

The Representation of Gender and Sexuality in Michelle Obama's *Becoming*

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Abstract

*This research focuses on the gender and sexuality in Michelle Obama's *Becoming*, her autobiographical novel. Obama attempts to present her past and present life in par with her gender role in her life. Although she has talked about many things in the book, her primary focus is on the role of gender and sexuality to shape her career. She has a dual identity as a daughter in her childhood and as a wife in her adulthood. She grows up in a simple family experiencing gender and sexuality in the book in which she feels in the family and the places she is grown up. As she goes to the university, she experiences discrimination between boys and girls. It helps her to address the problems when she is in politics having power to address the domination being a girl. Obama tries to clarify that gender and sexuality exist in every society in one way or another. Sometimes, it depends on people how they create their identity despite the obstacles as she has faced in her life. As Simone de Beauvoir claims 'one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one', the socially constructed idea of woman dominates her whole life. Michelle assimilates all the evils of the society and tries to make her identity despite the difficulty.*

The protagonist of the book is author herself. She has written whatever she has experienced and encountered the problems. To examine the research, the researcher has applied Marin Coleman and John Stuart Mill's ideas of women and their role in society. The significance of the research is to explore the shaping of life of Michelle Obama and gender roles in her career. Obama's point of departure is to show one's internal thoughts, determination and family play key role in addition to gender and sexuality. The study focuses on her personal views on family, community, race and the whole country. As she faces problems being a woman, she remembers her family background and the impact of her childhood environment. She keeps balancing the relationship with her husband. She assists him in every possible way without overshadowing her own distinct identity.

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Hence, gender and sexuality do not stop women from shaping their identities if they are determined to accomplish something in their life.

Keywords: Gender, Sexuality, Ethnicity, Class, Race

Introduction

Gender studies is a field of interdisciplinary education which analyzes the phenomenon of gender. It is sometimes related to studies of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and location. Gender is a term referred to the parallel and socially unequal division into femininity and masculinity. The socially constructed aspect of differences between women and men are the concerns of gender studies. Gender studies deal mainly with the social differences between men and women created by the society, which is learned, is changeable over time and varies within and between cultures. Gender studies is not only concerned to the individual and personality differences but as the symbolic level to cultural ideals and stereotypes of masculinity and femininity and at the structural level to sexual division of labor in institution and organization. The philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1956) said, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (273). In gender studies the term ‘gender’ is used to refer to the social and cultural constructions of masculinities and femininities. It does not refer to biological difference, but rather to cultural difference. As a constructivist endeavor, gender studies examine how gender is less determined by nature than it is by culture.

In most of the societies whether they are American or European or Asian or African, women are dominated and exploited. They do not have freedom of moving, speaking or settling down alone. They are not free to do anything. Their identity is connected to male members in one way or another. Women are attached with body parts. From the world history, they are treated like others while males are treated like self.

The research paper discusses the gender and sexuality in the life of Michelle Obama as she passed through her childhood to adulthood. Although she was born in the middle-class family, she witnessed many huddles in her life as she faced the problems in different places like her neighborhoods, schools and even at the college. It was difficult for her to change her mindset that she can perform equally as men. Her meeting with Barack Obama was milestone in her life as he supported her in every walk of life. Her father and brother have also played crucial roles in her life to make her believe that not all males are bad but some are good and cooperative too.

Females are dominated throughout the history everywhere in the world. There is no

equality between males and females. Although the level of domination differs from one country to another, women are suppressed in many ways. It is known that females want to reach top management and have some barriers and traits toward it. At the same time, there is common knowledge that men are in leadership positions in politics and education. My research focuses mostly about the differences between a leadership and management by female and male.

Being a female it is interesting to me to conduct a research about leadership being based on gender. It is interesting to find out the differences or similarities in leadership by men and by women, , how do they develop themselves in order to get followers. . How men and women develop the characteristics to be competent, progressive, well-informed, purposeful and professional in a dynamic and ever changing world.. What male and female do and what kind of features they are getting to become qualified leaders. "How men and women develop the characteristics needed to be competent, progressive, well-informed, purposeful, and professional in a dynamic and ever-changing world."

