

# Narrative and Concept of Self in Michelle Obama's *Becoming*

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## ABSTRACT

A narrative is a story that you write or tell to someone, usually in great detail. A narrative can be a work of poetry or prose, or even song, theater or dance. Self- concept is how we perceive our behaviors, abilities and unique characteristics. Through *Becoming*, Michelle Obama traces her journey from student, wife to becoming the First Lady of the United States of America. She also discusses her inner struggles which she successfully combats in order to find her inner voice. This journey helps her to carve out a unique identity for herself.

**Keywords:** Black feminism, Self- identity, concept of self and narrative

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## INTRODUCTION

“Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own”. Michelle La Vaughn Robinson Obama is an American lawyer, University administrator and writer, who was the first lady of the United States from 2009-2017. A graduate of Princeton University and Harvard Law school. Mrs. Obama started her profession as an attorney at the Chicago Law firm Sidley and Austin. She is married to the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, Barack Obama and was the first African- American first lady. As the first lady, Obama served as a motivator and good example for women and worked as an advocate for poverty, awareness, education, nutrition, physical activity and healthy eating. She supported American designers and was considered a fashion icon. She authored two famous books: *American grown* (2012) and *Becoming* (2018). “Becoming is never giving up on an idea that there’s more growing to be done”.

*Becoming* is an intimate, powerful and inspiring memoir by former first lady of America, Michelle Obama, published in 2018. This revealing memoir offers new insights into her upbringing on the south side of her native Chicago and the highs and lows of life with Barack Obama. This book is described by the author as a deeply personal experience. *Becoming* tells about Obama’s roots and how she found her voice and time in The White House and her role as a mother. This book consists of twenty-four chapters and is divided into three sections: Becoming Me, Becoming Us and Becoming More. In *Becoming* Michelle Obama describes her life by giving titles. “Becoming Me” focuses on the challenges of identity, “Becoming Us” emphasizes intimacy between Barack Obama and Michelle Obama and “Becoming More” gives importance to care by finding a way to care for others. She focuses on herself by giving importance to her individuality.

### **Narratives and the Concept of Self:**

Narrative theory mainly focuses on individuals forming an identity by combining their life experiences into an evolving story of self. Self- concept is defined as the totality of our beliefs, preferences, opinions, attitudes organized in a systematic manner towards our personal experience. By viewing the self as a narrative or story, brings light to the temporal and dramatic dimension of human existence. Narrative is the cognitive process that gives meaning to temporal events by identifying them as parts of plot.

The individuals construct private and personal stories linking diverse events of their lives into unified and understandable wholes. These are the stories about the self and are the basis of personal identity.

Narrative structure and organizational features function as an organizing scheme of everyday experience and action. In a narrative configuration, the parts of the whole are differentiated as beginning, middle and end of a single episode. Narrative configuration takes place through the process of emplotment. Emplotment is a procedure that composes temporal elements into a whole by “grasping them together” and mediating them towards conclusion. It is the means by which narrators weave together the complex of events into a single story. The emerging capacity for

autobiographical memory and its contributions to narrative structures lead to the newly emerging concept of self. Narratives play in the development of autobiographical memory and the relations between narratives and self-concept.

Katherine Nelson proposes a model of the development of self in which she characterizes children's increasingly sophisticated levels of understanding of self. Thus, self emerges from a collaborative constructive process. Language plays a critical role in distinguishing between self and other selves. As Nelson puts it, "The use of language is to exchange messages about „my“ experience, „your“ experience and „our“ experience... constitutes a major „taking off“ point for the future development of self-understanding".

Narrative structure is used to interpret and give coherence to past episodes in our lives and to configure future activities that we expect to lead to desired outcomes. It is used to give form and meaning to our own lives as a whole and self is something temporal that unfolds it times. Self is the narratively structured unity of one's own life as a whole that provides one's own self-identity.

Thus, "the self is a kind of aesthetic construct, recollected in and with the life of experience in narrative fashion". The self-concept consists of a narratively structured recollected self, and the more complete the story, the more integrated the self.

### **Writing the Self into Being: Narrative Identity in *Becoming*:**

In *Becoming* Obama in her autobiography tells a story that covers the full contour of her life, growing up in a "cramped apartment on the South side of Chicago" to living in "a place with more stairs that I can count". From "being held up as the most powerful woman in the world" to being taken down as "angry black woman". June Rathbone explains Self in "Survey of Literature on the Self" as the self is both the basic and most difficult human problem. In *Becoming* we can see Michelle Obama's difficulties to create her own self and identity.

Michelle Obama describes herself as an ordinary person who found herself on an extraordinary journey. In sharing her story Obama hopes to create a space for other stories and other voices to widen the pathway and this highlights her self-identity. Her childhood was not very pleasant. She had to live much of her childhood "listening to the sound of striving", and her writings shine brightest during this age. The sound of people trying however became the soundtrack of her life.

