crisis of identity. On the second hand, when a person develops a negative image of his identity, it can be argued that he may be likely to endure a crisis. In the case of Obama, we observe that his mother and his maternal grandfather joint to help him built a positive image of the black identity.

In *Identity and life cycle*, Erickson pinpoints that self-esteem is an important factor in choosing one's identity, and if one lacks self-esteem and confidence, it may cause identity problems (22). Visibly as a child, Obama has been saved from crisis because his grandparents

embraced his father's Kenyan ethnicity. For example, when Obama attended school in Hawaii, his grandfather informed his teacher of Obama's Kenyan heritage. The book stated,

Miss Hefty took attendance and read my full name; I heard titters break across the room. Frederick leaned over to me. 'I thought your name was Barry.' 'Would you prefer if we called you Berry?' Miss Hefty asked. 'Barack is such a beautiful name. Your grandfather tells me your father is Kenyan. I used to live in Kenya, you know. Teaching children just your age, it's such a magnificent country (Obamaa 60).

The passage is an example of how Obama's maternal family helped him develop a positive self-esteem about being African American; this type of positive influence made him proud to identify with being African American.

Once, the boy accept his father's racial identity; then comes the second level of identification. Freud informs us that "in a regressive way [identification] becomes a substitute for a libidinal object tie, as it were by means of introjections of the object into the ego". (Freud 61) Having being encouraged by those he loves the most, namely his mother and his grandparents, to identify with his absent father, he would absorb that image of his father by means of introjections. Put simply, he will adopt the father's identity (here identity includes race and personality). This identity will guide him for better or for worst.

The image of the father received from his white family can be considered as a bridge that links him to this absence father. Visibly, this image has to influence him all along his life journey. This influence that is to keep him from collapsing in time when he is lonely and may fall in crisis like Helga Crane in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*. Actually, Nella Larsen presents her main character in *Quicksand* as a lonely girl with no family belonging; she is rejected by her white parents as well as her black family. Being partly White and partly Black, she is unable to define who she is: black or white? This absence of family tie and with no support, Helga suffers from a severe crisis of identity. She has no model upon which to build not only her personality but also her racial identity. *Quicksand* presents Helga as a helpless person in search of a family belonging.

Though, Obama is a biracial child like Helga in *Quicksand*, contrary to Helga who is rejected by the family members, Obama is accepted by his family. The models upon which he constructs his identity become the torch that enlightens his road in lonely period. For instance, when he was away from his mother and his Grandparents, it was his father's image which guides and helps him raise himself as black man.

The significance of a role model for a youngster appears when Obama beginning to live away from his mother as a student. Obama reveals his struggle as a young African American

when he was far from his maternal. He writes “away from my mother, away from my grandparents, I was engaged in a fitful struggle. I was trying to raise myself to be a black man in America.” (Obama 76) In this passage, Obama shows that he has finally absorbed his father’s identity as he accepts his identity of black man and struggles to raise himself as such. In these moments, his father often writes to him. The father’s letters give him the feeling of belonging. He writes “My father’s letters provided few clues [to raise myself as a black man].” (Obama 76) In his letters, the father would “report that everyone was fine, commend on [Obama’s] progress in school, and insist that [Obama’s] mother, Maya, and [Obama] were all welcome to take [their] rightful place beside him whenever [they] so desired.” (Obama 76) The letters give Obama a sense of belonging. Despite the distance, the father and the son’s connection, inspires the latter, encourages and guides him so that he grows up as a dignified and responsible black man.