Viser (2001) studies women's leadership and claims that leaders should be aware about their driving force. She begins her book 'Leaders should regularly ask themselves 'What is driving me?' and 'What are my motives to lead?' We have become preoccupied with our curriculum vitae (CV). This overview of our educational background, the positions we have held, the responsibilities we have assumed, and the results we have achieved has become a 'this is me' statement. It reflects our progress, our professional direction, and may even provide indications about our future career. While a CV is a testimony of *what* we have done, it does not answer *why*. A CV does not address the following questions: Who are you as a leader? What kind of leader are you? Which values and principles underlie your actions and behaviors? Knowing the answers to these questions is crucial to ensuring that your career stays on course and that you are able to take decisions with integrity. Viser argues that only CV does not determine who a person is. It is important for the person to evaluate oneself.

Leadership is not a simple thing because the person should be different from others. It is not newness when a person follows a mass; rather he/she goes beyond the traditional idea of female backwardness. Moreover, leadership should start from childhood or

young age because the quality of life begins from the age. It is not only physical entity but also mental and psychological aspect. If children are taught to be leaders right from their young age, they feel that they should go beyond set limitations of the society.

Leaders master their skills and only exceptional ones can be described as natural born leader. Indisputably, some people are born with features of leaders, which help them to master skills of leadership more effectively.

In the beginning of our career at junior level we focus our attention on the correct execution of the tasks assigned to us in line with our job description (performance-related activities). We strive to carry out our tasks efficiently, with an eye for detail, in order to reach our goals. How well we perform these tasks defines how our performance will be judged by our superiors. A straightforward example is the sales target of a sales representative to recruit five new clients every month and render personalized service to 20 existing clients, selling 10 of them extra services.

Viser (2001) claims that at junior level, it is essential to acquire crucial knowledge and management skills. The focus is on education, training, and gaining experience for the execution of the role, such as overall company knowledge, and specialist product and market expertise. In this process perfectionism and attention to detail are prevalent. Unsatisfactory performance can be addressed through extra specialist training and on-the-job training. For example, if an individual fails to meet sales targets due to insufficient communication skills, toward clients or the organization, specific training can help that individual to improve his or her sales performance. Competition for promotion from junior levels to more senior levels is based on performance. Viser states that the first people to receive a promotion will tend to be the ones who outperformed others on their measurable targets. Viser states that a common pattern in the career development of women is that they remain concentrated on the execution of their tasks, aiming for more than 100 per cent perfection in middle-management functions.

In this way, in the junior phase the aspects of power and promotion receive little attention. Networks primarily consist of personal contacts, such as friends and family, and provide social and emotional support. Self-promotion does not take place systematically or strategically and is aimed at promoting specific results in the job. The research will be focused on the leadership of women in the autobiography. It attempts to discov-

er that women can be successful leaders as men.

Literature review

Col Sue Pope comments that the book is an autobiography of Michelle who deals with the ups and downs of her incredible journey from humble beginnings to the magnificence of the White House as America's first lady. Pope (2019) asserts:

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. It takes the reader seamlessly through three distinct phases of her life, Becoming me, becoming us and becoming more. (p. 2)

She gives an astounding conclusion inspiring all that becoming is a kind of transformation from one entity to another. She becomes a better person while attempting to do the same for the nation and the whole humanity at last.

Isabel Wilkerson believes that the book deals with the two things: discrimination between men and women and the discrimination between black women and white women Michelle experienced while she was at the college. Michelle underwent several problems including the hierarchy between black women and white women. She was mainly reprimanded while different rest rooms were used for white and colored women. Wilkerson (2018) explains:

The signs reminded every inhabitant of the very different place of black women and white women in the hierarchy. There were restrooms for 'white ladies' and often, conversely, restrooms for 'colored women.' Black women were rarely granted the honorific Miss or Mrs., but were addressed by their first name, or simply as 'gal' or 'auntie' or worse. This so openly demeaned them that many black women, long after they had left the South, refused to answer if called by their first name. (p. 2)

Black women were called by their first name while the white women were called mostly by Miss or Mrs. They were also called 'gal' or auntie or worse than that. She clearly noticed that black women were dominated and oppressed by white American.