Michelle Obama in *Becoming* focuses on self, which is the narratively structured unity of her own life as a whole that provides her own self-identity. Though she was disturbed by the huge sound of piano classes, she decided to learn piano and saw Robbie, her mother's aunt, as someone to win over. With her, it always felt like there was something to prove. To her Southside, her grandfather was as big as heaven. She was very proud of herself as her parents were glad of her and wanted to keep lit the flame inside her to do something and to prove her ability to conquer.

Obama's school life mainly describes her confidence in her ability to read, and discrimination based on the color of her skin. She elucidates that she felt the effects of transition at her second-grade classroom as the teacher in charge couldn't figure out the way to assert control and, in her perspective, we were a class of "bad kids". She writes "Kids know when they are in their toddler stage and at a very young age when they are being devalued". These kids are not "bad kids" but their circumstances made them so.

Michelle Obama's protective love of childhood did not make her low but in spite of the communal sense of suffering and injustice, she made her dream which is impossible to avoid for an Afro-American citizen. The neighborhood she grew up in was transformed by white flight, and later "deteriorated under the grind of poverty and gang violence". A prior incident with the police by her beloved brother Craig taught her that "the color of our skin made us vulnerable", it was the thing we would always have to navigate. Persistent incidents of discrimination bred in her family "a basic level of resentment and mistrust". The existential conception of self is opposed to the idea of the self as a substance or thing: instead that self is understood as becoming which is a temporal process. Slowly Obama was becoming more outward and socially more willing to open herself to the messes of the wider world.

Obama confesses that there's a lot she still doesn't know about America about life and about the future, but I do know myself. My father, Fraser, taught me to work hard, laugh often and keep my word. My mother, Mariam showed me how to live, think for myself and to use my voice. Together in our constricted apartment on the Southside of Chicago, they helped me see the value in our story, in my story, and in the larger story of America. My grandfather, Southside, acted as a magnet for all of us. He was forever mistrustful of the world beyond his own yard-worried primarily about everyone's safety and wellbeing as a result poured his energy into creating an environment where we were always well fed and entertained. Southside spoiled the dog the same way he spoiled me, with food, love and tolerance.

Obama discusses her neighborhood in her letters written to Dr. Lavizzo. As failure is a feeling long before it becomes an actual result. By viewing the self-Obama brings light to her life by facing all these failures in a challenging manner. For Obama, High school was meant to be a transformative phase of her life. At Princeton, she faced questions of whether she was the product of Affirmative Action programs, she felt like she was representing her race.

Obama is at her best when she's getting into the particulars of her story. Her description of the oasis she found in her fellow black student at Princeton more effectively conveys how isolating race can be than any of the more policy focused sections of *Becoming*.

Michelle Robinson's father Fraser and her friend Suzanne Allele's misfortune death made a turning point in her life. For Obama her father was the "hole in my heart" and "loss in my scar", the memory of her father motivated her each day. Those losses made her think of her contributions towards society and how well she was influencing the world.

One of the *Becoming's* key themes is the difficulty of marriage both in general and her relationship with her husband Barack Obama. In *Becoming* Obama explains the lessons she learnt was the power in people and the problems of married life. Her "early flicker of resentment" over her husband's political career, followed by her frustrations over being "a working full-time mother with a half-time spouse". Ultimately, she also reveals that they conceived both their daughters Sasha and Malia through IVF. She even paints a picture of marriage that is fiercely loving, on both her part and

#### **Barack's part.**

Mrs. Obama writes about being "flint out of the world". It is something she experienced again, transferring to Whitney Young, moving to Princeton as one of the few African American students on campus, joining the juggernaut of a Presidential campaign and moving into the White House,

Michelle Obama is an obsessively hard worker. She's the type of an intense and tightly wound person, pragmatic with patience for the trappings of White House life. She is proud of being black and of being a woman and she cares deeply about making sure and other black women they belong in America.

Thus, our individual stories can, and perhaps need to, expand the life of the protagonist. The individuals and communities become indispensable partners within a life story. Events affecting my family, or perhaps my country, become part of my self-narrative.

### **CONCLUSION**

The narrative theory focuses on the identity of Michelle Obama by combining her life experience into an evolving story of the self. The emerging capacity for autobiographical memory narratives contributes to the newly formed concept of the self. The self-concept is used to emphasize changes in how the self is constructed and understood and serve to configure a person's life into a self and to provide personal identity. The life stories need not be self-centered and the events affecting one's life, family, country become part of the self-narrative. The importance of events is no longer determined only by their effects on a person but also by their impact on others who have been taken in as part of the identity.

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