MYTH, IDENTITY AND RACISM IN BARACK OBAMA'S DREAMS FROM MY FATHER

Lewechi Nzeadibe PhD.
Nzeadibe.lewechi@mouau.edu.ng
School of General Studies, Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike.

ABSTRACT
Barack Obama's memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, offers profound insights into the intersections of myth, identity, and racism. This paper explores Obama's complex process of identity formation against a backdrop of racial tensions and cultural myths prevalent in American society. Through a critical analysis of the memoir, the study examines how Obama constructs his personal identity through the lenses of myth and race, drawing on the perspectives of contemporary scholars to illuminate the multifaceted nature of identity formation within a racially stratified society. The paper further demonstrates how experiences of racism and cultural displacement shape Obama's understanding of self, belonging, and social identity

INTRODUCTION
Myth, identity and racism are intricately interconnected concepts that shape social dynamics and personal experiences in profound ways. They serve as tools through which societies and individuals construct narratives, establish boundaries and define notions of belonging. As contemporary scholarship reveals, understanding these terms in relation to each other is crucial for dissecting the complexities of racial identity and the impacts of racism in today world.

Myth can be understood as a traditional story or a narrative that embodies core values and beliefs of a culture. Roland Barthes, a prominent figure in semiotics, says that myths serve to convey ideologies and reinforce cultural values (Barthes 142). In modern contexts, myths extend beyond mere stories; they encompass societal constructs that inform how groups perceive themselves and others. For instance, the myth of the "American Dream" promotes the belief that success is attainable for anyone through hard work and determination. However, this myth often obscures the systemic barriers faced by marginalized groups and communities, thus, perpetuating inequalities and discriminations of all kinds.

Joseph Campbell emphasizes that myths often establish a shared identity among members of a culture fostering a sense of belonging (Campbell 39). However, these shared narrative can also lead to exclusion. Myths can dictate who belongs to a group and who does not, often based on racial or ethnic lines. The implications of this illustrate how specific myths about races grounded in stereotypes or historical narratives can perpetuate racism and discrimination.

Identity is a fluid and multifaceted concept, influenced dynamically by various factors including culture, race and socio political context. Stuart Hall a renowned cultural theorist, articulates identity as a process of becoming shaped by the interplay between acceptance and resistance of dominant narrative (Hall 238). In this sense, identity is not static, rather it evolves as individuals Navigate their personal histories in relation to wider social structures.

For racial minorities, identity often intertwines with the myths surrounding their racial groups. The narratives constructed by society can significantly impact how individuals perceive themselves and their place within the broader community Frantz Fanon, in his seminal work "Black skin, White Masks", delves deep into the psychological effects of colonialism and racism on identity formation, arguing that individuals internalize societal perceptions to detriment of their self-conception (Fanon 12). Accordingly, the negative myths associated with race can distort personal identity, leading individuals to grapple with conflicting notions of self- worth and belonging.
Racism can be understood as both a personal prejudice and systemic hierarchy that privileges certain racial groups over others. Michelle, Alexander, in "The New Jim Crow" elucidate how systemic racism is sustained through institutional polices that perpetuate inequality (Alexander 6). This perspective emphasizes that racism is not merely a function of individual beliefs but is not rooted in historical and socio-cultural structures that continuously shape the experiences of marginalized groups. Furthermore, Robin Di Angelo, in her work on white fragility, argues that racism is ingrained in everyday interactions and societal rooms, often join unnoticed by those who benefit from systemic privilege (Di Angelo 12). The implication of this are profound, as they highlight the necessity of recognizing and dismantling the myths that uphold racist ideologies. Without confronting these narratives, individuals and societies may inadvertently perpetuate cycles of oppression.

The intricate relationship between myth, identity, and racism reveals how narratives can shape, distort, or affirm personal and collective identities. The myths surrounding certain racial groups often lead to stereotypes and generalizations that shape public perception for example, the perpetuation of myth concerning African America culture has frequently painted the community in a monolithic light, overshadowing the diversity and richness of individual experiences. This not only affects how individuals within those groups view themselves but also informs how they are perceived by others, often leading to marginalization and discrimination.