Another political theorist Mill (2018) sees the role of women to make the society. He says that there is nothing women cannot do. It is bad thing to forbid them from doing anything. Men are not superior to women because men cannot protect women and they are not in favor of women.

What women by nature cannot do, it is quite superfluous to forbid them from doing. What they can do, but not so well as the men who are their competitors, competition suffices to exclude them from; since nobody asks for protective duties and bounties in favor of women; it is only asked that the present bounties and protective duties in favor of men should be recalled. If women have a greater natural inclination for something than for others, there is no need of laws or social inculcation to make the majority of them do the former in preference to the latter. (p. 34)

It means women are to advance them politically. Politics is only way through which women can ascertain their roles and rights, according to Mill.

Moreover, Jean Jacques Rousseau (2018) divides inequality among humans in two categories: natural and political. Natural inequality cannot be changed such as age, health, strength, mind, soul and so on. They are different from persons to persons. Another inequality is political as it depends on convention established by certain privileged people. Rousseau (2018) argues:

I conceive two species of inequality among men; one which I call natural, or physical inequality, because it is established by nature, and consists in the difference of age, health, bodily strength, and the qualities of the mind, or of the soul; the other which may be termed moral, or political inequality, because it depends on a kind of convention, and is established, or at least authorized by the common consent of mankind. . . which some men enjoy, to the prejudice of others, such as that of being richer, more honored, more powerful, and even that of exacting obedience from them. (p. 87)

Social rules are determined by the political power. Politics plays key role in the society. Naturally all people are equal but human rules discriminate them. There is prejudice over certain group of people. Thus, Rousseau divides people into many categories

through which people have different positions in the society.

It is challenging for women who enter leadership sphere, which mainly is occupied by men. The leadership styles of women and men differ because of various reasons. Mostly there is basic information about leadership styles of women and men on the example of autocratic and democratic styles of both men and women. The behavior of women and men in leadership style are related to leadership roles. It is different for men and women and the fact that women face more barriers to become leaders, especially for leadership roles that are male-dominated. This issue is usually discussed in terms of leadership styles.

Distinctions in styles can be important because they are one factor that may affect people's views about whether women should become leaders. It is not surprising that women are the usual focus of discussions of the impact of gender on leadership. From one side, the differences in leadership style can provide a rationale for excluding women from opportunities and especially from male-dominated leadership roles. From another side, the perception of sameness would fail to acknowledge the relational qualities which are traditional source of female pride and that may contribute to superior performance by women leaders. But differences and similarity is not the main point.

Therefore, leadership styles of women and men are different, probably because women are more cooperative and collaborative, but less hierarchical, than men. However, men and women have different social roles, for instance in the family and jobs. . The main differences between men and women are that the male are assertive, controlling, and have confidence. They are characterized as 'aggressive, ambitions, dominant, independent, self-confident and competitive.'

Women are described to be more cooperative and supportive, while their male counterparts tend to be more self-assertive and competitive. Thirdly, women desire leaders who are cooperative, empathetic, supportive, democratic, and calm. Fourthly, most women perceive leadership more as a facilitation and organization rather than power and dominance. If we summarize above lines females and males are equally effective leaders. In addition, female and male leaders are equally effective in conflict management styles.

The only difference in female and male conflict management styles include age, education, and managerial experience - the leaders must share similarities to one another. Both, "men and women who have female bosses are more collaborative, and less aggressive than men" (Eagly & Carli, 2003). They seek consensus, emphasize team building, are more nurturing and empathetic, and are more approachable. However, males are still frequently rated more positively than females for the same behaviors. Men show more leadership, have higher-quality contributions, being more desirable for hiring, meriting a higher salary, and more responsible job. For the same behaviors females were rated as more emotional, less warm, less sensitive, and less attractive than males. Women have begun to increase their individual power, independence, assertiveness, and competitiveness. Male dominance is effectively reduced when people are reminded of their equalitarian attitudes.