In this perspective, the letters appear to be significant in erasing the distance and filling the void that the father’s absence creates. Obama often receive, these letters in period when he needed guidance. They give him stamina when he is about to lose hope. In such moments, he finds out the letters and reads them. For example, the book reveal that when Obama first arrived in Chicago, it was out of an arrangement with a friend of him who has to leave Chicago and Obama will rent the house, yet when he arrives the man’s phone number was not working. Not knowing where to go and being lonely; he digs out from his pocket a letter of his father. Reading the letter gives him some connection. Obama’s father writes that,

you will be pleased to know that all your brothers and sisters here are fine, and send their greetings. Like me they approve your decision to come home after graduation.... Barry, even if it is only for a few days, the important thing is that you know your people, and also that you know where you belong. (Obama 114)

The Book reveals that after reading the correspondance, he was relieved for he knows despite the predicament in which he is, there are some people whom he belongs to and who care for him. People who, it is true he doesn’t know, but who blood runs in his veins and who loves him. This knowledge gives him relief and stamina to struggle to find his way.

Dream from My Father highlights the connection between the son and the father when Obama is announced his father’s death. The book reveals that he first takes the information for granted and then replaying the image of his father, the stories his grandparents have told him concerning the father and the letters they have written to each other, he realizes the impact of his father’s image on him. He goes in bed and weeps. He notes

I awoke still weeping, my first real tears for him.... I turned on the light and dug out his old letters. I remembered his only visit, the basketball he had given me and how he had

taught me to dance? And I realized, perhaps for the first time, how even in his absence his image had given me some bulwark on which to grow up, an image to live up to, or to disappoint.... I needed to search for him, I thought to myself, and talk with him again. (Obama 129)

The death of his father reinforces the emotional tie between the son and the father. From the above lines, it comes out that the power of separation and destruction death often bears is nullified, especially when Obama realizes the powerful influence of his father on him. Though, he will be absence forever, his values and principles will remain for forever. He concludes his thought with the decision of “search[ing] for him”. He explicates the uniqueness of his father influence when he writes

Yes, I'd seen weakness in other men...Gramps and his disappointment, Lolo and his compromise. But these men had become object lessons for me, men I might love but never emulate, white men and brown men whose fates didn't speak to my own. It was into my father's image, the black man, son of Africa, that I'd packed all the attributes I sought in myself, the attributes of Martin and Malcolm, DuBois and Mandela.....my father's voice had nevertheless remained untainted, inspiring, rebuking, granting or withholding approval. You do not work hard enough, Barry. You must help in your people's struggle. Wake up, black man. The fantasy of my father had at least kept me from despair. Now he was dead, truly. (Obama 220)

From the above mentioned, it comes out that Obama has absorbed his father personality which guided him from his childhood until his teenage life and though, his voice remained untainted, inspiring, rebuking, granting or withholding approval as he would scold him for not working hard enough. Or urge him in helping in his people's struggle. It is as if the father was present even, he actually is far away in Africa. The strong emotional tie between them leads Obama to consider his action and always judge these actions according to the father's values taught to him. As a result, he has not only accepted his father but also his father's people.

III. Identification with the Group

The process of Obama's identity construction is completed when he identifies with black people. According to Freud, in the final level, identification “may arise with every new perception of a common quality shared with some other persons who are not an object of the sexual instinct” (Freud 61). The individual, having by means of identification choose a role model and absorbed his model by means of introjections, then he searches to connect with other persons whom he shares common qualities with. The third step of the process of identification appears in *Dream from My Father* when the boy, having internalized the character and the personality of his father, chooses his friend based on those values and principles that now govern his life.

In other words, growing as an African American Obama learns to be selective in his friendship in order to avoid being mistaken for a sellout. He diversifies his friendship circle, choosing “The more politically active black students. The foreign students. The Chicanos. The Marxist professors and structural feminists and punk rock performance poets.” (Obama100) Obama’s choice of his friends can be linked to his father’s personality, especially when the novel states that his father has been in Kenya government, he has married a white woman after he has turned to Kenya, and that he was open-minded. So, no surprise, in the list Obama dresses as guideline for his friendship, there is people with political commitment and people with different racial background. He seems to be searching his father’s character in his friends or people whom he decides to join for companionship.