Myth identity and Racism

Barack Obama uses myth and symbolic structures in his journey or quest for his ancestral homeland in the 'Kenya' section of Dreams from My Father to understand something like the missing piece of his identity, his paternal heritage to come to terms with the missing African component. This trip to Kenya would it res9olve that emptiness? He writes; "If I could just piece together his (Obama's father) story, I thought, then perhaps, everything also might fall into place (372). But there's also the fear; "what if the truth only disappointed, and my father's death meant nothing, and his leaving me behind meant nothing and the only tie that bound me to him or to Africa, was a name, a blood type, or white people's scorn?"(302).

On his arrival in Africa, Obama encounters lost luggage, an older model VW that barely runs, the seeming chaos of traffic wandering across lane, dodging potholes and pedestrians at breakneck speed. Obama's memoir traces a journey that is both deeper into Africa and deeper into humanity's evolutionary past. Obama's descriptions, like those of other, earlier western explorers of the continent, continually shift from Darwinian to biblical registers, imaging the African landscape as a past both savage and innocent seeing a pack of hyenas devouring the carcass of a wildebeest. Obama calls it a "Savage scene"… watching life faced on itself (356). Yet he continues, "This is what creation looked like".

> The same stillness, the same crunching of bone. There in the dark, over that hill. I imagined the first man stepping forward naked and rough-skinned, grasping a chunk of flint in his clumsy hand, no words yet for the fear, the anticipations, the awe he feels at the sky, the glimmering knowledge of his one death. If only we could remember that first common step, that firs common word- that time before Babel (356).

Barack Obama journeys by railroad into the Kenyan back country to discover what he can of the family patriarch, his paternal grandfather Hussein Onyango. He immediately connects the year of his grandfather's birth. The railroad, Obama tells us, was built in the nineteenth century, and ventured out into the heart of an unknown continent and connected British economic venues with missions and churches to vanquish the fear that an unknown land produced (367). As the African landscape spread out before him, his family's connection with it stirs his imagination.

> The thought made the history of the train come alive for me, and I tried to imagine the sensations some nameless British Officer might have felt on the trains maiden voyage as he sat in his gas-lit compartment and looked out over miles of receding bush. Would he had felt a sense of triumph, a confidence that the guiding light of Western civilization had finally perpetrated the African darkness? Or did he feel a sense of foreboding, a sudden realization that the entire enterprise was an act of folly, that this land and its people would outlast imperial dream (368).

In other words, Obama uses imagination to recreate his ancestral origin with deep feedings that the frenzy of African civilization might be an act of folly, which in itself unable to 'penetrate' the 'darkness' that is our collective primitivism. It is within this scene that Obama addresses the one imaginative failure that to Achebe, was *Heart of darkness's* most glaring omission:

> I tried to imagine the African on the other side of the glass window, watching this snake of steel and black smoke passing his village for the first time. Would he have looked at the train with envy, imagining himself one day sitting in the car where the Englishman sat, the load of his days. Somehow eased? Or would he have shuddered with visions of ruin and war? (368).

Despite his efforts, however he draws a blank. My imagination, he writes "failed me". As the train passes a group of boys waving from the stalls of an open-air market, Obama waves in return until interrupted by family members, who warn him to keep his hand inside. Africa is dangerous, hostile. "Those boys will throw stones at you" (368), they tell him, another strange story associated with Africa. Obama uses mythic and symbolic images in *Dreams from my Father* as he vividly recalls from his night on the train. He is walking through a village. There are the stares of children and old men, curious at first, but the dream's mood becomes increasingly fearful. A leopard growls, people run. Obama is running through the forest, tripping over the roots and vines. He breaks into a clearing, only to see the day turn to night and find himself facing a symbolic Africa, here a giant figure wearing only a loincloth ghostly mask;

> The lifeless eyes bored into me, and I heard a thunderous voice saying only that it was time, and my entire body began to shake violently with a sound, as if I were breaking apart. I jerked up in a sweat hitting my head against the wall lamp that struck out above the bunk. In the darkness. My heart slowly evened itself, but I couldn't get back to sleep again (372).