Under-representation of women in leadership positions in educational settings is a widely seen. , Despite the fact that teaching as a profession is dominated by women but there are very few women in the leadership position in the education sector. Over recent decades, scholars have interrogated this phenomenon with a view to identifying the factors that have contributed to the under-representation of women in leadership positions in education, with a particular focus on the personal, organizational and social/cultural levels. Marianne Coleman (2011) contends, "The statistics quoted earlier in the chapter indicate the extent to which women are still a minority in positions of importance at work and alert us to the slow pace of change regarding women and leadership." (p 6) Coleman further argues that "Leadership and organization theories developed in the post-war years were based on gendered assumptions and did not take into account the possibility that women might behave somewhat differently from men at work" (p 8). Female behaviors are, therefore, based on the interpretation of men, according to Coleman.

Methodology

This research paper stresses on gender and sexuality to analyze Obama's *Becoming*. The narrative technique, dialogue of the characters, events and the language *Becoming* reflect the dimension of the two discourses, male and female in contemporary society. This study is basically related to the library work. Reference materials, especially re-

views and other critical approaches is used. Some studies conducted by various writers and researchers have also been used in this study. Online resources has also been used in the research.

Analysis

This article examines Michelle Obama's *Becoming* from the perspective of political theory. World politics is changing all the time, many transformations have taken place. Personal lives are greatly influenced by political change when a person is under the influence of mainstream politics. In this research, the researcher focuses on how Michelle Obama experienced during her childhood and what transformation has taken place as a woman and the First Lady in the United States of America. The research stresses the impact of the author amidst a political change in her childhood, her college life, being a wife of a leader, and being the First Lady.

Her early life is affected by the turmoil of political biasedness in her life as she belongs to the black race. She realizes that there is a vast difference between white women and black women in the US, which particularly she learns at Princeton. She is determined to change the old concept of considering black women weak. She brings a drastic change in her concept and she encourages her husband Barack Obama to be president so that she can evade the discrimination for becoming better persons and a better nation.

Michelle Obama, born as Michelle Robinson, grows up on the South Side of Chicago, has numerous fluctuations as she passes through different stages of her life. In the beginning, she feels deserted by white and wealthy families as she was grown up in the middle class family. She spent her happy life in her childhood and worked hard to get good education. Her life was greatly affected when her father suffered from multiple sclerosis. Her difficulty became opportunity because of which she got homely environment at Princeton. Her entry into Harvard Law School helped her to achieve her goal including meeting with Barack Obama. Her friendship with him became a great momentum in her life because he is the person of optimism, his diligence, and also his humility.

Afua Hirsch (2018) expresses that Michelle Obama has exposed ugly side of race, marriage and ugly side of politics in the book. She has reflected whatever she experienced

in the process of becoming first lady from her husband rather than becoming a good lady from her own. In other words, she has sacrificed many things to be the first lady. Hirsch (2018) states:

Her role has never been defined, because, I suspect, to do so would involve the awkward truth – that it's essentially to make her husband look good. First ladies both feed into, and reflect, our patriarchal values, and so, in this world still so intolerant of female domination, making their husbands look good inevitably involves diminishing themselves, and a decoupling from their own achievements, so as not to outshine the president. (p. 2)

Women have many problems whether they belong to lower families or higher ones. She has represented various kinds of women. In her childhood, she experienced how people suffer being poor and black and black women. Later she experienced how women sacrifice their education and career after becoming a mother. She also experienced how women are discriminated in different places being not only women but also black women, particularly at the college.

Michelle Obama's family background is distinct from others. She recalls her past days and shares them with her readers. She asserts that she rarely goes to join her neighborhood kids because she did not want her dolls to be touched by them. It means her culture taught her to be individual and personal. Her childhood experiences reveal that she was horrified by the kids' dynamics moving from one place to another. Obama (2018) writes:

I rarely chose to join the neighborhood kids who played outside after school, nor did I invite school friends home with me, in part because I was a fastidious kid and didn't want anyone meddling with my dolls. I'd been to other girls' houses and seen the horror-show scenarios—Barbies whose hair had been hacked off or whose faces had been crosshatched with Magic Marker. And one thing I was learning at school was that kid dynamics could be messy. (p. 30)

Although she is American, she has got lots of experiences of people who are marginalized and oppressed for innumerable reasons. She understands how people feel bad when they do not have the sense of affinity in the community they live.

