

## Becoming Me: Journey from the ‘South’

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### Abstract

The rallying cry of “Black Lives Matter” that reverberated all through the U.S. after the George Floyd murder case brought to light the reality that racism is a living reality in the American soil. It is no legend of the past. It is not a bygone history. Therein lies the significance of the inspiring memoir by the former First Lady of the United States. Michelle Obama’s *Becoming* is more than a memoir. It is a social document that faithfully portrays the ground reality of ‘Being Black’ and ‘Becoming Black’ in a “White Society”. In her memoir, while recounting her rise from modest origins to the closest this country has to nobility, Michelle is taking the readers on an intimate tour of everyday African-American life. Her book illustrates how all Americans must part with the idea of post-racial society, the quaint notion that race and racism are relics of the United States’ long-ago past. In the memoir, she

establishes that prejudice is so woven into the fabric of America that it won't be gone in her lifetime, or even longer. The article "Becoming Me: Journey from the 'South'" traces the early stages of her life as a "striver", residing in the 'South' side of Chicago, identified with the city's African American population

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A well-known autoethnographer, Carolyn Ellis defines autoethnography as "research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (19). Michelle Obama's *Becoming* is obviously her life story, but it is a story whose narrative threads are closely interwoven into the cultural, social and political history of a race. Michelle begins the book by providing the readers with a glance of her early life as an African American woman growing up in Chicago, the most populous city in the U.S. state of Illinois, and the third most populous city in the United States. Michelle narrates at length about her childhood life in Chicago. The narrative of her life gets interwoven with the political status of United States at the end of the 1960s. America is in the midst of a massive and uncertain shift, with the Kennedys dead and Martin Luther King Jr. being assassinated, the nation was in chaos. The 1968 Democratic National Convention turned bloody as police went after Vietnam War protesters with batons and tear gas in Grant Park, about nine miles north of where Michelle lived. White families, meanwhile, were moving out of the city in droves, lured by the suburbs on the promise of a better life, which in turn led to increased racial segregation.

Even at the very beginning of the book, Michelle hints at racism that permeated American society and politics. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination was very foreboding, considering his position as a ground-breaking black man. She reveals the levels of racial segregation and disparities between Chicago's downtown and its South Side, and describes how she

consciously observed the segregated housing projects and the migration of White families to the suburbs. She clearly recollects how her grandfather Shields, hated not only the police but also mistrusted the Whites.

Prior to relocating to her aunt Robbie's apartment, Michelle and her family lived in Parkway Gardens, which were affordable housing projects, comprising of modern apartment buildings. Due to increased gang violence and exceptional poverty, the area became one of the most dangerous places to live in the city. Michelle's elucidation of the deteriorating neighbourhood provides another example of institutional racism i.e., building a neighbourhood for Black working-class families but not helping to ease the issues of poverty had turned the neighbourhood into a dangerous place. Michelle recognizes a pattern not only in this neighbourhood, but in many neighbourhoods in Chicago, as white families feel threatened by the prospect of their neighbourhood turning into a 'ghetto' and flee.

Through her experience as a young girl brought up in an era where colour or racial discrimination was on a high level, Michelle realises how even the young kids know when they are undervalued.

Now that I'm an adult, I realize that kids know at a very young age when they're being devalued, when adults aren't invested enough to help them learn.

Their anger over it can manifest itself as unruliness. It's hardly their fault.

They aren't 'bad kids.' They're just trying to survive bad circumstances.

(Obama,*Becoming*22)

She brings into light the impact of racial discrimination, particularly on Black children since they end up losing out on many opportunities due to the colour of their skin. The movement of people to the suburbs left financially unstable families, such as hers, at the mercy of incompetent teachers who disliked children and labelled them as "bad kids" (Obama,*Becoming*22).

Michelle shows the complexity of being a Black by narrating various instances where they were victims of the prejudice against the Black community. One such incident happened at Park Forest. When her brother Craig got a new bike, he took it for a ride to the paved pathway along Rainbow Beach, where he was picked up by a police officer who accused him of stealing it, unwilling to accept that a young black boy would have accessed a new bike in an honest way. The officer, an African American man himself, ultimately got a brutal tongue lashing from Michelle's mother, who made him apologize to her brother. This incident was as much an eye opener for Michelle as much against the intensity of prejudice against the Blacks, as conveying the message that you should not take it lying low. Her mother was giving her the first lessons to raise her voice against such unjust treatment from the Society.

Michelle again narrates one such story of racial prejudice. She recollects how her mother suffered a blow when her friend, Velma Steward, decided to relocate to Park Forest. An invite to the Stewarts' neighbourhood revealed the racial discrimination in all its gravity. Michelle states that during the visit, someone intentionally scratched her dad's beloved Buick marking a "thin ugly gulch that ran across the door and toward the tail of the car" (Obama, *Becoming* 29). This was simply because they were black people in a white neighbourhood. The fact that the Stewarts are light-skinned becomes important, as Michelle seems to posit that they were only accepted into the White community because people did not know that they were blacks, once again demonstrating the spirit of racism that exists in White suburban communities. But at the end of the day, Michelle's father finds that someone had keyed a gash across the side of his car, and her mother wonders if anyone knew that the Stewarts were black before they visited. Her father gets in the car, barely acknowledging it. The family rides back to Chicago without much discussion, and the next day, Michelle's father drives the car to a body shop and has the gash erased. The reaction of Michelle's family to this hateful vandalism highlights their resolve and resilience in the face of

negativity. Michelle's father simply accepts this as a part of life, his only desire is to move on and erase all evidence of this hatred. This anecdote brings out the reality of racial segregation that existed between the South Side and the suburbs of Chicago.