Actually, the list of his friends is a sum up of his father’s personality. So, his friends have to share the qualities of his father which he identifies with. The book states that in this posture he can embrace his black brothers and sisters, whether in America or in Africa, and affirm a common destiny without pretending to speak to, or for, all their various struggles. He reveals that despite the fact that some people may be racist, a term he rarely uses “None of our white friends, guys like Jeff or Scoot from the basketball team, treated us any differently than they treated each other. They loved us and we loved them back. Shit, seemed like half of ‘em wanted to be black themselves.” (Obama 82) In his interaction with people of diverse races Obama comes to realize races’ relation has shifted from overt hatred to collaboration; interestingly, some White even envy black culture and wish they were Blacks.

In this perspective, *Dream from My Father* seems to be describing the area Martin Luther King predicted when he was delivering, he famous speech ‘I have A dream’. When Obama describe his friendship with people of other races including the white race, he subsequently demonstrates that African Americans are living a new area of races relation advocated by highly educated African American figures such as W.E.B. Dubois and others. They advocated recognition of black art and Proclaimed equality with Whites. In *Soul Of Black Folk* Dubois’ thought is put in nutshell in these terms:

[The black] does not want to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa; he does not wish to bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he believes—foolishly, perhaps, but fervently—that Negro blood has yet a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without losing the opportunity of development” (Dubois 45-46).

It can be argued that Though racism does not totally disappear, Dubois and his followers claim which consists in making the black race and black culture recognized and accepted has come

to be a reality. African Americans can live side by side with other races in the United States society and none of them are ashamed of their identity. More importantly, children issue from miscegenation like Obama are free to choose who they are and will be accepted as such in most case. No one will accuse them of pretending to be White.

Being raise in a White Family and educated to accept his blackness, When Obama finally integrates the black community as a black man, he searches for a religious community that bears the principle he values. A community that speaks to humankind and human value in general. This may make him gather his dual identities. He finds this connection in the Trinity church of Chicago. Obama's book pinpoints that a brochure of the Trinity church guidelines list at the top of the top a commitment to God,

who will give us the strength to give up prayerful passivism and become Black Christian activists, soldiers for black freedom and the dignity of all humankind then a commitment to the black community and black family and education, the work, ethic, discipline, and self-respect (Obama 284)

In the light of the above quote, one can understand that the cause of black today blends with the one of all humankind which is the struggle for dignity, family, education, work, ethic, discipline, and self-respect. The novel reveals that among all the churches Obama has visited none of them has impressed him like the Trinity Church of Reverend Wright. In the Trinity Church he has found some common qualities which help him to identify with it and embrace its principles and values.

The philosophy of the church and the background of the preacher seem to serve as a natural bridge between him and his fellows in faith. Obama's process of identification ends as he finds common quality with the black community. His journey from the white community to the black one leads him successfully start a new area of his live journey. Freud informs us that "the more successful may this partial identification becomes, and it may thus represent the beginning of a new tie" (Freud 61) Obama has come from an all-white upbringing to search for new identification with African American. Yet he does not limit there, *Dream from My Father* indicates that Obama moves to Africa to search for his African identity and reconcile with his father on his sepulcher. Noticeable, Obama's process of identity construction can be a guide to bring up children issue from miscegenation who may not suffer from a severe fragmented sense of self.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the issue of identity construction and the crisis in Barack Obama's *Dream from My Father* proves that the role of the family is crucial in preventing biracial-children to endure a crisis linked to their dual sense of self. To sum it all, in the process of miscegenated-children self-construction, the family is significantly necessary to help them create a whole sense of self free from doubt and malaise. In the case study, Obama's mother and maternal grandparents have help him identify with his absent father. As a result, he learns to accept blackness through the positive image he has of his father. In this condition he succeed in constructing a secure black identity free from crisis as it is often seen in the literature about children issued from miscegenation.

Freud's analysis in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* is used as literary tool to examine the psychology of Obama as member of a marginalized group and how he frames his identity after the group without being negatively affected. The analysis shows that the process of Obama's identity construction has gone through three steps. First, he has built his personally after the one of his fathers, second his engrains the character of his father which makes him accept his black identity with confidence. Having accept his blackness; he finally identifies with the black community and with people of other races who share the principles and values that do not discriminate people based on their races.

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