Obama's verbal and symbolic imagery in the above dream memory parallels a similar scene earlier in the memoir in which he accompanied his mother and sister to a revival of the classic Brazilian film Black Orphans in a New York theatre shortly after the death of his father. The darkened theatre, the film's flickering images alternately illuminating and shadowing his mother in blue light, together offer a 'window' for Obama's 'wistful gaze' into the "unreflective heart of his mother's youth;

> We took a cab to the revival theatre where the movie was playing. The film, a ground breaker of sorts due to its mostly black, Brazilian cast, had been made in the fifties. The story line was simple, the myth of the ill-fated lovers Orpheus and Eurydice set against scenic green hills, and the

> black and brown Brazilians sang and danced and strummed guitars like carefree birds in colourful plumage. About halfway through the movie, I decided that I'd seen enough and turned to my mother to see if she might be ready to go. But her face, lit by the blue glow of the screen, was set in a wistful glaze. At that moment, I felt as if I were being given a window into her heart, the unreflective heart of her youth. I suddenly realized that the depiction of childlike blacks I was now seeing on the screen, the reverse image of Conrad's dark savages, was what my mother had carried with her to Hawaii all those years before, a reflection of the simple fantasies that had been forbidden to a white middle-class girl from Kansas, the promise of another life: warm, sensual, exotic, different(123-24).

Obama's discomfort is all clear; he is embarrassed" for his mother "irritated" with the audience. The implication is the Black Orphans is racist in its representation of Childlike blacks". Obama in attacking heart of darkness before his friends at occidental college, Obama had declared that for Conrad, Africa\s the cesspool of the world, black folks are savages, and any contact with them breeds infection" (103). Yet as he leaves the theatre after viewing this reverse image of Conrad's dark savages" Obama recalls a conversation with an English acquaintance that had lived in Africa and his reactions are eerily similar to that of Marlow's in Heart of Darkness.

Obama's biracial identity presents a unique challenge, as he grapples with belonging to both the African American and Caucasian Communities. He reflects on this struggle through a poignant anecdote. "I was like a boy watching from the outside, a spectator at my own life" (Obama 12). This feeling of being an outsider exemplifies the profound questions of identity; he faces. Scholars like David E. Wilkins asserts that Obama's story is one of a peculiar sort of alienation, one that is shaped by the collision of races and cultures| (Wilkins 24). This alienation manifests as a consistent theme through Obama's journey leading him to seek out his place in the world.

The influence of family is another crucial aspects in understanding Obama's identity. His father's absence left a void that directed his quest for connection and understanding. At his father grave he reflects.

> I realized that who I was, what I cared about, was no longer just a matter of intellect or obligation, no longer a construct of words. I saw that my life in America the black life, the white life, the sense of abandonment I'd felt as a boy, the frustration and hope I'd witnessed in Chicago all of it was connected with this small plot of earth an ocean away, connected by more than the accident of a name or the color of my skin. The pain I felt was my father's pain. My question were my brothers' questions. Their struggle, my birthright (430).

The post-colonial world Barack Obama discovers in 1988 is one of my contradictions. Yes, everybody is black, but Kenya is still a place where tribalism remains prevalent. "Most Kenyans still work with older maps of identity, more ancient loyalties," he observes (Dreams 348). He is dismayed when he hears his aunts stereotype other tribes and tells them that they all belong to one tribe, "the human tribe". They laugh and tell him that he's just like his father, a dreamer. This interplay between collective belonging, paternal understanding and the pursuit of self-identity underscores the complexities of his experiences.