Michelle further describes the hostility between the White and Black communities, which worked at different levels. For instance, African Americans considered it a betrayal of their culture if a Black spoke like a White. Michelle recounts:

At one point, one of the girls, a second, third, or fourth cousin of mine, gave me a sideways look and said, just a touch hotly, "How come you talk like a White girl?" The question was pointed, meant as an insult or at least a challenge, but it also came from an earnest place. It held a kernel of something that was confusing for both of us. We seemed to be related but of two different worlds. (Obama, *Becoming* 40)

Michelle protests, but she understands what the girl has meant. Speaking a certain way- the 'White' way as some would have it was often perceived as a 'betrayal', or a denial of one's culture. Michelle sees this same confusion play out years later, as Barack steps onto the national stage and people across the country have a hard time squaring his ethnicity with his persona. She explores the complexity of race within this interaction with that of her distant cousin. Michelle acknowledges that because her family has given up some of the markers of Black culture such as a distinct way of speaking, it seems as though they are playing into a racist ideal, that they believe speaking more like a white person is better than speaking like a black person. In this way, Michelle, and later Barack, were criticized from both angles, unsure of what kind of community they fit into. Ultimately, Michelle understands that even though this critique is one of race, in actuality it is a question of growing into one's own. Michelle ultimately 'becomes' who she really is; she doesn't try to 'become' something that

is untrue to herself or try to adhere to some previously held expectations, something that continues to confound people as the Obamas enter the White House.

Michelle notes that a child's awareness of stereotypes escalates with age, affecting children from minority backgrounds or discriminated ethnic groups such as African Americans. She focuses on the effects of stereotyping in a child's mind-set and development. This is evident from Michelle's personal experience. Due to her background, she doubted whether she was good enough to compete with peers from elite families. Undoubtedly, stereotyping and looking down on a particular community culminates in self-doubt, also contributing to lacking a sense of belonging.

Racism was a bitter reality that Michelle had to confront at its worst at the Princeton University. At the age of seventeen, Michelle Obama joined Princeton University. During those times, Princeton University was "extremely White and very male" (Obama, *Becoming*70). Both men and white students outnumbered females and African American students. Racial issues were still very perceptible at Princeton, with less than 9 percent of Michelle's freshman class being Black students. Standing out in a classroom due to the colour of her skin made Michelle feel uncomfortable, evoking feelings of not being good enough. Therefore, Michelle states that the company of Black friends provided support and relief to each other. Since it was the only time they could laugh as much as they wanted without the fear of being judged or looked down upon. The most memorable moments from her time in Princeton involved her former roommate, Cathy, who appeared in the news many years later, describing with embarrassment something Michelle hadn't known when they lived together. "Her mother, a school teacher from New Orleans, had been so appalled that her daughter had been assigned a black roommate that she'd badgered the university to separate us" (Obama, *Becoming*75), simply because Michelle was Black. Michelle states that

she got accustomed to her Black identity and did not “feel intimidated when classroom conversations were dominated by male students”(Obama, *Becoming*77).

Michelle realises that asserting her Black identity invests her with a new strength. At Princeton, Michelle majored in Sociology, attaining good grades. She asserts that despite living in a new world, she never forgot her roots. Whenever she was asked where she was from, Michelle would answer ‘Chicago’ particularly ‘the South Side’. She states that unlike the stereotyped images of the South Side of Chicago that were often shown in the news, for Michelle, the South Side was home. She constantly remarks on how different the world she lives in is from the world where she’s from. She knows that this probably conjures bad stereotypes of a ghetto or gang violence, but she feels it is important to represent a different piece of the South Side to people.

For Michelle the ‘South Side’ was always reminiscent of her heritage. She remained nostalgic about their tiny apartment with low ceilings and its fading carpet. Although the South Side was certainly not paradise, it was significant to Black people, including Michelle, since it signified their rootedness to the nation. Michelle has one relative in Princeton, Dandy’s younger sister whom she calls Aunt Sis. Aunt Sis, she writes, never truly lost her South Carolina roots, where Michelle had visited a few times. Michelle describes loving and hating being in the South, because it is so different from what she knows. But she also has an innate understanding that the South is a part of her heritage—a “deep familiarity that sat atop a deeper and uglier legacy” (Obama in *Becoming*86). Michelle acknowledges how the legacy of slavery has not only affected her older family members, but it is intertwined with her own life and history. She understands the importance of getting rooted in one’s history in order to be able to progress and branch out.

It was her parental guidance which helped in building Michelle's confidence and fighting the feeling of being “not enough” (Obama,*Becoming*56) within herself. She worked

hard to prove to the college counsellor that she deserved a chance to join Princeton. Ultimately, her parents' investment paid off when she got an admission letter from Princeton University. Michelle's journey from Princeton University to Harvard Law School and eventually securing a well-paid job overcoming all racial prejudices is indeed inspiring. It also describes Michelle's loyalty to her African American heritage. She attributes her success to the values instilled in her life by her parents and relatives, as well as the desire to prove that the South Side produced capable people who could make a difference. She admits that her drive was not just logic but by the reflexive wish to be approved by other people. The desire to prove that she was good enough compelled Michelle to work hard, thereby attaining admission to Harvard Law School.

Michelle Obama describes how racism she has experienced as a black woman in America has shaped her life into what it turned out to be later. 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 an individual's life. Michelle was brought up by parents who never instilled in her the feeling that she is a Black in a White dominated society. Nor did they make her excessively conscious of the discrimination that was very much a reality. Instead they instilled in her a sense of self-respect and self-confidence, which greatly helps her fight against all odds – whether it be gender or race.

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