Michelle's mother has played significant role to look into the world. She learns from her mother to be social. In the beginning, Michelle is intimately attached with her brother. Fearing that she will be self-centered, her mother helps her to go out and be a friend of other girls. The lines reveal her mother's guidance and father's support to involve in social manner:

[My mother] was hoping that I'd learn to glide socially the way my brother had. Craig, as I've mentioned, had a way of making hard things look easy. He was by then a growing sensation on the basketball court, high-spirited and agile and quickly growing tall. My father pushed him to seek out the toughest competition he could find, which meant that he would later send Craig across town on his own to play with the best kids in the city. But for now, he left him to wrangle the neighborhood talent. (Obama, 2018, p. 32)

Her parents are pretty aware that their children should participate in social function. Sportsmanship is one of the activities to socialize them. Her father believes that person's real talent comes from the competition and the sports is the factor to test the people.

Whatever she is writing in the book, it is her perception. Perceptions change according to the circumstances.

I am now at a new beginning, in a new phase of life. For the first time in many years, I'm unhooked from any obligation as a political spouse, unencumbered by other people's expectations. I have two nearly grown daughters who need me less than they once did. I have a husband who no longer carries the weight of the nation on his shoulders. (Obama, 2018, p. 333)

Obama believes that life changes all the time. Phases of life can start from one status to another status. When she was a child, she understood her life in one way like playing with her siblings, friends, and so on. After she got married, her life has changed completely. The way she behaves with others and the way they look at her are significantly different.

As she worked for the first time, she compared herself to others. It is due to her cultural

variation. She feels independent and confident as she is away from her elder brother Craig. She is no more attached with him. As she works, she realizes that she is as capable as others. She decides to be silent and try to observe her classmates whether they are smarter than her or not. She believes that she is culturally different from others. She thinks that it is necessary for her to prove equal to them. She evaluates herself that she is not less smart than them. Obama (2018) asserts:

Now, though, I was just Michelle Robinson, with no Craig attached. At Whitney Young, I had to work to ground myself. My initial strategy involved keeping quiet and trying to observe my new classmates. Who were these kids anyway? All I knew was that they were smart. Demonstrably smart. Selectively smart. The smartest kids in the city, apparently. But wasn't I as well? Hadn't all of us—me and Terri and Chiaka—landed here because we were smart like them? (p. 54)

Conclusion The research work focuses on Michelle's Obama's personal thought about her family. Michelle's childhood is reflected in her adulthood but in a different way. Her experience as a child has helped her to perceive the world in her own way. In the beginning, she stands as a single woman – someone's daughter and someone's sister- in relation. As she grows old her horizon becomes so large that she becomes a center for the world. After researching on her life sketch, the researcher came to the conclusion that her identity is associated with her political worldview as the first lady and as the mother of her children. Her autobiographical book *Becoming* presents her development of ideas, thoughts and worldview in a subjective way. She has got enough opportunity to distinguish herself as a common girl when she was a student and as a beacon of light for all the women of her race and other women across the world. The researcher focused on her identity despite her husband's dignified personality. Although she is the first lady of the USA, she is able to preserve her personality as a distinct woman becoming a source of inspiration for other women. Her early life that was full of turmoil has helped her to search for identity in her later life. Her main purpose is to show people how women are equally capable to maintain their intellect and guide other people like males. Her role to assist her husband is praiseworthy to fight for equality. Her difficulty became an opportunity because of which she got homely environment at Princeton. Her entry into Harvard Law School helped her to achieve her goal including meeting with Barack

Obama. Her friendship with him became a great momentum in her life because he is a person of optimism, diligence, and also his humility.

Her family background has a lasting impression on her life. She reveals that her culture is distinct in that she does not get attached to her neighborhood. Her childhood experiences affect her later life. She felt discrimination in her early life for instance. She wanted to eliminate such discrimination using her power. Her brother is her power in her childhood. Even after becoming the first lady she remembers her brother as her power of exposing herself to others. She encourages her brother to be exposed to others. She believes that basketball is a good medium to show the identity and understand the importance of teamwork.

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