Education also plays a critical role in shaping Obama's identity. His experiences in academic setting exposes him to various cultures and ideologies, fostering a broader world view. He notes "In classroom filled with diversity, I found my voice" (Obama 210). This realization highlights the transformative power of education in affirming his identity. Cornel west observes that intellectual engagement is essential for creating a critical consciousness that allows individuals to navigate their identities in a complex world" (West 24). For Obama, education becomes a means to reconcile his multifaceted identity and affirm his place within a diverse society.

In the book, Obama exposes racism as he recounts experiences that highlight the pervasive nature of racism in American society. He reflects on his childhood in Hawaii and his time in Chicago, where he confronts the reality of being a black man in a predominantly white world. In his exploration, Obama sees his life as speaking to the "fissures of race that have characterized the American experience, as well as the fluid state of identity, the leaps through time, the collision of cultures, that mark our modern life (vii). He contends that racial categories are no longer permanent and inflexible marks of identity but "fluid" and it is this transition that he explores in his book. Obama's narrative comprises his own interior journey and his ambivalence as well as his struggles with his mixed inheritance during his early years;

> At night I would close the door to my room, telling my grandparents I had homework to do and there I would sit and wrestle with words, locked in suddenly desperate argument, trying to reconcile the world as I found it with the terms of my birth (85).

In the Chicago section, Obama notes conversations he had with black leaders and the denigrating references blacks use among each other. Black folks are just lazy, Barack don't wanna do nothing. "He also noted the dynamic and debilitating use of the word |nigger" and its offensive reference to "lazy, useless" individuals;

> Often the word nigger replaced black … a word I'd once like to think was spoken in jest with a knowing irony, the inside joke that marked our resilience as a people until the first time I heard a young mother use it on her child to tell him he wasn't worth shit, or watched teenage boys use it to draw blood in a quick round of verbal sparring. The transformation of the word's original meaning was never complete; like the other defenses we erected against possible hurt, this one, too, involved striking out at ourselves first (195).

Many blacks resort to using racist language against themselves and assist in the perpetuation of negative stereotypes. The racial epithet has programmed blacks and whites for centuries, has lowered self-esteem and is deeply ingrained in the American psyche. Struggling for a semblance of understanding, both races, particularly European Americans, cannot really "know" blacks. Obama uses the voice of Frank, a black poet and friend of his grandfather in Dreams to show the same thing.

…But he (Obama's White grandfather) doesn't know me (Frank)… He can't know me, not the way I know him. Maybe some of these Hawaiians can or the Indians on the reservation. They've seen their fathers humiliated their mothers desecrated. But your grandfather will never know what that feels like (90).

Although Obama's mother instilled in him the belief that rational thoughtful people could shape their own destiny| (50). Obama echoes his doubts: "I had no idea who my own self as… I learned to slip back and forth between my black and white worlds. Understanding that each possessed its own language and customs and structures of meaning, convinced that with a bit of translation on my part the two worlds would eventually cohere" (82).

Furthermore, the impact of racism on personal relationships is poignantly illustrated in his narrative. Obama reflects on this relationship with his father, whose absence significantly affected his understanding of manhood and identity. He writes, "And yet, as I close the door behind me, I can hear my father laughing with the other men, and I wonder if that laugh, somehow, turns to ice" (Obama 100). This metaphor illustrates the distance between his father's ideals and the reality of racial existence. The haunting notion of a laughter that signifies both joy and pain encapsulates the complexities of familial relationships fought with the weight of racial expectations.

CONCLUSION

Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father* intricately weaves together themes of myth, identity, and racism, presenting a narrative that resonates with both personal and societal significance. Through his reflections on his biracial experience, the impact of societal myths, and the pervasive reality of racism, Obama invites readers to reconsider their understanding of race and identity. His work is not merely an autobiography but also a profound commentary on the complexities of living in a racially stratified society. As Obama articulates his journey toward self-discovery, he simultaneously dismantles the myths that seek to confine identity within simplistic categories, challenging readers to embrace a more nuanced understanding of race in America.

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